

ÉTUDE CRITIQUE / REVIEW ESSAY

The Abortion Wars: The Scholarly Front

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Leslie J. Reagan — *When Abortion Was a Crime: Women, Medicine, and Law in the United States*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997. Pp. xiii, 387.

Kerry N. Jacoby — *Souls, Bodies, Spirits: The Drive to Abolish Abortion Since 1973*. Westport, Conn.: Praeger Publishers, 1998. Pp. xv, 230.

James Risen and Judy L. Thomas — *Wrath of Angels: The American Abortion War*. New York: Basic Books, 1998. Pp. x, 402.

Cynthia Gorney — *Articles of Faith: A Frontline History of the Abortion Wars*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998. Pp. 575.

Mark Stetson, ed. — *The Silent Subject: Reflections on the Unborn in American Culture*. Westport, Conn.: Praeger Publishers, 1996. Pp. xvi, 265.

Donald T. Critchlow — *Intended Consequences: Birth Control, Abortion, and the Federal Government in Modern America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999. Pp. x, 307.

FEW ISSUES have the same capacity to fuel intense and bitter conflict as abortion. This is true in Canada, but is doubly so in the United States, where for decades a rancorous and intermittently violent deadlock has paralyzed public discussion of the issue. Even recent efforts by the “Common Ground” movement’s Network for Life and Choice to break through the old polarities have made little dent in the cast-iron certainties most bring to the public arena.

Paradoxically, while the intensity with which debate is approached has

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helped produce a flood of passionate and forcefully written literature, both popular and scholarly, it has guaranteed that much of this literature is never read or even seriously considered by those whom the authors would most like to convince. The result is not so much a “debate” as a dialogue of the deaf, or at least of the selectively hard of hearing.

In such a situation it is the responsibility of academics to clarify, if they cannot solve, the elements of contention, to break down stereotypes and reveal complexity and ambiguity. This has not happened, or at least not to a desirable degree. In part this reflects the fact that, like other citizens, academics bring their own intense commitments to the debate and often produce unconsciously partisan accounts. This natural tendency would be in large measure remedied if a healthy debate existed within academic life, in which the discipline of criticism mitigated the problems created by an engaged scholarship. This is not the case. The dominance of pro-choice beliefs is so pronounced that truly searching critiques of that position are rarely produced. One of the best, most balanced, and most insightful accounts of the abortion dispute is not by an academic at all, but by a particularly talented journalist. The works discussed here are a large but hardly exhaustive collection of recent writings on abortion in the United States.¹ They include a survey of abortion from the late nineteenth century to the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision, three studies of the right-to-life movement, a collection of essays from within that movement, and finally an account of family planning and abortion as public policy issues since 1945.

The strengths and weaknesses of academic work on the topic are abundantly on display in Leslie Reagan’s *When Abortion Was a Crime*. It has justly received widespread acclaim: thoroughly researched and well written, it is informed by a wide knowledge of the secondary literature in a number of related fields. Her goal was to write a history of the entire period during which the highly restrictive abortion laws passed in the nineteenth century were in effect. She has taken Chicago as her focus, but with frequent looks at the situation in other areas, and she asserts that “sources verify that my findings hold true for other cities, large and small” (p. 17). The core of her research lies in the examination of criminal case records involving abortion: she notes that hers is the first work to chart the enforcement of abortion laws, and she sees in that enforcement a “gendered” system of punishment.

She divides the period between illegalization and the *Roe v. Wade* deci-

1 Prominent among other important recent books is David Garrow’s massive and exhaustively researched tome, *Liberty and Sexuality: The Right to Privacy and the Making of Roe v. Wade* (New York: Macmillan, 1984), which is informed throughout by a pro-choice perspective. Rickie Solinger’s *Abortion Wars: A Half Century of Struggle, 1950–2000* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998) contains some useful essays, most notably William Saletan’s “Electoral Politics and Abortion: Narrowing the Message”, pp. 111–123. Of particular interest to Canadians is Raymond Tatalovich’s *The Politics of Abortion in the United States and Canada: A Comparative Study* (Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 1997).

sion into four phases. The first, from the 1880s through the 1920s, maintained considerable continuity with earlier years. Abortion continued to be widely accepted and available, and a crackdown between 1890 and 1920 was a failure. During the second phase, the Depression years, both the need for abortion and its availability increased. It moved more into doctors' offices and clinics and became more visible. The third period, beginning in 1940, saw the restriction of abortion, with both increased police raids on doctors' offices and a tightening in hospitals of the grounds for "therapeutic" abortions. This attack on the availability of abortion was a symptom and effect of a newly aggressive cult of domesticity and of a "McCarthyite" repression of dissent. The combination of increased demand for abortion and a limited supply of competent practitioners created a situation in which incompetent and rapacious abortionists wrought havoc on women. Despite the advent of antibiotics, the rate of complications soared and a crisis in women's lives became pressing. This repression led to the final phase, in which a movement first to reform restrictive abortion laws, beginning in the 1950s, then to repeal all such laws grew and triumphed.

