

Abortion as Insurrection

Dr. Warren M. Hern

What role does abortion play in changing power relationships in American society?

The abortion controversy exists not because of those who have abortions or those who perform them. It exists because of the intense feelings of those who are bystanders and who are not affected directly by the act of abortion. Why, then, are those who oppose abortion so intently determined to prevent others from acting?

The most fervent anti-abortion groups are led and directed by men. These men tend to espouse a regressive if not totalitarian philosophy that requires subservience by women and control of social institutions by men. Joseph Scheidler, head of the Chicago Pro-Life Action League, is the most lurid example. Here is Scheidler in a 1984 interview with *American Medical News*, while expressing his opposition to the Equal Rights Amendment: "It would give women the same rights as men....God didn't intend that or he wouldn't have had women bearing children."

Anti-abortion groups represent a cultural counterrevolution that resists and tries to repeal profound changes that have occurred in our society in the past century, particularly during the past thirty years. The introduction of safe and effective fertility control measures in the past quarter-century has freed women to choose not to reproduce and to choose to develop other skills in society. Women have new opportunities for education and for careers.

Abortion is the most obvious, vulnerable, and dramatic example of the new freedom for women. It is the final and irretrievable act of fertility control a woman can exercise in a particular pregnancy. Abortion is therefore truly revolutionary in the sense that it fundamentally and irreversibly changes power relations within Western society.

To the historic patriarchal agrarian society and those who defend its values, abortion is an act of insurrection. It shatters the last bonds of biological tyranny that have been used to control the lives of women and some men. Women, freed from the tyranny of biology, have become uppity. They are now competing with men for jobs, money, and power. The effort to crush those who provide this service and to crush all progress toward equality for women in our society raises fundamental questions.

Those who defend the traditional values say that the problem is the definition of human life and that our definition is inadequate. The issue, however, is not when life begins but who is best prepared to make the decision to transmit life to a new generation: the individual or the state?

The issue is not the definition of life but the definition of power: who has it and who doesn't? Will power in our society be wielded absolutely by those who cannot become pregnant, or will it be shared by those who can?

The fetus becomes a pawn in this power struggle. It becomes a demigod, a fetish object to be protected against evil. It is endowed with magical and fantastic properties, as we see in the propaganda movie, *The Silent Scream*. Fetus fetish dolls even become a source of revenue for the right-to-life movement, according to *National Right to Life News* of October 24, 1986.

Fetuses are politically useful. They are not uppity and they do not argue. They present no economic threat to the male power structure. They can be defended along with the flag and motherhood before the voters at election time. They can be defended against sin and immorality, thereby throwing political opponents into disarray. They provide an irresistible opportunity for the exercise of righteous indignation.

Defending the fetus is an effective way to divert attention from other intractable and less interesting matters of public policy, such as the national debt, staggering budget deficits, the arms race, colossal environmental destruction, uncontrolled growth of the human population, poverty and malnutrition, illiteracy, and epidemic disease generated by the tobacco industry.

Under the Reagan administration, abortion became a political act, and abortion is now in danger of becoming a political crime against the state.

Abortion has become a political issue because it is about power. It is about who runs your life. It is about who runs our society. It is about self-determination, about self-realization, about individual choice, about personal freedom, and about responsibility. It is about humanistic values as distinguished from supernatural, fantastic, or divine control of human lives as interpreted by those who claim they speak with God and with authority.

Opposition to legal abortion, in the long run, is an exercise in futility, notwithstanding temporary successes in restricting access to abortion and the vexation of mindless harassment. The big-time political operators know this, but they are using abortion – and the true believers who oppose it – for a political purpose. That purpose is to gain power.

They have been successful to a limited degree. They played a role in removing intelligent leaders such as Birch Bayh, George McGovern, Frank Church, and Dick Clark from the United States Senate. They played an important part in the election of Ronald Reagan as president of the United States. They have dominated the Republican party nationally and much of the federal government since 1980. They want power, and opposition to abortion is one way to get it.

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George Bush, Pat Robertson, Jack Kemp, and Robert Dole all were on record as 1988 presidential candidates who were opposed to legal abortion. Opposition to abortion was a major component of each candidate's appeal to the religious right, particularly during the 1988 primaries. George Bush used this appeal during the first presidential debate and in the rest of his campaign.

