

# From *When Abortion Was a Crime* to *Abortion Is a Crime*

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I began researching the history of abortion in the United States when I was in Judy Leavitt's Women and Health class at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. Assigned a research paper, I suggested the 1960s abortion legalization movement. "That's too recent," Judy replied; she advised me to instead examine the medical literature for discussions of abortion. I went to the UW's incredible medical library, where I used the *Index-Catalogue of the Library of the Surgeon General's Office* to identify journal articles about abortion and then tracked them down in dozens of regional and specialist medical journals held by the library.<sup>1</sup> In this first-year graduate seminar paper, I discovered the persistent conversation among doctors about abortion and their own practices and techniques of performing what they called "therapeutic abortion"—induced when the physician believed that pregnancy threatened the life or health of the woman. The medical literature included patient case studies, collective data, the introduction of new instruments, and discussion about when a therapeutic abortion was required.

At one point I switched to colonial history, but one sleepless night of tossing and turning told me that I was not done researching abortion. I made it my dissertation topic. The threat to the legality of abortion posed by Ronald Reagan's election to the presidency in 1980, while I was a college student, had turned me into an activist, so the topic mattered to me.

I am grateful for comments from Janet Golden, Linda Gordon, Judy Leavitt, and the section's editors, Kelly O'Donnell and Naomi Rogers.

1. The *Index-Catalogue* made it possible to search the near entirety of medical literature by subject (keyword), otherwise impossible before digitization of publications, and then go to the original journals for the citations (all in hard copy). The *Index-Catalogue of the Library of the Surgeon General's Office, 1880–1961* is now available as a digitized, online reference itself through the National Library of Medicine at <http://indexcat.nlm.nih.gov>. On the *Index-Catalogue* and how to use it, see L. R. Kozuma, "IndexCat: Index-Catalogue of the Library of the Surgeon-General's Office, 1880–1961," *NLM Tech Bull* 338 (May–June 2004): e8, [https://www.nlm.nih.gov/pubs/techbull/mj04/mj04\\_cat.html](https://www.nlm.nih.gov/pubs/techbull/mj04/mj04_cat.html).

But equally important, no one had investigated the hundred years during which abortion from conception on had been criminalized across the nation. What happened to women when early abortion was criminalized? What role did the medical profession play in the new legal landscape? How did the state enforce the new laws?<sup>2</sup>

I have been asked what it's like to do research on a "controversial" topic. I don't know that I ever thought much about whether focusing on abortion was controversial or dangerous. My advisors, Judy Leavitt and Linda Gordon, supported the project. And as an activist before becoming a graduate student, I had already managed my fears of public speaking; my anxieties focused more on writing.

The one person who expressed opposition to this dissertation topic, renowned historian Gerda Lerner, was trying to protect me and other students of hers interested in studying sexuality from jeopardizing their future careers; the profession was far more conservative at that time, and many historians were suspicious and disrespectful of topics they considered trivial or not "real history." She feared that the new field of women's history and the UW Women's History Program that she founded could be associated with sexuality and sexual nonconformity at a time when women's history was already widely marginalized. Her anxiety resembled feminist Betty Friedan's fear that the "purple menace"—i.e., lesbianism—would hurt the new feminist movement and her new organization, the National Organization for Women (NOW). But Gerda's fears arose both from her knowledge of the male-dominated historical profession and from her experience as a Jew and a leftist in a rapidly Nazifying Austria: as a student in Vienna, after the 1938 Anschluss, she had been active in the student anti-Nazi resistance and was imprisoned for six weeks until she managed to escape to the United States. A decade later she had seen how the 1950s McCarthyist Red Scare destroyed many people's careers (including her husband's).<sup>3</sup> But Gerda was no coward: despite her disapproval of sex-related topics, when I told her of my plan to pursue the history of abortion, she soon returned to her role as a historian and mentor, suggesting archives and sources. Though Gerda's response unnerved me, I plunged ahead—with the support of my advisors Judy Leavitt and

2. A handful of scholarly studies had examined the history of abortion: James C. Mohr, *Abortion in America: The Origins and Evolution of National Policy, 1800–1900* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); Linda Gordon, *Woman's Body, Woman's Right: Birth Control in America* (New York: Grossman, 1976).

3. Gerda Lerner, *Fireweed: A Political Autobiography* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003); Daniel Horowitz, *Betty Friedan and the Making of "The Feminine Mystique": The American Left, Cold War, and Modern Feminism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000).

