

Is there anybody in there?

We examine the ethics of abortion

Anarchist Communist Federation

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Abortion isn't the issue

Abortion arouses many passions and seems an impossible dilemma to resolve beyond doubt. One reason may be that abortion is not, ultimately, an assault on a living being but rather on the very reality people construct to sustain themselves. Many conservatives have an organic view of society in which the foundation of existence is the family and society nothing more than the family writ large. To attack the family through its primary purpose, propagation, is to threaten society and ultimately, their existence.

For the religiously inclined “ Abortion is a symbolic threat to an entire system of thought and meaning[for] it signals that the Christian ideal of selfless charity is despised and rejected”; the unborn child is unreal, a symbol of security and continuity for themselves and their faith. Abortion threatens death to spiritual life but is life itself to the committed feminist. For them, controlling a body that has for centuries been regarded as property is essential to self-actualisation. “Abortion laws are woman-control laws...enacted before women could vote and part of the double standard in sexual attitudes which has resulted in widespread social and psychological disorganisation”. Abortion and contraception are alternatives to compulsory pregnancy which alone permit women to define themselves beyond the narrow scope of motherhood. Both sides of the argument are afraid that if they lose they will cease to exist. If this were simply the a conflict over the rights of a few individuals it would have little to do with us. The problem is it fought out in the arena of the State and its policies. What is being challenged is the way in which society is organised and we all have an interest in the outcome. Anarchists support women's right to choose not because of ethics or philosophy, or because by defending it we defend ourselves, but because the struggle to become free is one that we, female and male anarchists, are also fighting and because the direction towards freedom in society is one we are also travelling.

Pseudo-science

Our present understanding tells us that the development of a human being is a continuous process, not a set of discrete steps at which it is possible to say that before there is no humanity and after humanity exists. There are therefore only conditions of being and non-being, possibility and non-possibility, organised and disorganised life. We owe no duty to molecules and strands of DNA. We may have obligations to people able to recognise and reciprocate with us. Humanity does not consist of life alone, it consists of aware, organised and independent life. Is someone suffering massive and irreversible brain damage, unable to respond to any stimuli or survive if life-support is withdrawn, a human being? Yes. Is that human being a person possessing rights? No. Society and common sense says not; the person is gone though the bodily remains of a human being are still with us. If it is not possible to identify the properties that makes us human or when we acquire them, there may be no such thing as humanity, no human rights, only people with lives of varying length and experiences of varying intensity, good or bad.

Pro-lifers refuse to admit that abortion is a universal, common to both early non-literate societies and to recent industrial ones. People have always attempted to prevent birth by contraception and when that has failed by abortion, and even, when that has failed, resorted to infanticide. It is likely that abortion was the first surgical procedure ever attempted by humankind. We know that while most people have no predisposition to kill, all of us have a compulsion to sur-

vive which only the most extreme circumstances or pathologies override. If this is true (and it is) then people should feel badly about 'killing' an unborn child. They do not. All clinical experience confirms the tremendous sense of relief most women feel when an unwanted pregnancy is terminated. Most of us possess the innate sense to know that an unborn child is not a person in the same way that a born child is. It is never people who forbid abortion and always kings and states and governments. even today a woman still needs the permission of a doctor licensed and scrutinised by the state- she remains unfree. Capitalism objectifies everything, perverting even the fact and meaning of life, the process of creation and termination. Procreation is no longer a personal or human process but one that all governments claim the right to control and influence. In the valleys they shout "breed, breed!", in the mountains they cry "Sterilise, sterilise". Endless pseudo-facts, the products of pseudo-science and scientism, are used to frame our very perceptions about life and life-giving.

The Age of Reason and Enlightenment ushered in the age of perfectibility of men and man in society (women usually failed to enter the argument). It unleashed upon the world many forces that have worked for good and ill. Libertarianism corrupted by capitalism places each person on their own pedestal, demanding all that society can offer while fearing or ignoring their neighbour. Scientism gives some the power to fulfil their conscious and unconscious desires, fuelling the competitive and acquisitive urge. But an unfettered capitalism unleashed by liberalism and rationalism is rapidly degrading social reason and the rationalist utopia. Where each individual is god, each fact is a gun. Capitalism feeds from the social irrationalism it creates. The result is all around us. The same technology that gave us control of our fertility, a control millions demand, also produced thalidomide and the possibility of profoundly altering the human genome. The irrational desire to purify and perfect that led to the Holocaust also fuels the vast industry of cosmetic and genetic manipulation.

Rights?

The dividing lines between pro-life and pro-choice cross a number of arenas: the arena of rights- rights of the unborn, the mother, the commonality, the arena of essence- where does humanity come from, what does it mean to be human?; the arena of utility and necessity- if we are compelled to decide (for instance because the life of the mother is threatened) then how do we weigh necessity and consequence; lastly there is the arena of freedom- what obligation do we have to obey society's rules, what 'right' does society have to decide what happens to 'our' body.