A number of themes are followed in this account. One is the central role of women, whose "demand for abortions, generally hidden from public view and rarely spoken of in public, transformed medical practice and law over the course of the twentieth century" (p. 1). Another is the dynamic interchange between "private" and "public" spheres, which Reagan finds less distinct than often assumed. In particular, the intersection of the state, women, and the medical profession and the use of private agencies to enforce state policy draw her attention. She notes that the medical profession displayed considerable diversity in its responses to women and cannot be regarded simply as an instrument of repression: "Medicine was more of a negotiated terrain between physicians and patients than has been realized" (p. 4). Crucial to her case is the claim that an "alternative public morality" existed, which rejected the official condemnation of abortion found in the law and continued to believe in the traditional distinction between pregnancy before and after "quickening". In her account of how and why the restrictive laws came to be passed, she posits as central the forces of professionalism, gender, class, and race. The movement to restrict abortion was, she insists, "antifeminist at its core" (p. 11).

A number of questions can be raised about this book, starting with how typical Chicago truly was. Reagan asserts that it was representative of urban America, but, even if this is granted, the problem remains that for much of the period in question a majority of American women did not live in cities, or even in smaller urban areas. More problematic is the unsatisfactory character of her explanation for the changes in enforcement practices after 1940: vague references to "McCarthyism" and "domesticity" hardly suffice.

Another quite central issue is Reagan's claim of an "alternative public morality". She repeatedly alludes to this, and in some measure she is surely right, but there is never a clear idea of how widely it was held. At times she

seems to suggest it was a majority belief — “a popular morality that accepted abortion was almost never publicly expressed but was rooted in people’s daily lives” (p. 6) — but never demonstrates this. Indeed, it would be hard to do so, since there is good reason to believe that opposition to abortion was in fact widely held, or at least accepted as reasonable. The ease with which the restrictive laws of the nineteenth century were passed, with virtually no opposition, and the absence of any mainstream challenge to those laws until the late 1950s suggest that the anti-abortion position held considerable appeal or seemed congruent with the dominant moral sense of the community, insofar as it received public expression. The vocal opposition of nineteenth-century feminists to abortion is grudgingly recognized by Reagan, but she does not convincingly account for it in terms of her thesis. Her explanation for the passage of restrictive abortion laws in the nineteenth century excludes any recognition of a genuine moral concern for fetal rights. While this is consistent with the writings of historians such as Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, it ignores the fact that even James Mohr, on whom Reagan relies heavily and who first advanced the theory that anti-abortion physicians were motivated by a desire to increase professional power, does indeed see such a concern as a real part of the anti-abortion crusade.² While she is no doubt correct in seeing a substantial portion of the population as continuing, well into the twentieth century, to accept the idea of “quicken-ing” as a significant divide in pregnancy, it is not clear that this constituted anything like a majority.

Reagan is so intent on demonstrating — as she does — the widespread existence of abortion and of support for it among many women and members of the medical profession that she ignores or unduly downplays another vital reality: a widespread rejection of abortion, particularly late-term abortion, based on the belief that it terminated a human life.³ To ignore this fact is to make incomprehensible another reality: from the beginning of the current abortion controversy, public opinion polls have shown that only

2 Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, “The Abortion Movement and the AMA, 1850–1880”, in her *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), pp. 217–244; James Mohr, *Abortion in America: The Origins and Evolution of National Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), pp. 164–166. An account of nineteenth-century abortion history, from a pro-life perspective which is highly critical of Mohr, is found in Marvin Olasky, *Abortion Rites: A Social History of Abortion in America* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1992). A recent full-length account of the life of the leader of the physicians’ anti-abortion crusade is Frederick Dyer’s *Champion of Women and the Unborn: Horatio Robinson Sorer, M.D.* (Canton, Mass.: Science History Publications, 1999). As the title implies, it takes a far more positive view of Sorer’s activities than does Smith-Rosenberg.

3 Ten years after the *Roe* decision, 57% of Americans surveyed by the *New York Times* described abortion as “the same thing as murdering a child”. Everett Carl Ladd and Karlyn H. Bowman, *Public Opinion About Abortion: Twenty Five Years After Roe v. Wade* (Washington, D.C.: AEI Press, 1997), p. 18. While this led only a minority to reject the operation in all circumstances, it does indicate why only a minority endorse it without reservation.

minorities of Americans favour either the complete illegalization of or unrestricted access to abortion. Large numbers of Americans favour the legalization of abortion for some, but not all reasons; the title of a classic study of public opinion sums it up clearly: “Negativism, Equivocation, and Wobbly Assent: Public ‘Support’ for the Prochoice Platform on Abortion”.⁴ The current debate is not comprehensible without an understanding of that history of ambiguity and conflicted emotions.