Linda Gordon<sup>4</sup> and the extraordinary group of women's history graduate students at the University of Wisconsin.

I was fortunate, too, to find support from the wider historical profession. Senior scholars whom I knew only as books, like Jim Mohr, Joan Brumberg, Allan Brandt, and Nancy Tomes, were generous and remembered my name. My colleagues encouraged me and my academic institutions (the University of Wisconsin–Madison, Johns Hopkins University, and the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign) funded my work. The awards for my first article and for my books show the encouragement and validation I have received.

Still, historians sometimes expressed their own anxieties/trepidations. “I loved your article,” said many senior colleagues at the reception for the 1991 meeting of the American Association for the History of Medicine, referring to “About to Meet Her Maker,” published in the *Journal of American History* a few months earlier.<sup>5</sup> Some continued, “I really liked the way you talked about the implications for the present.” Others remarked, “I really liked it, except you shouldn’t have added that last paragraph.” Historian opinion was apparently evenly divided, with half disapproving of forays into the contemporary world and the other half applauding the same. That final paragraph commenting on the present-day implications of my findings was not in the original manuscript. The journal’s editor asked me to add it. Few talked about my use of inquests, my conclusion that doctors acted as an arm of the state, and my interpretation of law enforcement system routines as essential methods of punishing women who sought abortions. Now that universities expect faculty to demonstrate their “public engagement” in annual reports and promotion papers, perhaps historians will be less apprehensive about “presentism.” But I doubt it. It’s a disciplinary concern that works to discipline nonconformists and political radicals. Yet, as historians know, defying convention, using unexpected sources, and challenging received wisdom are the ways that historical knowledge advances.

Since its first publication in 1997, twenty-four years after the *Roe v. Wade* and *Doe v. Bolton* decisions, *When Abortion Was a Crime* has been cited and sometimes twisted by partisans in the ongoing public debates over abortion.<sup>6</sup> The attention has been predominantly positive and supportive,

4. I also had the good fortune to have other faculty mentors, including Hendrik Hartog, Vanessa Gamble, Ron Numbers, and Steve Stern.

5. Leslie J. Reagan, “‘About to Meet Her Maker’: Women, Doctors, Dying Declarations, and the State’s Investigation of Abortion, Chicago, 1867–1940,” *J. Amer. Hist.* 77, no. 4 (March 1991): 1240–64.

6. Leslie J. Reagan, *When Abortion Was a Crime: Women, Medicine, and Law in the United States, 1867–1973*, with a new preface (1997; Berkeley: University of California Press, 2022).

however. It is widely read by undergraduate, graduate, and professional students and educated nonacademic readers along with reproductive rights advocates and abortion providers.<sup>7</sup> Scholars regularly cite it. Personal attacks via email or U.S. mail have been rare. In contrast to what some expect, I've never heard from someone angry that their relative's name appeared in my publications. Quite the opposite. Excited at learning more about a relative, they sought more details. Nor, as one new colleague worried, have pickets against me ever appeared in the history department's halls.<sup>8</sup>

In the 2000s, I moved to other topics. I investigated the centrality of movies to health education, particularly those about cancer. The campaign to promote breast self-examination using short films initiated in 1950, I found, is one of the longest-running and most successful public health campaigns of the twentieth century. To self-examine one's breasts became, for women, the mark of a good citizen: a good patient who followed medical advice.<sup>9</sup> My own experience with miscarriage prompted me to publish the first article that historicized the biological and cultural event of pregnancy loss. I found that the dominant post-World War II medical and popular message about pregnancy loss described it as a "blessing": nature had prevented the development of a child with "birth defects."<sup>10</sup> Seeing this desire to avoid the birth of disabled children, I educated myself about disability history. I began researching one infectious

7. "Pro-choice," "reproductive rights," and "reproductive justice" refer to advocates and social movements that support abortion rights, but they are not the same. Most narrow is the term "pro-choice," which refers exclusively to legal abortion. "Reproductive rights" comes from a left-oriented feminism that supports childbearing and -rearing and all the resources needed to support family making, birth control, and abortion and opposes sterilization abuse. "Reproductive justice," which also advocates for more than abortion alone, frames reproductive freedom and rights as human rights. The concept of reproductive justice was developed by Black women, addresses women of color specifically, and seeks social transformation. Jael Silliman et al., *Undivided Rights: Women of Color Organize for Reproductive Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: South End Press, 2004); Loretta J. Ross, *Radical Reproductive Justice: Foundations, Theory, Practice, Critique* (New York: Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2017); Loretta Ross and Rickie Solinger, *Reproductive Justice: An Introduction* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017).

