

“As Through a Glass, Darkly”: Recent Interpretations of the Pro-Life Movement

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ABSTRACT: Now nearly sixty years old, the pro-life movement has been the subject of a large literature, of widely varying quality. This paper examines six of the more notable recent studies and finds that they too differ greatly. Ziad Munson’s *The Making of Pro-Life Activists* is a useful and unbiased study. Daniel Williams’s *Defenders of the Unborn* is an exceptional account of the origins and development of the movement which highlights its liberal origins. Laura Hussey’s *The Pro-Life Pregnancy Help Movement* is a meticulous and wide-ranging study of crisis pregnancy centres, which breaks new ground. Paul Saurette and Kelly Gordon, in *The Changing Voice of the Anti-Abortion Movement*, look at the changing rhetorical style of the pro-life movement, primarily in Canada, and persuasively finds a remarkable shift in recent years. Karissa Haugeberg’s *Women Against Abortion* unconvincingly portrays a movement which is reactionary, patriarchal, and violent. Jennifer Holland’s *Tiny You* focuses on four western states, and also sees a deeply illiberal movement, characterized by “whiteness,” a term which she never defines. The latter two books point to a problem with a historical profession which increasingly rejects objectivity and sees its task as the advancement of a preferred narrative.

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THE PRO-LIFE MOVEMENT has been in existence for nearly sixty years and an enormous amount has been written about it. The quality of this literature varies greatly, from serious, insightful scholarship to rabid partisanship. There have been reviews of the earlier publications, and this paper does not seek to revisit that material.¹ Rather the intent is to acquaint listeners with a body of work produced since 2008, all of it published by university presses.

These works not only provide fresh insights into the pro-life movement, but they also offer a glimpse into the current state of scholarship in the humanities and social sciences. They are, in disciplinary terms, a diverse lot: two are by political scientists, one is by a sociologist, and three are by historians. Good, solid work is still being done, but three of the books betray the harmful effects of a deep-seated politicization of research. For two of the books, both by historians, this negates much of their worth. This politicization is particularly dangerous in an academic culture which skews so heavily to one side of the spectrum: works which are reflective of the prevailing orthodoxy are apparently sometimes spared appropriate critical review. Did the university presses which published some of these works neglect their duty to demand scholarly rigor?

These books give us an opportunity to reflect on the issue of objectivity and neutrality in scholarship, and how those questions are currently addressed. They also raise the problem of understanding the thinking of those with whom you profoundly disagree: is it possible, or desirable to do so?

The sociologist Ziad Munson's 2008 publication, *The Making of Pro-Life Activists*, is a balanced and serious attempt to understand the world of

¹ Keith Cassidy, "The Right to Life Movement: Sources, Development, and Strategies," in *The Politics of Abortion and Birth Control in Historical Perspective, Issues in Policy History*; #5 (University Park, Pa: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), 128–59; Keith Cassidy, "The Abortion Wars: The Scholarly Front," *Histoire Sociale/Social History XXXII*, no. 64 (November 1999): 295–310; Keith Cassidy, "Interpreting the Pro-Life Movement: Recurrent Themes and Recent Trends," ed. Joseph W. Koterski, *Life and Learning IX* (Washington, D.C, 1999).

pro-life activism.² His most startling finding is that the process of recruitment into the pro-life cause is highly formative of pro-life beliefs. This stands in contrast to the usual view that it is pro-life ideas already held which lead to active recruitment—in fact, the sequence of chickens and eggs is usually reversed. Munson also observes that there are four distinct “streams” within the pro-life movement, which are often in sharp disagreement. He stresses the diversity among pro-lifers:

“There is a tendency to try to boil social movements down to a single underlying idea or belief. This is especially true of movements with which one disagrees: it is easier to dismiss an opposing viewpoint by reducing it to a sound bite or a simple (and ugly) message. Until now, the pro-life movement has been examined in this manner – as a countermovement that is “really” about gender relationships, changes in sexuality, and the true role of women in society. These ideas are evident in the moral universe of pro-life activism, but they neither define nor organize the different constellations of ideas about abortion that make up that universe.... Activists’ beliefs about abortion do not neatly fit into a single ideological camp.³

Especially notable, and very useful, is historian Daniel K. Williams’s *Defenders of the Unborn: The Pro-Life Movement Before Roe v. Wade*, published in 2016.⁴ This is the best monograph on the topic and has proven highly influential. Williams properly begins before WWII with Catholic opposition to abortion and contraception, based on a natural law tradition, which readily transitioned into an opposition to abortion based on an appeal to universal human rights. In this, the Catholic position was very consistent with a New Deal liberalism. Notably, Williams dismisses the idea that the pro-life movement was “conservative” in its origins.