Reagan concedes that abortion after “quickening” was rejected by most, both in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but she does not appear to recognize the problem this creates for her account of the abortion repeal movement of the 1960s and 1970s. That movement cannot be viewed, as she implies it can, as part of a return to an older tradition (“The social movement to decriminalize abortion drew upon and brought into the open a longstanding acceptance of abortion,” p. 216), since the demand for a repeal of laws restricting abortion at any stage of pregnancy clearly represented a radical break with the “quickening” tradition. As she puts it, referring to traditional attitudes, “once quickening occurred, women recognized a moral obligation to carry the fetus to term” (p. 9). What is so striking about the abortion rights movement from the 1960s onward is its complete negation of the idea of fetal rights at any stage of development, an attitude that had never been part of traditional acceptance of early abortion. While any move for liberalization was bound to provoke a counter-movement, so radical a demand guaranteed that it would be a major one, which could plausibly claim to be defending a traditional view of prenatal life. To the present day, neither pro-choice nor pro-life advocates can claim the unequivocal support of public opinion, precisely because both can claim to represent, in part, traditional social attitudes.

Consequently Reagan’s characterization of the anti-abortion movement as “a backlash in reaction to the expansion of women’s reproductive rights and sexual freedom” and connected to a “New Right ... conservative political agenda hostile to feminism, sexual freedom, freedom of speech and religion, and civil rights” (p. 248) is utterly inadequate, failing to acknowledge its real social and intellectual character as a legitimate heir to deeply and widely held attitudes to fetal life. Her claim that “[a]bortion opponents have succeeded in creating a new discourse, giving the fetus new meaning as a human ‘life’, and labelled abortion ‘murder’ ” (p. 248) is startlingly unhistorical. The ideas of fetal humanity and abortion as murder are not recent constructions by anti-

4 Judith Blake and Jorge H. Del Pinal, “Negativism, Equivocation and Wobbly Assent: Public ‘Support’ for the Prochoice Platform on Abortion”, *Demography*, vol. 18, no. 3 (August 1981), pp. 309–320. The same point is made by Elizabeth Adell Cook, Ted G. Jelen, and Clyde Wilcox in *Between Two Absolutes: Public Opinion and the Politics of Abortion* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1992): “In fact the majority of Americans hold positions that do not fall neatly in either camp” (p. 37).

feminists: they can be found in the writings of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, Victoria Woodhull, and Tennessee Claflin.⁵

Celeste Condit has described pro-life accounts of abortion history as “heritage tales”, which provide a selective reading of the topic to create an illusion of an “almost absolute” rejection of abortion throughout Western history.⁶ While it would be as facile and unfair to characterize Reagan’s work as simply a “pro-choice heritage tale”, it is true that in each case the complexity of history is simplified to provide an appearance of unchallengeable legitimacy for a contemporary movement. They might be seen as rival Whig interpretations of abortion history.

Reagan’s account of the right-to-life movement is not a central part of her work, but its inadequacies are illustrative of the largely unsatisfactory character of the literature on the subject.⁷ The movement is often seen as an expression of social and political conservatism, most commonly as part of the “New Right”. It is normally treated as monocausal — the most widely adopted explanation being Kristin Luker’s, that the movement is really a defence of women’s traditional motherhood role.⁸ In this view, the right-to-life movement is really only an anti-abortion movement, with a focus not on the protection of the value of life in a general sense, but rather solely on abortion for reasons such as the defence of gender roles or a conservative code of sexual morals. In consequence the complexity and diversity of the movement disappear.

5 Some discussion of this is found in Carl Degler’s *At Odds: Women and the Family in America from the Revolution to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 243. An extensive collection of anti-abortion statements by nineteenth-century feminists is found in Rachel McNair, Mary Krane Derr, and Linda Naranjo-Huebl, *Pro-Life Feminism: Yesterday and Today* (New York: Sulzburger and Graham, 1995), pp. 5–137.

6 Celeste Michelle Condit, *Decoding Abortion Rhetoric: Communicating Social Change* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1990), chap. 3, “The Pro-Life Heritage Tale”, pp. 43–58.

7 Prior to the works discussed here, three general histories of the movement had appeared: Andrew H. Merton, *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); Dallas Blanchard, *The Anti-Abortion Movement and the Rise of the Religious Right: From Polite to Fiery Protest* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1994). Paige’s book is the best of the group, but all are deeply biased and frequently sensationalist and cannot be taken as adequate accounts of the movement. Merton’s book is analysed in James Kelly’s “Turning Liberals into Fascists: A Case Study of the Distortion of the Right to Life Movement”, *Fidelity*, vol. 6 (July–August 1987), pp. 17–22. Kelly compares Merton’s taped interviews with the contents of the book and concludes, “It was as though he had not listened to his own taped interviews when he sat down to write the book.” More of the literature on the topic is discussed in Keith Cassidy, “The Right to Life Movement: Sources, Development, and Strategies”, *Political History*, vol. 7, no. 1 (1995), pp. 128–159.

