

# Anthropologists, Abortion and the Cultural War In America

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Some things are true even if Pat Buchanan says them. When I came out of the Peruvian Amazon after doing field research in the summer of 1992, the first thing I saw and heard on television in Lima was Buchanan's speech at the Republican convention about the "culture war." I broke into a cold sweat and wanted to go back to the safety of the jungle with my Shipibo friends. Give me the snakes in the forest and *sancudos* on the Ucayali *playa*, please. But the scariest thing was, he was right. Of course, he was one of the generals in the war. And as an abortion doctor, I was in the crosshairs.

The cultural revolutions that we saw erupting in the sixties and seventies had their origins in many previous events, but the sexual revolution—who many saw as a breath of air in a suffocating cultural environment—was also part of a new freedom of expression. It was also, especially for women, a way of escaping from prescribed social roles defined by biological function and reinforced by patriarchal social values. It meant that women could make choices never before fully and safely available to them. It meant they could choose to *be* as distinguished from merely surviving according to prescribed rules.

## COMMENTARY

When asked how she would manage being both a woman and a member of Congress, Pat Schroeder asked, "Do I have to choose?" She also said, "I have a brain and a uterus, and I use both."

Pat went on to challenge the male-dominated seniority system in Congress, including the Chairman of the Armed Services Committee, on whose committee she so capably served. Her sharp wit, ribald humor

and devastatingly prepared arguments changed the way the Congress handled military matters. It also changed the way many of the male members saw women. She was charming, funny and effective.

Pat Schroeder's success symbolized the problem that cultural conservatives and defenders of patriarchal val-

are now competing against uppity women for jobs, money and power.

Why is it that anti-abortion fanatics call themselves "Pro-Life" while they are killing doctors who do abortions and picketing infertility clinics? Because the struggle has nothing to do with abortion or infertility. It's about power: who has

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ues were beginning to face. She was an uppity woman. She scared them.

Fetuses, by contrast with adult women, are not uppity. They can be defended at election time along with Motherhood, Apple Pie and the American Flag, thereby sending political adversaries into disarray. Fighting For The Fetus wins Hearts, Minds and Votes. The Fetus becomes a Fetish Object to be defended. It works. Defenders of the Fetus win elections. Look at Bob Dole, who was losing his bid for reelection in 1974 until, a week before the election, he started calling his obstetrician-gynecologist opponent An Abortionist. It worked. Dole won. It didn't matter that Dr Roy had delivered thousands of babies and had done only a few abortions for serious medical reasons.

The Republican Party, taken over by the radical political right, took Dole's example to heart. Its leaders decided to exploit the radical religious right and cultural conservatives to get power.

Who are the people who have led the fight against abortion and women's rights? Who are the picketers? Who are the anti-abortion assassins? White, unemployed, uneducated men who have lost their status in society because they

it, and who doesn't. It's about which way the guns are pointed. Trying to understand this in terms of logic and reason doesn't work, because it isn't about logic and reason. It's about who's running your life. It's

about who controls the definitions of words and the terms of survival.

In his book, *The Politics of the Rich and Poor*, Kevin Phillips, no flaming, pinko, wild-eyed liberal, wrote that the Republican Party had decided to use several hot-button cultural issues, including abortion, to get power, and it worked. The real goal, however, according to Phillips, was not to outlaw abortion, but to use the power to transfer money from the pockets of the poor and middle-class to the pockets of the rich.

It would be reductionist to assert that the abortion issue has been the cause of the direction in which American society appears to be heading, and there are obviously many causes. But I have a special interest in the role of the abortion issue since I am a physician who performs abortions as well as an anthropologist and epidemiologist who studies fertility and other reproductive health issues in human societies. In fact, one of the reasons why I chose to provide abortion services was that I was concerned about the public health and social justice issues affecting women and their families under the circumstances of illegal abortion. Many women were dying (and still are) from illegal abortion everywhere I

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Protest signs at the March for Women's Lives, Washington DC, April 25, 2004. Photo courtesy of Sarah Wassell

## Religion and IVF

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As a result of these unprecedented Iranian religious rulings favoring third-party gamete donation and surrogacy, infertile Shi'ite Muslim couples in Iran, as well as in Shi'ite-majority Lebanon, are beginning to receive donor gametes, as well as donating their gametes to other infertile couples. For the Shi'ite religious authorities, IVF physicians and infertile couples who accept the idea of gamete donation, the introduction of donor technologies has been described as a "marriage savior," helping to avoid the "marital and psychological disputes" that may arise if the couple's case is otherwise untreatable.