Indeed, he writes “Many pro-lifers had long been sympathetic to political liberalism, but in the early 1970s, they would make a new effort to graft their advocacy of rights for the unborn onto a larger, socially conscious,

² Ziad W. Munson, *The Making of Pro-Life Activists: How Social Movement Mobilization Works* (Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 2008), <https://doi.org/10.7208/9780226551210>.

³ Munson, 153.

⁴ Daniel K. Williams, *Defenders of the Unborn: The Pro-Life Movement before Roe v. Wade* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

liberal political agenda that would include antiwar activism, poverty relief, and racial justice, along with programs to help unborn children and their mothers”⁵

Williams notes, “The Republican Party was far from an obvious home for pro-lifers in the mid-1970s.”⁶

Williams skillfully traces the process from the 1976 election onward—by which the pro-life movement did indeed end up closely allied with the Republican Party. In part this arose from changes in the Democratic Party:

For three decades following the creation of the New Deal, most liberal Democrats had grounded their calls for social welfare programs and economic uplift in the principle of helping the male-headed household—a concept that closely accorded with the Catholic church’s teaching that the family unit was the foundation of society. But by the late 1960’s and 1970’s liberal Democrats exchanged this family centered ideal for a new rights-based ethic grounded in individual autonomy and social equality, thus alienating many theologically conservative Catholics, including the pro-lifers who viewed the defense of fetal rights as a liberal campaign and who had hoped to ally with Democrats.⁷

He notes “Republicans had given little support to the pro-life cause before *Roe*. In many ways, it was *Roe* itself that had produced this uneasy alliance and prompted both sides to enter into a marriage of convenience that at times was fraught with tension.”⁸

Williams elaborates:

And over time a strange thing happened. As the other moral regulatory causes that the Christian Right had championed . . . eventually lost public support, and in a few causes faded away entirely, the pro-life cause remained the one moral issue that was capable of attracting a younger generation to the Republican Party. It did so because unlike the other campaigns for moral regulation, it was a human rights cause that the millennial generation, which had grown up in an era of rights consciousness, could easily understand and claim as its own.⁹

⁵ Williams, 155.

⁶ Williams, 230.

⁷ Williams, 247.

⁸ Williams, 267.

⁹ Williams, 267–68.

Laura Hussey's *The Pro-Life Pregnancy Help Movement*, published in 2020, is an examination by a political scientist of the history, organizations, goals, operations, and effects of crisis pregnancy centers (CPCs). These are the least recognized yet most pervasive part of the pro-life movement and have never been subject to systematic and fair-minded treatment.¹⁰ She is clear about her own pro-life convictions and past involvement with pro-life organizations. Given the academia's overwhelmingly pro-choice views on abortion, she proceeds in a fashion which assures readers that she is honest, fair minded, and transparent about her research methods and conclusions.

She decisively refutes the notion that CPCs arose because of pro-life frustration with the failure of political pro-life action:

Pro-life pregnancy centers began sprouting in the United States as repeal of criminal abortion prohibitions arose on state legislative agendas in the late 1960's and 1970's.¹¹ "Expansions in pro-life individual outreach only rarely appeared to be tied to the ebbs and flows of the pro-life movement's political prospects...."¹²

With regard to politics, she concludes that:

In the end, though, political ideology simply is not salient to the way pregnancy help activists frame their work. Although most pregnancy help leaders identify with the pro-life movement, the typical pregnancy center identifies itself as a ministry or a service provider rather than an activist organization. Consistent with this identity its personnel tend to distance themselves from overtly political activity when representing the center.¹³

She discounts the view that CPCs deliberately try to look like abortion clinics in order to deceive potential clients:

As important as this drive to compete with abortion clinics is to understanding some of the pregnancy centers actions (See Chapter 4), it is incomplete. My research suggests that pregnancy centers' strategies to compete are sometimes

¹⁰ Laura S. Hussey, *The Pro-Life Pregnancy Help Movement: Serving Women Or Saving Babies?* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2020).

¹¹ Hussey, 211.

¹² Hussey, 211.