8 Kristin Luker, *Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984). For a compatible analysis, see Faye Ginsberg, *Contested Lives: The Abortion Debate in an American Community* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), which studies Fargo, North Dakota.

These views of the movement are not sustainable. There is evidence that calls into question the simple correlation of pro-life views and a more general social and political conservatism.⁹ That the movement is complex, and not reducible to a single explanatory device, is the theme of several important works.¹⁰ That it is more than an anti-abortion campaign and has a wider range is shown by its heavy involvement, since its origins, in the issue of euthanasia.¹¹ That the movement is so frequently portrayed as marginal, pathological, and reactionary is not so much a reflection of its actual character as of the ideological commitments of the academics and journalists who discuss it. As well, it reflects the problem of social distance: few academics who write about the movement are likely to know personally any significant number of pro-life people.¹²

How well does the new literature address these deficiencies? Three books focus on the contemporary opponents of abortion. The most ambitious, Kerry Jacoby's *Souls, Bodies, Spirits*, is also the least successful. Jacoby begins promisingly enough, with a recognition of the complexity of abortion "which is not a single issue at all" (p. xiii) and a desire to move "beyond the name-calling and stereotyping" in understanding anti-abortion activists.

Jacoby posits a three-fold division of the right-to-life movement. At first, she claims, it arose in the 1970s as a "moral crusade" to protect the "moral and social worldview" of its members (p. 7). In this phase its membership was largely Catholic and more concerned with asserting a moral view than achieving real political impact. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, with the influx of evangelical Protestants to the cause and its alliance with the New

9 See, for example, James Davison Hunter, *Before the Shooting Begins: Searching for Democracy in America's Culture War* (New York: Macmillan, 1994). Hunter points to a complex situation in which pro-lifers are more conservative on some matters than their pro-choice opponents, but are more likely to be opposed to issues such as the death penalty (p. 106) and more likely to be concerned about issues of poverty, racial discrimination, and nuclear war (p. 116).

10 A remarkable study of the Canadian pro-life movement, which recognizes its complex character, is Michael Cuneo's *Catholics Against the Church: Anti-Abortion Protest in Toronto, 1969–1985* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989). See also James Kelly, "Toward Complexity: The Right to Life Movement", *Research in the Social Scientific Study of Religion*, vol. 1 (1989), pp. 83–107, and "Seeking a Sociologically Correct Name for Abortion Opponents", in Ted Jelen and Marthe A. Chandler, eds., *Abortion Politics in the United States and Canada* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1994), pp. 14–40.

11 This point is suggested in Cassidy, "The Right to Life Movement". Note as well the comment by Cook, Jelen, and Wilcox in *Between Two Absolutes*, p. 76: "We are confident that attitudes toward abortion and mercy killing are, at least in part, components of a more general respect for the sanctity of human life."

12 In her review of Luker's *Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood* in *Contemporary Sociology: A Journal of Reviews*, vol. 14, no. 1 (January 1985), pro-choice scholar Carole Joffe noted, "Given that most academics have little firsthand knowledge of this group [pro-lifers], and tend to be biased against them, it is a powerful revelation to see these 'others' emerge as compassionate human beings" (p. 27). A similar point is made by another pro-choice scholar, Laurence H. Tribe, in *Abortion and the Clash of Absolutes* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1990), p. 238.

Right, it became a “social movement”, which sought real as opposed to symbolic victories. From the late 1980s, with the appearance of Operation Rescue, the “abortion abolitionist” cause became what can best be characterized, she argues, as a “religious revival”. At times she seems to suggest that these are successive phases, but towards the end of her book she claims that “all three elements of the enterprise discussed here remain vital and active” (p. 177).

This work began as a Ph.D. thesis in political science, and it bears a number of marks of its origin. The lengthy discussions of social movement theory are intermittently insightful and her critique of resource mobilization theory is useful, but the reader cannot escape the nagging suspicion that many tons of ore must be processed to extract several ounces of precious metal.

Her account of the thinking of the 1970s activists — in particular her attempt to trace abortion attitudes to Catholic Marian doctrines — is simply not consistent with any wide reading of the material produced in that decade and does not convey the real character of the ideology of the activists. More crucially, she fails to make a convincing case that anti-abortion activism in the 1980s was fundamentally different from what it had been in the 1970s. She asserts that it was “too narrowly focussed, in both its theology and its issue orientation, to be thought of as a social movement”. The influx of evangelicals and the alliance with the Republican party under Reagan were of considerable significance, but they hardly constitute grounds for seeing a sharp differentiation between a “moral crusade” and a “social movement”. Many of the same people were in both, doing and saying many of the same things.