8. That said, it hasn't all been hunky-dory. I've experienced the usual sexual harassment and behind-the-scenes bias.

9. Leslie J. Reagan, "Projecting Breast Cancer: Self-Examination Films and the Making of a New Cultural Practice," in *Medicine's Moving Pictures*, ed. Leslie J. Reagan, Nancy Tomes, and Paula A. Treichler (Rochester, N.Y.: University of Rochester Press, 2007), 163–95; Leslie J. Reagan, "Engendering the Dread Disease: Women, Men, and Cancer," *Amer. J. Pub. Health* 87, no. 11 (November 1997): 1779–87.

10. Leslie J. Reagan, "From Hazard to Blessing to Tragedy: Representations of Miscarriage in Twentieth-Century America," *Fem. Stud.* 29, no. 2 (Summer 2003): 356–78. See also Lara Freidenfelds, *The Myth of the Perfect Pregnancy: Miscarriage in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

disease known to cause miscarriages and birth defects: German measles (rubella). When a global pandemic of German measles threatened the birth of “20,000 damaged children” in the United States, public health professionals, media, and individual women expressed widespread anxiety and expected therapeutic abortions.<sup>11</sup> My current research on the health effects of Agent Orange exposure in the United States and Vietnam also grew out of my miscarriage research.<sup>12</sup>

As the fiftieth anniversary of *Roe* approached, a Republican Senate, President Donald Trump, and the Federalist Society teamed up to add extremely conservative antiabortion justices to the U.S. Supreme Court. My editor at the University of California Press and I, like the rest of the country, realized that the new six to three conservative majority posed a grave threat to *Roe v. Wade* and *Casey v. Planned Parenthood*. Foreseeing the likely gutting of *Roe*, I wrote a new preface to *When Abortion Was a Crime*, reflecting on the fifty years since *Roe*, the deepening class, racial, age, and regional inequities in abortion access and reproductive justice, and the ramifications of demolishing the nationwide legal status of abortion. I hoped to reach a new generation of students, health care personnel, lawyers, and policy makers. At present, in a time of intense uncertainty about American democracy and with the notable strength of antifeminism, white supremacy, and white Christian nationalism in American culture and politics, the need for historical accuracy and insight is great. I also wanted to provide the information needed by people facing abortion bans and information blackouts. Thus, my report on contemporary activism (and lawbreaking, as in the past) includes names of organizations and links to websites, including Plan C (for at-home medication abortion); the National Network of Abortion Funds, local and regional funds that help cover the costs of medical care and travel for people seeking abortions; and the National Abortion Federation, which offers a patient hotline, referrals to providers, and support for abortion providers. Through Elevated Access, a network of volunteer pilots offers free transportation to people who cannot access abortions and gender-affirming health care in their own states and towns.<sup>13</sup>

11. Leslie J. Reagan, *Dangerous Pregnancies: Mothers, Disabilities, and Abortion in Modern America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).

12. Leslie J. Reagan, “My Daughter Was Genetically Drafted with Me’: U.S.-Vietnam War Veterans, Disabilities, and Gender,” *Gender Hist.* 28, no. 3 (November 2016): 833–53; Leslie J. Reagan, “Representations and Reproductive Hazards of Agent Orange,” *J. Med. Law Ethics* 39, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 54–61.

13. Plan C for “safe at-home abortions,” <https://www.plancpills.org>; National Network of Abortion Funds, <https://abortionfunds.org/about>; National Abortion Federation (hotline phone number is 1-800-772-9100), <https://prochoice.org>; Elevated Access, <https://elevatedaccess.org>. PRROWESS is currently raising funds for a floating medical clinic to provide abortions (and other sexual health care) in a ship in international waters off the Gulf

The 2022 release of the book's new edition proved prescient, unfortunately. The antiabortion movement and their comrades in the Republican Party revealed their giddiness about the new court by rushing to pass ever more creative antiabortion laws before and after the *Dobbs* decision. Passage of the Texas law banning abortion at six weeks of pregnancy, deceptively named "the heartbeat bill," and then the Court's refusal to immediately find it unconstitutional or issue an injunction were harbingers of what was to come.<sup>14</sup> At the time of this writing, fourteen states have banned abortion; experts expect about half of the states to do so.<sup>15</sup> But we don't know what the ultimate outcome of *Dobbs* will be: The decision has energized the reproductive rights movements. Voters went to the polls in force in 2022 to defeat abortion bans and restrictions in Kansas, Kentucky, and Montana and to pass measures protecting reproductive "freedom" and "autonomy" in California, Michigan, and Vermont.<sup>16</sup> Reproductive rights supporters continue to fight the severe restrictions unleashed by the decision in the courts, in the streets, in legislatures, and in the voting booths.