¹³ Hussey, 214.

exaggerated in the popular press. This includes deceptive and coercive practices.¹⁴

Her most sensitive and insightful research concerns the motivation of workers in CPCs; she focuses on religion, not in a formal and dogmatic sense, but in the desire to emulate Christ's love:

Notably, the kind of religious faith activists professed is neither the "personal morality" or "sin avoidance" variety of Christianity typically associated with pro-life activists. Neither is it the kind of "social justice" or "social gospel" variety often associated with antipoverty work. Instead, activists in the pro-life pregnancy help movement fuse these two faces of Christianity by reifying the biblical command to love both God and neighbor.¹⁵

She asks, "Are pro-life pregnancy centers primarily in the business of serving women or saving babies? In activists' ideal world they accomplish both: saving babies as a result of serving women."¹⁶ In fact, serving women is the primary goal of the centers, which do provide real goods and services to clients:

Indeed, if pregnancy centers do have a hidden agenda behind the claims to provide practical and emotional support through unplanned childbearing, it is more likely an agenda to transform the lives of clients through sharing faith-based messages than one to stop all the abortions that they can.¹⁷

The last three books, by clearly pro-choice researchers, vary in approach and quality. They do raise the question of whether pro-choice advocates can surmount their biases as effectively as a pro-life supporter like Laura Hussey.

The Changing Voice of the Anti-Abortion Movement, by two political scientists—Paul Saurette and Kelly Gordon—appeared in 2015. While seriously weakened by its biases and omissions, it nonetheless makes a useful

¹⁴ Hussey, 215–16.

¹⁵ Hussey, 225.

¹⁶ Hussey, 227.

¹⁷ Hussey, 228.

contribution to our knowledge of the abortion debate.¹⁸ The primary focus is on Canada, although some attention is paid to American developments.

As the title suggests, the work studies the style and substance of the persuasive material produced by the right to life movement. It argues that, particularly in Canada, there has been a considerable shift in the tone and approach taken by the movement:

We have found...that over the past decade the Canadian anti-abortion movement has increasingly employed a public discourse that serves to distance itself from the stereotypical image of the movement as male led, religiously grounded, focused on criminalizing abortion, fetal centric, and aggressively anti-woman in its tone. Instead the movement is increasingly using a variety of rhetorical techniques (including arguments, visuals, frames, and narratives) to present a profoundly different public face and voice to Canadians—one that portrays the anti-abortion position as modern, non-religious, open, sympathetic, and above all as “pro-woman” and progressive.¹⁹

They employ quantitative and qualitative analyses of pro-life material—blog posts, websites, and statements by pro-life politicians, primarily from the period 2007 to 2010, and demonstrate that indeed newer themes have been foregrounded. The book’s many biases are irritating and detract significantly from its worth: among them the assumption that the “anti-woman” labelling of some pro-lifers is accurate and not just a hostile caricature; the acceptance of the idea that abortion is free of serious medical side effects and that any claim to the contrary is without scientific basis; and the presentation of a very lengthy historical account of abortion law, which substantially misrepresents the real record. Most startling, in a scholarly book, is the concluding chapter entitled “Where to Now? Practical Implications for Abortion Rights Advocates” dedicated to providing pro-choice activists with advice on how to counteract the right to life movement’s newer approaches.²⁰

¹⁸ Paul Saurette and Kelly Gordon, *The Changing Voice of the Anti-Abortion Movement: The Rise of “pro-Woman” Rhetoric in Canada and the United States* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015).

¹⁹ Saurette, xvii.

²⁰ Saurette, Chapter 14.

Despite all this, the book seems to have a genuine desire to understand the topic. It is a very useful reminder that the course of the abortion debates in Canada is very different from that of the United States, not only because of the constitutional and political differences between the two countries, but even more because of the more notably secularized nature of Canada.

The historian Karissa Haugeberg's 2017 publication, *Women against Abortion*, focuses on the experience of pro-life women.²¹ She accepts uncritically the thesis minted by Kristin Luker²² that for most the real driver of their commitment was their investment in conventional gender norms, which were threatened by abortion:

For many of these women, motherhood was the identity that mattered most: their ideas about sex, work, and personal fulfillment often hinged on their ability to nurture and sustain families. They worried that contraception and abortion, which made motherhood optional, would devalue their decision to stay at home to raise families.²³

She concentrates on those who “shaped the American antiabortion movement not through leadership positions in conventional groups but instead as members of grassroots organizations.”²⁴ In particular she looks at Marjory Mecklenburg, Mildred Jefferson, Julie Loesch, Joan Andrews, and Shelly Shannon. This is a strange claim, since several of those listed were notably leading figures in conventional organizations.