Certainly the movement became more pragmatic after the final failure of the drive for a Human Life Amendment. However, to maintain, as Jacoby does, that the “abolitionists” of the 1970s achieved no real results compels her to ignore the passage of the Hyde Amendment, barring federal funding of abortions, in 1976. As well, she ignores the crucial years prior to the 1973 *Roe* decision, apparently assuming that opposition to abortion became of consequence only in that year. In fact, a number of the most important right-to-life organizations predate 1973, and the movement had already won substantial victories in the 1972 referendums on abortion in North Dakota and Michigan and in pushing through repeal of New York’s very liberal abortion law in the same year (a victory negated by Governor Nelson Rockefeller’s veto). These were real, not symbolic, victories, and do not comport with her attempt to posit a difference between a “moral crusade” and a “social movement” phase.

More successful is Jacoby’s distinction between the “social movement” and “religious revival” phases in their definition of the nature of the problem posed by abortion and the solutions appropriate to it, with the latter group inclined to a more sweeping and extreme position. Indeed, her chapters on the “religious revival” aspect of the movement are the best in the

book and contain some sharp insights. Her analysis (pp. 159–166) of the thesis advanced by Dallas Blanchard and Terry Prewitt that “fundamentalism” explains the turn to violence by some abortion opponents is particularly trenchant.¹³ She demonstrates clearly that this is sloppily argued and refuted by their own evidence.

A central aspect of the book is its use of an opinion survey of pro-life activists, conducted in 1992. Fifty organizations were chosen at random from a list of 500, and ten copies of the survey were mailed to each with a request that these be distributed to the groups’ members. There were 104 replies. The replies are frequently cited and often provide a vivid illustration of the author’s points, but a sample of this size, with insufficient controls to ensure that it is representative, is of limited use for making generalizations about the movement.

Jacoby’s bibliography reveals some startling omissions: Michael Cuneo’s insightful account of the Canadian pro-life movement, which has enormous relevance for the American scene, is missing, as is reference to any of the work of James Kelly, an American sociologist who has produced a rich literature of articles on the topic.¹⁴

Regrettably, this book adds less to our knowledge of the topic than it promises. While it manifests a commendable desire to break away from negative and constricting stereotypes, it suffers from an abundance of models and displays a limited acquaintance with the substantial history of the movement.

James Risen and Judy L. Thomas’s *Wrath of Angels* is a far livelier account and much richer in vivid detail and character portraits, as might be expected of two seasoned journalists (for the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Kansas City Star* respectively). In their view, the Supreme Court’s sweeping decision in *Roe* short-circuited the development of national policy and left abortion opponents only two options for peaceful change: to pass a Human Life Amendment or to change the composition of the Court. “Both were long shots at best, and both ultimately ended in failure and despair,” they write (p. 39). With that failure, the mainstream right-to-life movement became irrelevant, and those who took the issue seriously moved into various forms of direct action: “*Roe* led almost inevitably to revolution and sent opponents into the streets” (p. 39). Given this assessment, Risen and Thomas virtually ignore the mainstream movement, such as the National Right to Life Committee, and focus on the advocates of “direct action”.

Their account has a number of virtues. It recovers the “lost history” of the direct action wing of the movement by exploring in detail the ideology and

13 Dallas A. Blanchard and Terry J. Prewitt, *Religious Violence and Abortion: The Gideon Project* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1993).

14 Cuneo, *Catholics Against the Church*; Kelly, “Turning Liberals into Fascists”, “Toward Complexity”, and “Seeking a Sociologically Correct Name”.

tactics of the “Father of Rescue”, John Cavanaugh-O’Keefe, a figure unknown outside the pro-life movement and little recognized even within it. In light of later developments, it may appear surprising that the early abortion clinic sit-ins were inspired by the anti-war movement of the 1960s and that many of the early participants had been active in the campaign against the Vietnam war. Drawing on the thought of Martin Luther King and Gandhi, they sought to transform attitudes to abortion by their willingness to suffer for the unborn by peaceful sit-ins, in which there would be no response to violence or verbal abuse.

Even in these early days, however, there were problems. One of Cavanaugh-O’Keefe’s followers, Michael Bray, in fact secretly undertook a bombing campaign against abortion clinics. His arrest and conviction were a shattering blow for Cavanaugh-O’Keefe, who felt that both he and the principles for which he stood had been betrayed. The example of Cavanaugh-O’Keefe and his writings on the subject “had a broad ripple effect, influencing every major activist in the anti-abortion movement, for good or ill” (p. 67). However, the original flavour of his movement — leftist and anti-war — disappeared, as his tactics were adopted by more conservative elements. Ironically “his efforts ... led instead to the creation of the first conservative civil disobedience movement in modern American history, a movement that mobilized Protestant fundamentalists for political action for the first time in more than fifty years” (p. 68).