I am not happy to have been right that the Supreme Court did destroy *Roe*. The *Dobbs* decision overturned fifty years of precedent, which many Americans assumed would never happen despite the relentless attacks and mounting restrictions that made access to abortion increasingly unequal and difficult. For many, however, *Roe* was gone long before *Dobbs*. This is most true for Black and Brown women, minors, low-income people, lesbian and trans, and those in the South and Midwest. The Hyde Amendment (1976) banning federal funding of abortion was the first restriction, curtailing access to abortion for poor women and women working in the U.S. military or federal government. The court's decision in *Casey* upheld

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Coast. The clinic will be most accessible to people living in the Gulf states that have abortion bans—Mississippi, Alabama, Louisiana, Texas. See <https://www.prrowess.org/home>.

14. Adam Liptak, J. David Goodman, and Sabrina Tavernise, "Supreme Court, Breaking Silence, Won't Block Texas Abortion Law," *New York Times*, September 1, 2021; Leslie J. Reagan, "Texas's New Abortion Law Threatens Women's Health and Well-Being," *Washington Post*, June 28, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2021/06/28/texas-new-abortion-law-threatens-womens-health-wellbeing>.

15. I count the current Georgia law that bans abortion at six weeks as a ban; most people do not know they are pregnant at this extremely early state—just two weeks after a missed period. "Tracking the States Where Abortion Is Now Banned," *New York Times*, updated November 23, 2022, [https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/us/abortion-laws-roe-v-wade.html?name=styl-abortion-us&region=TOP\\_BANNER&block=storyline\\_menu\\_recirc&action=click&pgtype=Article&variant=show&is\\_new=false](https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/us/abortion-laws-roe-v-wade.html?name=styl-abortion-us&region=TOP_BANNER&block=storyline_menu_recirc&action=click&pgtype=Article&variant=show&is_new=false).

16. "Abortion on the Ballot," *New York Times*, December 8, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/11/08/us/elections/results-abortion.html>.

*Roe* but allowed a wide variety of restrictions, including mandatory twenty-four- to seventy-two-hour waiting periods, parental notification requirements for people under eighteen, forced reading of false scripts about the dangers of abortion to patients in advance of the procedure, and vaginal ultrasounds—state-mandated sexual assaults.<sup>17</sup>

As the new legal terrain of abortion became apparent, the number of requests from journalists, colleges, and organizations seeking my historical insight, writing, and public speaking exploded. The possibility of returning to the time when abortion was a crime had suddenly become very real. When the American Historical Association (AHA) and the Organization of American Historians (OAH) submitted an amicus curiae brief in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health* in support of Jackson Women’s Health, they used my research along with that of others.<sup>18</sup> Although the majority opinion claims to be based on history, it ignores fifty years of historical research on abortion. “Instead,” as the AHA-OAH pointed out, the majority “adopted a flawed” version of history “pressed by anti-abortion advocates” for decades.<sup>19</sup> The majority opinion gets the history egregiously wrong when it declares that “an unbroken tradition of prohibiting abortion on pain of criminal punishment persisted from the earliest days of the common law until 1973.” Abortion was not always a crime in America. The truth is that abortion is deeply rooted in our nation’s history—in practice, in morality, and in law.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, as the AHA-OAH observed, the Court has now established a precedent that historical evidence need not be presented “according to high standards of historical scholarship.” The

17. Rosalind Pollack Petchesky, *Abortion and Women’s Choice: The State, Sexuality, and Reproductive Freedom* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1984); Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* (1997; New York: Vintage Books, 1999), chap. 3 and passim; Johanna Schoen, *Abortion After Roe* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

18. American Historical Association, “AHA Signs Amicus Curiae Brief in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health* Organization (September 2021),” [https://www.historians.org/news-and-advocacy/aha-signs-amicus-curiae-brief-in-dobbs-v-jackson-womens-health-organization-\(september-2021\)](https://www.historians.org/news-and-advocacy/aha-signs-amicus-curiae-brief-in-dobbs-v-jackson-womens-health-organization-(september-2021)).