Her agenda becomes clear when she declares that:

By capturing American women's experiences over a forty-year period, this study shows that the borders that separated conventional and grassroots, violent and nonviolent pro-life organizations were always porous. Most scholars who have examined women pro-life activists have studied women in particular cities, in particular organizations, over a relatively short period of time.

²¹ Karissa Haugeberg, *Women against Abortion: Inside the Largest Moral Reform Movement of the Twentieth Century*, Kindle Edition (Urbana, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2017).

²² Kristin Luker, *Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

²³ Haugeberg, location 121.

²⁴ Haugeberg, location 79.

An unintended consequence of this approach is that it can mislead observers into thinking that antiabortion activists were clearly divided between those who participated in nonviolent, conventional campaigns from those who deployed intimidating or violent strategies for ending abortion. The traditional approach to studying the movement has also obscured pro-life activists' use of coercive and violent tactics since the 1960s."²⁵

Haugeberg describes the book this way:

This book reveals the symbiotic relationship between the conventional and grassroots wings of the pro-life movement, showing that the women who emerged as key figures in the rescue movement learned direct action strategies at workshops held during conventional pro-life groups' annual meetings. Federal and state money often bankrolled grassroots coercive strategies to prevent women from obtaining abortions. And the arguments and strategies women operating at the grassroots level developed came to serve as blueprints to legislators and judges who continue to craft policies and laws that erode women's right to abortion.²⁶

She concedes that many in the movement began as liberal or left in ideology, but argues that the movement, and the Republican Party, both moved to the right in succeeding decades.²⁷ The point made by Williams, that at its core the movement retained a liberal sensibility which sustained its appeal, is lost on her.

While she focuses on women who played an important role in the movement, she sees it as essentially patriarchal. She is clearly among those "who see the pro-life movement as part of a larger patriarchal project devoted to disciplining women into becoming wives and mothers."²⁸

She deals at length with crisis pregnancy centers, and paints an unremittingly negative picture:

Although CPC volunteerism initially seemed friendly and helpful, a close examination of tactics deployed by women pro-life counselors since the late

²⁵ Haugeberg, location 204.

²⁶ Haugeberg, location 214.

²⁷ Haugeberg, location 136, acknowledges Williams's recognition of a liberal origin of the right to life movement.

²⁸ Haugeberg, *Women against Abortion*, 1575.

1960s reveals that deception, coercion, and terror have been central features of women's work in the antiabortion movement."²⁹

Haugeberg adds, "By the early twenty-first century, CPCs were more numerous and engaged in more straightforwardly deceitful practices than ever before."

She is eager to portray the movement as essentially united, with all sectors of it implicated in violence:

Turning our attention to women rescuers forces us to reconsider whether the activists who committed illegal, violent acts of protest were truly acting alone. By the early 1990s, the antiabortion movement was comprised of three interrelated groups of activists: conventional activists who used traditional strategies for fighting abortion by focusing on public policy and the law; crisis pregnancy center activists who maintained thousands of pseudo-medical clinics and counseling hotlines throughout the United States; and violent extremists who were willing to commit arson, bombings, and murder.³⁰

The book's strategy is to stress the interrelated character of the movement, and to downplay the degree to which the mainstream repudiated violent tactics."

In sum, her book portrays a pro-life movement that is violent, or tolerant of violence, patriarchal, deceitful, and disturbingly successful in shaping public policy. It has two purposes: to discredit the movement by tying it to violence and reactionary gender ideas, and to explain its successes, but to do the latter without giving it very much credit.

In pursuit of its first goal, it focuses on the period of greatest anti-abortion violence, using that as a culminating point. It seeks to connect all to violence by downplaying or erasing the distinction between demonstrations and coercion violence, and by practicing a variant of guilt by association. Her claim that "the women who emerged as key figures in the rescue movement learned direct action strategies at workshops held during conventional pro-life groups' annual meetings" overlooks the fact that the National Right to Life Committee early ended any hosting of direct-action workshops at its conventions.

²⁹ Haugeberg, *Women against Abortion*. 1183.

³⁰ Haugeberg, *Women against Abortion*. location 2881.