The authors then cover the rise of the flamboyant and consciously outrageous Joe Schiedler, the direct action movement in St. Louis, and the development of Operation Rescue. They recount in detail the internal battles which tore that group apart and suggest that the failure of Operation Rescue paved the way for a radical fringe to descend ever deeper into violence, culminating in murder. They conclude, “The violence of the 1990s spelled the end of anti-abortion activism as a significant political and cultural force in American society” (p. 273).

This book is based on over 200 interviews and an extensive reading of literature pertaining to the movement, and it adds enormously to our knowledge. The authors’ characterizations are sharp and colourful: Randall Terry, for example, is a “strange and fascinating new hybrid, a kind of cross-cultural train wreck — Huey Newton meets Oral Roberts” (p. 218). The reader grows wary, however, at some of their lapses. In discussing Roman Catholic theology, even the most secular authors — or at least their editors — might be expected to know that God is described as a Trinity, not a “Trilogy” (p. 44). The National Right to Life Committee had its origins in 1968, not 1972 (p. 19), and to state that by the time Justice Blackmun retired he had “received more than sixty thousand pieces of hate mail” (p. 5) is irresponsible hyperbole, since that is the total of all letters he had received opposing the decision; are we to believe that they were all “hate mail”?

More seriously, their core theses, that the mainstream right-to-life move-

ment was irrelevant and that the descent into violence by a handful of extremists had finished the movement by the early 1990s, are dubious. Certainly the direct action wing of the movement had lost all influence or even legitimacy in the eyes of the public, but the mainstream movement continued to play a significant role in American politics. Restrictions on federal abortion funding continued in the late 1990s; the attempt to pass the *Freedom of Choice Act* failed; the Republican party kept the anti-abortion plank in its 1996 platform; and public opinion polls showed an increasing number of people willing to identify themselves as “pro-life” and a diminishing number willing to accept unrestricted abortion.¹⁵ In consequence of their intensive coverage of the direct action wing of the movement, the authors seem to have absorbed its negative evaluation of the mainstream organizations. Political clout in Washington and declining public acceptance of abortion, however, seemed to indicate that the reports of the mainstream movement’s demise were greatly exaggerated.

Another journalist, Cynthia Gorney from the *Washington Post*, has produced what is, while not a history in an academic sense, clearly the most insightful account of the abortion controversy to date. Her *Articles of Faith* is massively researched, the product of more than 500 interviews, numerous archival collections, and a lengthy bibliography, and is informed by an extraordinary ability to get inside the heads of activists on both sides and present their views with a passion and conviction at least equal to their own.

The book originated when she was sent to Missouri by the *Washington Post* to prepare an article on the background to *Webster v. Reproductive Health Services*, which was decided by the Supreme Court in 1989. In preparation she read widely in the literature on the abortion controversy, but soon discovered how false was “the assumption that a rich assortment of written reference works would explain for me, in language not intended to persuade or demean, what had happened in the years of conflict over legalized abortion” (p. 5).

I could not find a single volume that told me in narrative fashion what I wanted to know, which I began to understand was at once simple and alarmingly complex: How did we come to this? Who were the participants? What were the stories of women and men whose personal understanding of the events around them were so different that they had come to describe them in entirely different vocabularies? (p. 5).

15 A *USA Today*/CNN/Gallup Poll reported that “people who consider themselves ‘pro-choice’ are no longer a majority. The figure is 48%, down from a high of 56% three years ago. ... The number identifying themselves as ‘pro-life’ has risen from 36% three years ago to 42%” (*USA Today*, May 5, 1999, p. 15A). An analysis of eight *USA Today*/CNN/Gallup Polls taken since 1994 found “a significant drop — 8 percentage points — in the number of people who say they support abortion under any circumstances” (*USA Today*, January 21, 1999, p. 1A).

While she does not attempt to give a comprehensive account of the national story but rather focuses on Missouri, she steps back periodically to set the national context. Her choice of Missouri was wise: few states have had a more direct impact on the national story, and its abortion activists faithfully mirror many of the trends found nationally, both between and among themselves. Within the state she tells the story by focusing on a handful of individuals who played particularly crucial roles in the conflict. One is Judith Widdicombe, who, when we first meet her, is a nurse running an illegal abortion referral service in the 1960s and who, after *Roe*, opens an abortion clinic. Eventually it is her clinic, Reproductive Health Services, that challenges state restrictions on abortion in the *Webster* case. On the other side we meet first Dr. Matt Backer and later and more significantly Sam Lee, through whose thoughts and activities we follow the opposition to abortion. The two adversaries come to an understanding and grudging respect for each other, and through their eyes we follow local and national events. The author's ability to explicate the thoughts and emotions of both pro-life and pro-choice advocates perfectly is uncanny: in successive chapters she virtually becomes these persons and presents their arguments at least as forcefully as they could themselves. It is hard to imagine how anyone, after reading this book, could sustain the stereotypes so common in the abortion controversy. The divisions within each movement are presented clearly as well, as they battled, often bitterly, over the most effective tactics.