19. American Historical Association, “History, the Supreme Court, and *Dobbs v. Jackson*: Joint Statement from the AHA and the OAH (July 2022),” [https://www.historians.org/news-and-advocacy/aha-advocacy/history-the-supreme-court-and-dobbs-v-jackson-joint-statement-from-the-aha-and-the-oah-\(july-2022\)](https://www.historians.org/news-and-advocacy/aha-advocacy/history-the-supreme-court-and-dobbs-v-jackson-joint-statement-from-the-aha-and-the-oah-(july-2022)). Thirty other organizations, along with the American Association for the History of Medicine (AAHM), signed this statement.

20. See the AHA-OAH brief; Leslie J. Reagan, “What Alito Gets Wrong about the History of Abortion in America,” *Politico*, June 2, 2022, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2022/06/02/alitos-anti-roe-argument-wrong-00036174>.

majority's false history "is now enshrined in a text that becomes authoritative for legal reference and citation in the future."<sup>21</sup>

The dissenting opinion by justices Stephen Breyer, Sonia Sotomayor, and Elena Kagan, in contrast, carefully tells the history of abortion and argues that women's freedom and liberty require the constitutional right to abortion.<sup>22</sup> Although I did not write *When Abortion Was a Crime* in order to address twenty-first-century legal strategies, court cases, or the new reality of abortion bans, my research is now part of a legal narrative.

The chaos that followed the *Dobbs* decision repeats much of the history that I found in the era of criminalized abortion: increased state and medical surveillance of women; institutionalized distrust of pregnant and miscarrying women (and all pregnant people); threats to the reputations and licenses of doctors; and fear of the law that then drives medical decision making, patient (mis)treatment, and hospital and pharmaceutical policies. Few openly defy the new surveillance. Instead, individual doctors, hospitals, clinics, and national pharmacy chains (Walgreens and CVS) have complied by questioning female patients, refusing to provide medical care, and blocking prescriptions in the name of following vague or non-existent laws primarily for self-protection.<sup>23</sup> That immediate compliance, sometimes without any law in place, is more than disappointing; it reveals the ease by which health care institutions and personnel and the larger society criminalize women, especially women of color, stigmatize female sexuality and reproductive decision making, and feel free to control and make decisions for women.

The end of *Roe* and the new patchwork of state laws threaten the right to bodily integrity—for everyone. They threaten hard-won advances in patient care and individual and collective rights, including medical respect for individual patient autonomy and decision making, rights to privacy

21. American Historical Association, "History, the Supreme Court, and *Dobbs v. Jackson*" (n. 19).

22. *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, 597 U.S. (2022), written by Justice Elena Kagan. *When Abortion Was a Crime* is cited at 57n27 of the dissenting opinion. For analysis of the dissent, see Stephen Rohde, "'With Sorrow, We Dissent': The Three Justices Who Rejected *Dobbs*," *Ms.*, July 5, 2022, <https://msmagazine.com/2022/07/05/dobbs-v-jackson-dissent-breyer-sotomayor-kagan-opinion-roe-v-wade>.

23. On the consequences of *Dobbs* and the continuing struggle for reproductive freedom, see the Guttmacher Institute, <https://www.guttmacher.org/state-policy/explore/overview-abortion-laws>; the Center for Reproductive Rights, <https://reproductiverights.org/maps/abortion-laws-by-state>; Pregnancy Justice (previously National Advocates for Pregnant Women), <https://www.pregnancyjusticeus.org>; and the American Civil Liberties Union, <https://www.aclu.org>. See also Leslie J. Reagan, "Making Abortion a Crime Again," *Fem. Stud.* 48, no. 3 (2022): 844–49.

in medical information, sexual behavior, reproductive decision making, contraceptive use, family making, and marriage, and LGBTQ rights.<sup>24</sup> *Dobbs* deepens existing racial discrimination and inequities in medicine and society. Respect for patient autonomy and individual decision making about health care, sexuality, and family is highly dependent on racial privilege and wealth and always has been. People of color, low-income people, and those lacking insurance do not receive automatic deference to their decisions. In fact the opposite is true: they are subjected to arrest when miscarrying, blood testing without consent, and incarceration for using narcotics during pregnancy.<sup>25</sup>