Her discussion of the relationship of the pro-life movement to violence is marred not only by her obsessive desire to link even the most peaceful proliferator to it, by the most tenuous strands, but also by her complete lack of context. We hear nothing from her about violence from left wing movements, such as anti-war and environmental action groups, and the tolerance displayed by the left for that violence. Accordingly, she shows no understanding that in a larger context, the pro-life movement was relatively free from violence and denounced it. In the wake of the *Dobbs* decision, overthrowing *Roe v Wade*, there were dozens of violent attacks on pro-life crisis pregnancy centers around the United States.³¹ Very little was heard from pro-choice advocates condemning these attacks.

With regard to the movement's success, she notes: "The relative stability of Americans' attitudes about abortion, the proliferation of regulations that make it difficult for women to exercise their right to abortion, and the continued ferocity of antiabortion activism suggest that we cannot underestimate pro-life activists' influence on reproductive health policy and law in the post-Roe period."³² (Note, by the way the reference to the "continued ferocity" of the movement. This tells us far more about Haugeberg's biases than about the current movement)

The book is based on extensive research, but research used to advance a predetermined narrative. In particular, her treatment of CPCs is disgraceful: assertions made by opponents or hostile journalists are accepted as fact. The picture given by Laura Hussey is far more balanced and believable.

Jennifer Holland, also an historian, is author of *Tiny You: A Western History of the Anti-Abortion Movement*, published in 2020. Her research—primarily featuring interviews with 28 pro-life activists—focuses on the pro-life movement in four western states: Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, and Utah.³³ She considers it one of the most successful political movements of

³¹ "Two Churches Set on Fire as Wave of Violence Against Pro-Life Christians Continues," LifeNews.com, July 12, 2022, <https://www.lifenews.com/2022/07/11/two-churches-set-on-fire-as-wave-of-violence-against-pro-life-christians-continues/>.

³² Haugeberg, *Women against Abortion*. location 2974.

³³ Jennifer L. Holland, *Tiny You: A Western History of the Anti-Abortion Movement*, First edition (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2020).

the twentieth century, although this is conceded with dismay rather than rejoicing:

“This book argues that anti-abortion activists made the political personal to many white Americans. . . . Activists brought fetal imagery and its attendant politics into crisis pregnancy centers, onto public thoroughfares, and to schools, churches, and homes. They inserted fetal politics into profoundly intimate relationships. . . . Those politics invited white people to think of themselves as abolitionists and the nation’s saviors. In the process, activists developed and fostered a constituency of white Americans for whom anti-abortion politics became essential to their sense of self. Turning a core feminist principle on its head, activists made a political abstraction—fetal life—into a facet of everyday life. Yet unlike second-wave feminists, pro-life activists usually did not take personal experiences and give them political meaning. Because so few of these activists had themselves had an abortion, their work became not to make the personal political, but to make the political personal. They transformed their political beliefs—those fetuses were babies and abortion was murder—into a lived reality.”³⁴

She argues that “Anti-abortion political activism was cultural work, and its effects infiltrated the seemingly apolitical spaces of Americans’ lives.”³⁵

One of her major complaints about the movement is its use of the language of civil rights and its presentation of itself as a civil rights movement:

It was not just feminists from whom conservatives borrowed. In rhetoric as well as strategy, anti-abortion activists appropriated liberal tools writ large. Pro-life activists developed a discourse that envisioned abortion as evidence of the perversion of modern science, a genocide akin to the Holocaust, and a product of racist or otherwise hierarchical thinking that privileged some lives over others. . . . Conservative activists thus borrowed the rhetoric of civil rights—an ideology forged in the crucible of southern segregation. . . . Anti-abortion activists put that elastic but liberal rhetoric to conservative ends. While other social conservatives used the language of liberty, the pro-life movement wagered on the power of civil rights. Because of this, abortion was able to outlast other socially conservative issues that drifted in and out of focus over the years. . .

³⁴ Holland, 2-3.

³⁵ Holland, 3.

Through this civil rights movement for fetuses, regular white people could be both the victims of modernity and potential saviors. When social conservatives borrowed the new social currency of civil rights and put it to socially conservative ends, white religious people—southerners, northerners, and westerners alike—were able to represent themselves as abolitionists, not segregationists.³⁶

This is all tied to a recurring theme of the book: that the right to life movement is a “white” movement. The words “white” and “whiteness” are used hundreds of times in the book, but it is not clear what they exactly mean. She is not simply referencing the fact that the majority of active right to lifers were white—she means that in some undefined way being anti-abortion was “white.” African-Americans who were pro-life are rarely referred to, and even then, passed over as being “used” by white pro-lifers.³⁷ Her recurrent—indeed obsessive—use of the trope of “whiteness” is common in some academic circles and reflects a style of argumentation at once portentous and empty. That a university press would allow this lazy argumentation as a central theme is disturbing evidence of a real decline in scholarly standards.