Widdicombe and Lee intersect at many points, with Lee taking part in sit-ins at Widdicombe's clinic and later helping to lobby the Missouri legislature to pass the legislation challenged in the *Webster* case. The story culminates with the *Webster* decision, but a ten-page epilogue brings events up to 1997. The real climax of the book is a scene in a chapter entitled "Zealots", when in 1989 the old antagonists, who have formed a real respect for each other, both find themselves under attack from members of their own movements who feel they are too moderate. For a moment they give each other a hug, recognizing their shared quandary.

This bare summary does not do justice to Gorney's achievement. She has filled the gap that she so clearly perceived in the literature and has produced a book that seeks to understand and explain, not to persuade and explain away. She has entered the minds of the protagonists and has articulated their positions with clarity and force. To see her move, in successive chapters, from one side to the other, presenting the arguments passionately felt by each with equal facility, is to see a first-class journalist at work. Anyone who wishes to understand the abortion controversy in a way that neither caricatures its activists nor reduces them to statistical abstractions should read this book.

While being superb journalism and an indispensable resource for historians, this book is not a history. Its strength — the intense, sympathetic focus on individuals — is also its limitation. I would not wish for the overly abstract social analysis used by Jacoby, but a larger theoretical structure is still needed.

One source of insight into the thinking of the right-to-life movement is provided by the 13 essays in Mark Stetson's *The Silent Subject*. In the foreword, Richard John Neuhaus argues that, while there has certainly not been silence about abortion over the preceding decades, in another sense "there has been a most remarkable silence about the subject of abortion — that subject being the human life that is terminated by abortion". Neuhaus maintains that "we have not had the civil conversation that is required" about abortion and that "one side in the debate has adamantly insisted upon the exclusion of 'the silent subject' from the debate". We cannot, however, "honestly consider the merits of 'choice' without considering what is chosen" (p. xi).

Divided into five sections, the essays cover ethical, cultural, personal, religious, and legal perspectives and represent a range of professional, ideological, and religious backgrounds. As with all such collections, the quality of the essays varies, but at their best they add significantly to our understanding of the pro-life view of the subject. The philosopher Francis Beckwith argues trenchantly with the proposition that "since experts disagree about when and if the fetus becomes a human life, then abortion should remain legal" (p. 33), and psychologist Sidney Callahan argues for our "moral duty to the unborn" and fears that "a destructive and violent solution permitted in one stage of life" will be generalized "to other stressful situations" (p. 48). An essay by pro-life feminist Frederica Mathewes-Green explores the work of a pregnancy care centre in Maryland and concludes with the reflection, "The abortion battle is most loudly fought in the political arena, but few pregnant women are found there. Where women in need go, other women go to help. ... It is a subversive work, when women help women give birth, and it is the best proof yet of the power of sisterhood" (p. 132). Clarke Forsythe's legal analysis of the enforcement of abortion laws before *Roe*, done from a lawyer's rather than an historian's perspective, not surprisingly concludes that "[a]bortion laws can be successfully enforced, and abortion can be contained", but cautions that "the surrounding cultural and sociological conditions that create the demand for abortion must be understood and counteracted in concert with the enforcement of criminal prohibitions" (p. 206). His observations are in striking contrast to the perspective advanced by Leslie Reagan, and it would be interesting to see an expanded version of them. Other essays in this collection reward reading, such as David Reardon's study of "Women Who Abort: Their Reflections on the Unborn".

Cumulatively, these essays undermine easy generalizations about the pro-life movement and make clear that it is complex and diverse, hardly reducible to such stock phrases as "the Religious Right" or "anti-feminist", and that a re-evaluation of it is overdue. They are not, however, with the exception of Forsythe's essay, history as such, but rather indispensable material for the writing of one.

A study with a far broader focus is Donald Critchlow's *Intended Conse-*

quences, which, appropriately for the founding editor of *The Journal of Policy History*, examines “the transformation of federal family planning policy in modern America since 1945”. This is more than an account, based on public documents, of legislation, administrative arrangements, and court decisions, though it includes all of these. It is based on a deep understanding of the social context of public policy and makes use of a wide range of archival holdings, most notably the papers of John D. Rockefeller 3rd and the Populations Council.

Four themes are identified: that “the influences of elite interests and mass political movements is multi-dimensional, dynamic, and varied in the political process”; the intended as well as unintended consequences of public policy; that the ability of groups to affect public policy is dependent on the values and mores of the larger culture; and finally that “the complexity of the policy process ... does not easily lend itself to categorizing policy actors into the ‘good guys’ and the ‘bad guys’ ” (p. 9).