“How do you make sure that your work doesn’t hurt the (abortion / reproductive rights) movement?,” some have asked. For historians working on politically salient topics, this is an important question. But there isn’t any way to know what argument or history might be politically “useful” in the future. We can’t predict what will advance or harm movements for justice. As historians, we also know that social movements are always, necessarily, sites of debate about what constitutes justice, freedom, and equality as well as sites of internal battles over goals, language, and strategy. Ultimately, however, being a historian and being an activist are two different jobs. I don’t do history to find the best argument for today’s movement. Furthermore, what seemed “best” twenty or thirty years ago or even two years ago may come to be seen as damaging—such as the term “pro-choice” and the refrain popular in the 1990s, “safe, legal, and rare.”<sup>26</sup> Rather than pussyfooting around the word “abortion” and implicitly agreeing that abortion is bad, today’s young activists proudly proclaim their abortions and have taken up different slogans: “Everyone Loves Someone Who’s Had an Abortion”; “Abortion Is Health Care”; “Banning Abortion Is Forcing Pregnancy”; and “Regulate Dick, not Jane.”

As a historian, I seek to answer the many questions that arise from my research, including difficult questions that I, too, may prefer to avoid. For example, in *Dangerous Pregnancies*, I delved into an area that the abortion

24. *Griswold v. Connecticut*, 381 U.S. 479 (1965); *Loving v. Virginia*, 388 U.S. 1 (1967); *Eisenstein v. Baird*, 405 U.S. 438 (1972); *Lawrence v. Texas*, 539 U.S. 558 (2003); *Obergefell v. Hodges*, 576 U.S. 644 (2015). The *Dobbs* dissenting opinion clearly shows how these cases (and others) are all intertwined through their reasoning and precedent and now, regardless of the majority’s claim otherwise, are all at risk. *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization*, passim in the dissent.

25. Roberts, *Killing the Black Body* (n. 17); Pregnancy Justice, <https://www.pregnancyjusticeus.org>.

26. Tracy A. Weitz, “Rethinking the Mantra That Abortion Should Be ‘Safe, Legal, and Rare,’” *J. Women’s Hist.* 22, no. 3 (Fall 2010): 161–72.

rights movement and feminist activists preferred to sidestep: the relationship between societal fears—or hatred—of people with disabilities and the earliest discussions of abortion as an ethical action. Thalidomide and most especially German measles boosted an incipient abortion law reform effort in the 1960s. Long-standing fears of physical disabilities and intellectual impairment combined with underlying eugenic thinking justified the performance of therapeutic abortion by physicians. When white middle-class married mothers spoke about their agony at the prospect of bearing a “deformed” infant when it could be prevented, their respectability—and organizing efforts—helped usher in abortion law reform.<sup>27</sup> I suppose it was brave to make my political position on abortion crystal clear up front, particularly as a graduate student and an untenured assistant professor. Some scholars of abortion before me had refused to state their views.<sup>28</sup> I saw that as unnecessarily cautious: First, there could be almost no one in the United States without an opinion on it. Second, I did not believe that anyone studying abortion could possibly be “neutral.” Nor did I see any value in pretending otherwise.

My dissertation then book was rooted in deep, thorough, careful research; I had a perspective as a feminist scholar and a social historian dedicated to closely analyzing how class, race, gender, and sexuality worked together (intersectionality). I also had faith in the quality of my work thanks to the community of feminist-scholar-activists in the UW women’s history program. For all the stresses of graduate school, I lived in a world of moral support, surrounded by others equally dedicated to women’s history, to feminism, and to creating a more just world. My bravery, if it is that, comes out of a commitment to the struggle for women’s equality, and equally to bodily autonomy, sexual freedom, patient rights,

27. Reagan, *Dangerous Pregnancies* (n. 11).

28. Kristin Luker, *Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), xiii; Faye D. Ginsburg, *Contested Lives: The Abortion Debate in a Small Community* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), xxxv. Luker said she needed to keep her views to herself in order to retain readers “looking for ammunition to confront their opposition or to persuade” and would otherwise close the book once they knew which “side” she supported. Ginsburg similarly wanted her readers to reconsider what they think is “truth” about people who have different views from their own. It was “not her task,” she said, to take a “partisan” position. In contrast, Rosalind Pollack Petchesky, who like Luker published her book in 1984, clearly stated her position as a feminist whose purpose was “to analyze and defend women’s need for safe, legal abortion; and . . . to develop . . . a feminist concept of reproductive freedom.” Petchesky, *Abortion and Women’s Choice* (n. 16), vii, x. Linda Gordon had not hidden her perspective either and was condemned by some for it; *Woman’s Body, Woman’s Right* (n. 2).

and racial and social justice. I am honored if my writing contributes to advancing those goals in a small way and inspires today's new activists.



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