She writes: “...anti-abortion activists usually figured fetal victims as white. But they often implied they would rescue people of color as well. In this way people of color, especially black people, were implicated in the pro-life movement, as one-dimensional victims of a liberal, feminist, or “anti-life” society in need of a white conservative savior. They came on stage, so to speak, largely to prove the morality of the white protagonist.”³⁸

Holland cannot completely deny the existence of scholarship pointing to the liberal roots of the pro-life movement, but she does her best to downplay it, as in these passages:

Recently, a handful of scholars have focused on the liberal origins of the anti-abortion movement, arguing that it was human rights, anti-poverty, or proto-feminist beliefs that motivated many early pro-life activists. There is some truth in this reassessment, but pro-lifers’ beliefs in human rights or the power of the

³⁶ Holland, 4.

³⁷ Holland, 84.

³⁸ Holland, *Tiny You: A Western History of the Anti-Abortion Movement*, 5.

state to better people's lives were almost always paired with an overriding concern about the insidious power of women's excessive sexuality.³⁹

The white men and women of this movement claimed that theirs was a civil rights movement. Older visions of moral degradation transformed into more modern conceptions of rights abuses. Activists claimed that fetal rights derived from the Declaration of Independence, which secured Americans' right to life; but they were really riding a much more modern political wave. They borrowed much more from the black civil rights movement and the international human rights movement when framing their story. But make no mistake: This language was always in service of denying others their rights. Women seeking abortions were a perpetual thorn in the side of the movement.⁴⁰

What is unusual in this work is its focus not on major national activity, but on the educational work done by pro-lifers at the very local level—in churches and neighborhoods:

This book argues that anti-abortion sermons, viewings of pro-life films in schools, or a casual glance at a fetal pin were more transformative than seeing radical activists block clinic doors. Through such everyday activism, the movement changed almost every urban area (and many rural areas to boot)... It was this kind of intimate activism, not the movement's more divisive civil disobedience, that produced the uprising of many white Americans around the protection of all fetuses. Moving away from the radical action that looks deceptively like the national story, this book attends to political culture in order to understand the development of a broad, national pro-life public.⁴¹

In her first chapter, focused on politics, Holland makes it clear that she rejects the notion that pro-lifers were ever truly "liberal": "Ultimately the story of the anti-abortion movement is not one of activists who lost their liberalism, but rather one of sexual moralists who found their party."⁴²

She believes that the roots of pro-life political activism lie in earlier social conservative movements: "The anti-birth control and anti-porn

³⁹ Holland, 6.

⁴⁰ Holland, 7.

⁴¹ Holland, 14.

⁴² Holland, 22.

movements set the groundwork for the early anti-abortion movement in the Four Corners states and across the nation.”⁴³

“They may have been interested in the poor and the disenfranchised but those interests were not what motivated their anti-abortion activism. It was in the anti-porn and anti-birth control movements where they formed the intellectual frameworks that would later translate into anti-abortion politics.”⁴⁴

Chapter Three discusses the development of fetal imagery: “In the 1970s, pro-life activists developed a repertoire of fetal imagery and arguments that represented their movement as a justice movement. As with earlier socially conservative movements, the anti-abortion movement sought to meet liberalism on its own ground. The first step was to humanize the fetus, in an attempt to secure for it the rights of a born human. This was at the heart of pro-life activism in 1967, as it would be well into the twenty-first century.”⁴⁵

Chapter Three also looks at religion. While the pro-life movement was politically unsuccessful in the 1970s,

If we direct our gaze at the parish rather than the statehouse, however, the movement looks wholly different. There, the movement was dynamic, developing cohesive political ideas and ecumenical bridges. Religious people laid the organizational and theoretical groundwork for the movement for years to come. A cadre of energized activists compelled their religious institutions to remake themselves into bulwarks against abortion.⁴⁶

In Chapter Four she turns to Crisis Pregnancy Centers. “Activists flocked to this corner of the movement because so much rested on making fetal politics personal to American women.... They used deceptive practices, often masquerading as abortion providers, in order draw these women to their doors. Many of their clients left CPCs traumatized or simply frustrated, while others imbibed the pro-life vision. Any concerns about deceptive practices were swept aside for the larger good of “saving babies.”

⁴³ Holland, 48.