During the period covered a dramatic change took place from “nonintervention to active involvement” (p. 3). While family planning drew support from concerns about both women’s rights and overpopulation, initially the latter was most influential. At first the focus was international, but during the Great Society emphasis shifted to the United States, “as federal involvement in family planning became an instrument to alleviate problems of poverty, welfare costs, and out-of-wedlock births” (p. 4). The family planning movement was driven by the efforts of a small, elite group — “Largely upper-class Protestants, the leaders of the movement reflected the bias of their social backgrounds” (p. 18). No one was more influential than John D. Rockefeller 3rd, whose presence is felt throughout the book. Early convinced of the menace of the “population explosion”, he was the driving force behind the creation of the Population Council and remained an active participant in the public policy process until his death in a car accident in 1978.

Several important changes occurred in the early 1970s. First was the emergence of the abortion issue, especially after *Roe*, which polarized discussion of family planning and ended bipartisan support for it. “Moreover, abortion transformed the discussion into a ‘rights’ debate. ... In the process, overpopulation became less important as a policy concern, although it never fell completely off the policy agenda” (p. 7). As well, the abortion issue led to the formation of grass-roots organizations, pro and anti, which in part supplanted the philanthropic organizations such as the Population Council that had previously shaped the family planning agenda. Even within the world of the large foundations, “[e]litism, at least in form and style, had become quite unfashionable in the egalitarian decade of the 1970s ... power was to be shared — still not equally, perhaps — with ethnic minorities and women” (p. 193). Secondly, by the time of the United Nations Population Conference in Bucharest in 1974, criticism of traditional population control policies had become sufficiently acute that in a major speech to the confer-

ence Rockefeller urged a new approach that stressed women's rights and social development. In the aftermath of that speech major changes took place in the approach of the leading family planning organizations, often after bitter internal conflict.

After 1974 Rockefeller increasingly moved away from his earlier and more limited concerns and focused his attention on the promotion of abortion rights and the transformation of public attitudes to sexuality, including homosexuality. Critchlow's findings about this phase in Rockefeller's career are highly interesting. He became a major supporter of the Sex Information and Education Council of the United States and from 1973 to 1978 provided "financial support and direction" to a number of pro-choice groups, including Catholics for a Free Choice (p. 184). In all, he donated more than half a million dollars of his own funds to the cause of abortion rights. A similar push came from other groups such as the Ford Foundation, which provided funding for legal challenges to abortion restrictions, subsidized pro-choice religious organizations, and provided funds for scholarly studies of abortion such as those by the historians Maris Vinovskis and James Mohr. The extent to which the pro-choice movement was subsidized by a handful of wealthy individuals and foundations casts an interesting light on the history of the abortion debate: while the pro-choice movement was certainly in part a "grass-roots" phenomenon, many of its principal organizations were heavily dependent on elite support.

What had begun as a movement concerned with a perceived problem of overpopulation in third world countries had become a domestic movement, which sought to transform not only family planning practices but the whole range of attitudes to sexuality and gender roles. "The emergence of the proabortion and antiabortion movements in the late 1960s and early 1970s only intensified cultural and religious divisions concerning these underlying social changes" (p. 8). Critchlow argues that, while the "concept 'cultural war' exaggerates the political differences within the American polity, the term captures the nature of the polarized debate over abortion and gender-related issues in contemporary America" (p. 8).

This social conflict was not an intended consequence of the family planning movement, but, as Critchlow emphasizes, many of its outcomes were. The reduction in the population growth rate in the United States and the world as a whole was one, as was the related increase in contraceptive use. The legalization of abortion was another. On the other hand, the claims of family planning proponents that it would lower poverty and the number of out-of-wedlock births proved illusory. Poverty fell, but for reasons unrelated to family planning (p. 230); while these programs were not, as some critics charged, responsible for the rise in out-of-wedlock births, neither did they decrease, "as policy makers claimed they would with federal intervention" (p. 230).

As might be expected with any work covering so large and complicated a topic, mistakes are almost inevitable. Thus Critchlow confuses the organiz-

ations which arose from ideological splits within the National Right to Life Committee (pp. 139–140).¹⁶ These are minor issues, however, which do little to detract from a very impressive scholarly achievement. Consistent with one of his four themes, he treats neither the advocates of family planning and abortion nor their opponents as “good” or “bad”. His sensitivity to complexity and change helps him overcome the limiting stereotypes mentioned earlier and points to the emergence of a more satisfactory scholarship in this area in the future.

The works examined here make important contributions to our knowledge. Gorney and Critchlow are particularly useful, but none of these books ends the need for the further exploration of this tangled and divisive issue. Academics might find that the call to understand and accept diversity — even if they do not feel like “celebrating” it in this case — would be the best basis for further research, however much it runs counter to their personal beliefs.

16 He refers to the American Right to Life Association (a group that, while chartered, was never activated), saying it was formed in 1974, when he apparently means Americans United for Life, which was created in 1971. More confusingly, some of his remarks about ARTLA suggest that he is conflating it with American Citizens Concerned for Life, a liberal pro-life group.