In Lebanon, Shi'ite *fatwas* allowing egg donation have, in fact, been a great boon to marital relations. There, both fertile and infertile men with reproductively elderly wives (those with poor ova quality) are signing up on waiting lists at IVF clinics to accept the eggs of donor women. Some of these donors are other IVF patients, and some are friends or relatives. And in at least one clinic, some are young women being recruited from the US, who may unwittingly serve as anonymous egg donors for conservative Shi'ite Hizbullah couples! Furthermore, quite interestingly, in multi-sectarian Lebanon, the recipients of these donor eggs are not necessarily only Shi'ite Muslim couples. Some Sunni Muslim patients from Lebanon and from other Middle Eastern Muslim countries (as well as minority Christian couples), are quietly saving their marriages through the use of donor gametes, thereby secretly "going against" the dictates of Sunni Muslim orthodoxy.

Indeed, new reproductive technologies have brought great joy to thousands of infertile Muslim couples who have borne test-tube babies over the last 20 years since these technologies were first introduced in the Sunni Muslim world. Furthermore, the more recent globalization of these technologies to the Shi'ite Muslim world has fundamentally altered understandings of the ways in which families can be made and the ways in which marriages can be saved through the uses of donor technologies. Paradox-

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looked—in Latin America, where I worked as a medical student, intern and Peace Corps physician, and in the US, where I saw tragedy as a medical student and as a public health physician. But I had learned in medical school that pregnancy is "normal," and that a woman is most "normal" when she is pregnant. Well, if that's true, what is she when she's not pregnant?

Once you start analyzing this, it is apparent that Western culture defines women as reproductive machines—that is their purpose in life—so pregnancy is "normal" even though women can die from it whether they want to be pregnant or not. The cultural revolutions of the 1960s and 1970s (built on the work of many pioneers) challenged this cultural norm by asserting that women may choose not to be victims of the tyranny of their own biology, not to mention the tyranny

ically, the most conservative, male Shi'ite religious leaders in Iran have been the ones to adopt the most "adventurous" attitudes toward third-party gamete donation. In doing so, they have offered reproductive *fatwas* with real potential to transform infertile gender relations in ways heretofore unanticipated in the Muslim world.

For infertile Shi'ite Muslim couples already benefiting from donor gametes in IVF clinics in Iran and Lebanon, the donor children they bear represent the happy outcome of the "brave new world" of third-party gamete donation as it enters the Muslim world in the 21st century. For those of us in anthropology who study the social and cultural implications of the new reproductive technologies, the striking and rapidly evolving case of the Muslim world reminds us why religion does, indeed, matter in reproductive health, particularly as we enter a religiously troubled new millennium. ■

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of men who expected them to stay home in the kitchen, barefoot and pregnant, making cookies and having babies. They could choose their own identity. And they could choose to be uppity.

And now these uppity women—who decided to become doctors, lawyers, bank presidents and political leaders—decided, after all, to have babies anyway. But at age 38 or 40 or 45, things too often go wrong, and a desperately desired pregnancy becomes a tragic nightmare or a threat to life. And these women have to confront the profound sadness of ending a pregnancy, but in a climate of anti-abortion terrorism and by a doctor who works behind bullet-proof windows.

Abortion became a target for the cultural conservatives because having an abortion became a public act. *Roe v Wade* was the red flag in front of the bull. It was one thing, though, for people to have sincere philosophical and religious convictions, for people to be afraid of social change, but it was another thing, and far more dangerous, for

someone to start exploiting those convictions for political purposes—to gain power. That gave powerful psychological permission for the perpetrators of anti-abortion violence including the political assassination of abortion doctors and others helping women get abortions.

Ronald Reagan announced that he was going to make abortion illegal, and he made this a fundamental part of his political appeal. Reagan tried to make abortion a political crime against the state. From that point, having an abortion was a political act. Performing an abortion was a political act. Doctors are fewer and more identifiable than patients. Kill the doctors, and we will stop abortion, someone said. Guess what? It works. The logic of power is as inscrutable as it is inexorable. ■

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