⁴⁴ Holland, 23.

⁴⁵ Holland, 55.

⁴⁶ Holland, 89–90.

She is relentlessly negative in her treatment of CPCs and cites lawsuit material and pro-abortion claims as factual, with no attempt at balance. The institutions described by Laura Hussey are scarcely recognizable here.

In Chapter Five children are her subject and she declares that:

Adult activists increasingly sought out children and teenagers to be an audience for their pro-life appeals, remade youth spaces into pro-life spaces, and worked to create a new cadre of activists. Adult activists hoped these “survivors” would be the future of their movement and the future of a better, more socially conservative, society.⁴⁷

Another passage in the same vein:

The place of children in the anti-abortion movement changed in the 1980s and 1990s. In these years, adult activists gradually entered youth spaces—like schools and homes—and remade them into pro-life spaces. Most of this organizing was focused on teenagers, but in many cases, it incorporated younger children as well.⁴⁸

With full parental control of curriculum and reduced outside influences, homeschooling allowed for children’s “politicization.”

In Chapter Six she declares that “White anti-abortion activists put the “unborn” at the heart of the family’s structure and its reason for being. The late twentieth-century “traditional family” was really a fetus-focused family. Like so many other creations of the pro-life movement, this fetus-focused family was a product of white nostalgia.⁴⁹

Three passages illustrate her point of view:

Anti-abortion activists reshaped all levels of American politics, from the schoolhouse to state legislatures to presidential elections. Indeed, the ways activists politicized people in intimate spaces allowed for the bigger regional and national political transformations.... Over time, they politicized enough people to transform the Republican Party and conservative culture writ large.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Holland, 148–49.

⁴⁸ Holland, 149.

⁴⁹ Holland, 183.

⁵⁰ Holland, 210.

In the twenty-first century, that culture helped restrict abortion access and kept Americans from truly addressing the many forms of violence afflicting the nation. If abortion was the origin of gun violence in America, there was no real need for gun reform. Guns were merely the scapegoat for an abortion-related problem. If abortion was at the root of racism, there was no real reason to oppose the gutting of civil rights measures. And if abortion was the source of women's oppression, then abortion restrictions were the only measures that could help. This was a conservative "civil rights movement" that had a single solution for the nation's many problems of discrimination and disenfranchisement, and one of its primary effects has been to undermine most efforts to do anything about them.⁵¹

But the nation cannot return to the late 1960s. Too many Americans have been changed by the anti-abortion movement already. The world where religious leaders could convincingly claim that abortion was a moral good is gone. The world where increasing access to abortion, even in the narrow cases of incest and rape, was a bipartisan issue has been -erased. The world where courts did not try women for murder in cases of illegal abortion is no longer logical. The anti-abortion movement has spent fifty years convincing many Americans that their lives are dependent on preserving fetal lives, and the greatest moral good would be to treat abortion just the same as murder. Americans will have to live with the legacy of that work.⁵²

Holland's account of the pro-life movement contains a number of startling, if unsupported, pronouncements. The claim that "*The late-twentieth-century 'traditional family' was really a fetus-focused family*" is a rhetorical extravagance, which turns the belief that the unborn are actually existent human beings, who should be recognized as such, into the central and defining hallmark of a family. As well she advances the notion that pro-life beliefs are "political" beliefs, which were intruded into "private" spaces. It does not seem to occur to her that beliefs about the nature and value of human life are *pre-political* and operate to shape political action.

The books by Haugeberg and Holland both reflect considerable research, but research not merely guided, but limited, constrained, and dictated by a narrative. For Haugeberg it is that the pro-life movement is, in its entirety, linked to violence, and even its most antiwar and leftist members are part of that collective guilt. For Holland it is the pro-lifers are not really

⁵¹ Holland, 210.

⁵² Holland, 212.

campaigners for human rights, but have cynically borrowed the language of human rights, while actually being a conservative white group intent on imposing their values on people.

They both recognize the success of the right to life movement in shaping public policy, but do not seem to understand the reasons for that success.