The reason why opposition to abortion works so well as a political organizing issue is that it plays well to the emotions of both simple people who wish to defend traditional values and righteous fanatics who see themselves as the defenders of public virtue. It supports the activities of those who feel good by making other people feel bad. It supports those who fear thought, reason, and intellectual and academic freedom as well as those who fear the participation in democratic society of people who are different.

As social scientists, we might understand that there is a cultural lag between the fundamentalist prayer-meeting message that harshly condemns abortion for "moral" reasons and the currents of late twentieth-century urban society. As citizens, though, we must perceive the threat to civil liberties and modern political order and consider our response.

I must ask myself what my own role is in this process. Does it matter that I perform abortions? Does it matter that I defend the right of physicians to do so? Does it matter that I defend the right of women not only to have them but to have them under conditions of safe, humane, supportive medical care?

This is not an abstract issue. In this case, words do not fulfill the freedom to choose. After someone decides to have an abortion, someone must be ready and willing to perform it. For some people, I am half of that equation.

Abortion is not the best answer to every unplanned or unwanted pregnancy, and it is not the answer to every complicated pregnancy. It requires a difficult and sometimes extremely painful personal decision. It carries some physical risk – especially if not performed properly – and it is often physically painful. It is for many a cause of great sadness, especially when it occurs without adequate psychological support or under degrading or dangerous conditions. Under safe and humane conditions, it can be a source of great relief and an opportunity to begin life anew. But it is never easy for either women who have abortions or those who provide them.

My participation in the provision of abortion services as it has occurred in my life could be seen in various ways. To a considerable extent, however, it is the direct consequence of my own logic, conclusions, and personal ethics. I chose medicine because it appeared to be an interesting career with unlimited opportunities for personal service to humanity, opportunities for scientific learning and research, opportunities to relieve suffering, and opportunities for personal growth. I have always been especially concerned with broad issues of public health. As I worked in some of those issues and saw the connection between individual suffering and public health issues, I kept noticing the fact that women were suffering and dying unnecessarily from illegal abortions. I also observed that failure to provide opportunities for fertility control was leading to rapid growth of the human population and destruction of the very resources needed to sustain the human population.

Having accepted an invitation to provide abortion services for what I expected to be a relatively short time, I found myself at the center of a controversy far more significant than my own personal choices. I also found that what I did appeared to make important differences in the lives of the women I helped and in the lives of their families. It is very difficult to walk away from circumstances like that.

Now I find, some fifteen years later, that I have spent a good part of my life engaged in this struggle. There is no end to the struggle in sight. Shall I continue? Does it matter? Will not others continue the struggle as well if not better? What about my own desire to remove myself from the maelstrom of controversy that threatens my patients, disrupts my life, and, indeed, threatens at times to interrupt my life?

One ineluctable fact is that, before a pregnant woman decides to walk into my office for her appointment with me to have an abortion, the probability is overwhelming that she will have a baby. In having a baby, her life would be changed. The world would have a new person. In some remote and infinitesimal way, perhaps impossible to measure, we would all be affected. Even so, no decisions are more personal or more the result of individual will than the decisions to have sexual intercourse, to have a child, or to have an abortion.

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When that woman walks out of my office, she will not be having a baby, at least as the result of that pregnancy. Her life has been changed. Biology is not her destiny, to contradict Freud. We have turned the history of the species upside down. We have changed history. We have changed the world and the relationship of that woman to the world.

The fact that we can do this for many women changes our society. The fact that others oppose our actions and seek to impose the coercive power of the state – to imprison us for our actions – is a political fact that we have, acting together, defied. We have stated that human beings are responsible for their actions, are responsible for the problems created by those actions, and are responsible for the solutions. We have stated that we may change the future, that we may make the world better, that we may choose not to accept the authority of those who would rule by force, ignorance, and fear, and that we may apply human learning and reason to human problems. We have stated that destiny is what we make it and, in a way, that the very idea of destiny is no longer valid. We create our lives as we go.

Each one of us who performs abortions, at least those who do so openly, provides a symbolic expression of that idea. As a symbol, it communicates an unfettered message to everyone in our society. The longer that symbol exists and the longer it survives attack, the more it connects with the real needs of real people and the more validity it acquires. That is why the attacks are so direct and increasingly harsh.

As long as that expression of freedom, reason, human caring, and enlargement of human choice is threatened by a totalitarian and oppressive movement, I will perform abortions.

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