It is clear that neither author actually understands the reasoning of proliferators—they can quote what they say, but they cannot imaginatively enter into the mind of people they oppose. For these authors pro-life arguments are only the veneer covering the real motives of the movement: sexual repression, patriarchy, “whiteness.” In pinning simplistic labels on the movement, they ignore Munson’s point noted above: “*There is a tendency to try to boil social movements down to a single underlying idea or belief. This is especially true of movements with which one disagrees: it is easier to dismiss an opposing viewpoint by reducing it to a sound bite or a simple (and ugly) message Activists’ beliefs about abortion do not neatly fit into a single ideological camp.*”⁵³

The failure of these writers to even attempt to understand, in a deep way, people different from yourself is a grave one for an historian. It is a widespread problem and seems to be rooted in the fear that if you do present accurately the inner reasoning of people with whom you profoundly disagree that you are somehow accepting their ideas.

Unfortunately, these historians seem to be part of a larger trend: to dismiss the very idea of objective writing in favor of “moral clarity.” This has been commented on in journalism but is not confined to that world.⁵⁴ The historical profession’s problem with a present-mindedness that distorts research became a notable issue in August of 2022, when an anodyne article about “presentism” by the President of the American Historical Association became the object of intense controversy and attack by left-wing historians.

⁵³ Munson, *The Making of Pro-Life Activists*, 153.

⁵⁴ Matt Welch, “Journalists Abandoning ‘Objectivity’ for ‘Moral Clarity’ Really Just Want To Call People Immoral,” *Reason.Com* (blog), June 24, 2020, <https://reason.com/2020/06/24/journalists-abandoning-objectivity-for-moral-clarity-really-just-want-to-call-people-immoral/>; “Journalism, Race, and Moral Clarity | Commonweal Magazine,” accessed August 27, 2022, <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/journalism-race-and-moral-clarity>.

That commitment does not preclude objectivity is a point made some years ago by Thomas Haskell that bears repeating.⁵⁵

A flaw running through all three pro-choice books is an acceptance of the idea that abortion was a traditional common law right. The works of Joseph Dellapenna and John Keown have made no dent on this myth.⁵⁶ More disappointing is the fact that the picture painted is a radically simplified version of James C. Mohr's pro-choice *Abortion in America*: all nuance is removed and the physician's crusade against abortion is reduced to a simple matter of professional self-interest. That the legal changes of the nineteenth century were in large part the result of improved medical knowledge is never acknowledged.⁵⁷

They could write as they did because given the dynamics of the American academic world, left-wing works that echo familiar themes are welcomed without searching criticism. Unlike Laura Hussey, who had to

⁵⁵ James Sweet, "Is History History? Identity Politics and Teleologies of the Present," *Perspectives on History*, August 17, 2022, <https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/september-2022/is-history-history-identity-politics-and-teleologies-of-the-present>; John Sexton, "The President of the American Historical Association Criticized the 1619 Project and Outrage Followed," hotair.com, accessed August 27, 2022, <https://hotair.com/john-s-2/2022/08/21/the-president-of-the-american-historical-association-criticized-the-1619-project-and-outrage-followed-n491275>. The belief that because one cannot be "neutral" one cannot be "objective" is a fallacy persuasively dealt with by Thomas Haskell, in *Objectivity is Not Neutrality: Explanatory Schemes in History*, (Baltimore, MD, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000)..

⁵⁶ Joseph W. Dellapenna, *Dispelling the Myths of Abortion History* (Durham, N.C.: Carolina Academic Press, 2005), <http://catdir.loc.gov/catdir/toc/ecip0513/2005015243.html>; John Keown, *Abortion, Doctors and the Law: Some Aspects of the Legal Regulation of Abortion in England from 1803 to 1982* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

⁵⁷ James C Mohr, *Abortion in America: The Origins and Evolution of National Policy, 1800-1900* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); Marvin N. Olasky, *Abortion Rites: A Social History of Abortion in America* (Wheaton, Ill: Crossways Books, 1992); Frederick N. Dyer, *Champion of Women and the Unborn: Horatio Robinson Storer, M.D.* (Canton, MA: Science History Publications, 1999), <https://www.worldcat.org/title/Champion-of-women-and-the-unborn--Horatio-Robinson-Storer-M.D./oclc/468692308>.

write knowing that everything she said would be subject to close questioning, they were not challenged.

The good news is that works of significant value are being produced on the pro-life movement. Even Saurette and Gordon's *Changing Voice of the Anti-Abortion Movement* adds to our knowledge: it is trying to answer a question, and whatever the authors' flaws and biases, it does so. Haugeberg and Holland are trying to advance a narrative, and while they uncover useful information while doing so, the result is the presentation of misleading caricatures. The bad news is that many university students will be given distorted and deeply flawed accounts of the movement as authoritative. All scholars, whatever their position on abortion, should try to ensure that better scholarship prevails.