Reality does not concede us rights, we are merely the means for life to continue. Nature is wasteful and cruel. We may regret this biological engineering but it is a reality we cannot ignore. Consider the millions of sperm lost with every ejaculation- each is a vital component of new life. There is a great deal of menstrual wastage before the woman is even aware she is pregnant. One in three fertilised eggs or embryos fail to develop correctly and die in the uterus, resulting in spontaneous abortion or reabsorption — millions of potential human beings die naturally every year but what Rights does Nature concede them? Pro-lifers argue that humanity commences on conception but conveniently forget that for every 5 births there is 1 spontaneous abortion of a viable foetus- does divinity will this? Religions have created an elaborate hierarchy of rights and justifications to buttress this inconsistency, demanding that even where access to abortion is conceded, it is the responsibility of the woman to prove a higher or 'better' right to life. This,

of course, preserves religion's (and the state's claim to be the moral arbiter of society. When we fall into the trap of looking to authority for redress, we concede not only its right to exist but its power over our lives.

Stigma

There is a stronger argument than rights or ethics, an argument sufficient to justify decades of class struggle, however violent, and capable ultimately of sustaining an entire, liberated society. This is the argument from necessity. Women do not primarily need contraception as a 'right' nor as one expression of personal freedom and choice but as a basic need, upon which millions of women, those who die in childbirth for instance, demand. Where there is social sanction and support for contraception and abortion, women live; where there is none women and their children die in their tens of thousands. Lack of pre-natal and ante-natal care, of basic health facilities, the prevalence of diseases, the ravages of female circumcision, the savage familial onslaughts on women who become 'illegitimately' pregnant, the stigma, in many societies, of bearing female children, all combine not just to make women second-class citizens but to leave women at the mercy of murderous people and groups operating with the sanction of states wholly permeated by the triumphant creed of male dominance. This creed ignores the routine death of thousands of women with a shrug of male shoulders and the self-satisfied smirk of the sanctified moralist- be it priest or matriarch. This is bad enough, but where religious bigotry and social reaction combine, murder and manslaughter is actively countenanced, encouraged, and in some places protected, as a basic pillar of society, one of the strongest foundations for social order. The argument for access to contraception of all kinds is not, therefore, a question of freedom, since (as the west has discovered) health clinics and the Pill have not made women free. Rather the struggle for 'women's rights' is the arena in which we defend the millions who would die or be scarred for life while waging war on those sections of society who deny women life and freedom. More importantly it is where we confront and must, ultimately, destroy the social and economic forces that actively fuel the anti-abortion campaign: religious bigotry, male chauvinism and neurotic fear.

Material world

Life and society are continua, without beginning or end. People exist in subjectively-defined environments where nothing is absolute and everything conditional. No life is perfect, reality presents us with difficult choices; we are forced to weigh consequences. we rightly choose to exchange the life of the zygote, embryo or unborn foetus for the fuller life of the mother because on her life depends the life of other children, the life of her partner or other members of society, other people that have contributed to her development. It is a kind of madness that fails to weigh the economic, demographic, eugenic, humanitarian, social and pathological factors that are part of everyday experience in favour of things that are quite unmeasurable and dubious in their claimed benefits- faith and salvation.

We live (or want to live) in a material world in which what is, is, and what is not (or is not provable or is only potential) is not. Dreams, conjecture, ideas may be real in the mind of the thinker but remain unreal until they are shared. The idea of a new, independent human being

that two people create when they make love is only an idea until that independent human being has been created by birth and begun to interact independently with the rest of society. We can only make a claim on others if they recognise our humanity. That claim to be depends on our self-awareness, our ability to choose, our responsibility to and for others. For revolutionaries there is no question of trying to weigh one human right against another — all are bogus. Nor do we rate one person as superior to another. we do believe that what is real and can be measured, the life of the person we know far outweighs what does not, and may never exist. There is no absolute compulsion upon us to protect life, though the religions may wish that one existed. If we cannot be compelled to protect life as individuals then the state should not compel us collectively to do so either. At the same time we state that no individual can claim an absolute freedom in all circumstances to please only themselves. the decision to interrupt a process demands the same of our conscience as the decision to begin it. An anarchist society will make the clinical resources necessary for abortion to take place available but will also place a far greater emphasis on contraception; not because abortion is morally wrong but because waste is wrong, unfreedom is wrong, because being forced to make a decision is worse than freely creating conditions in which we have the opportunity to decide, to exercise our mind and conscience. The reason we defend a woman's right to choose is that most people, placed in this situation, make use of their intellect and consult their conscience. That fact offers us far more chance of building a better society than prostrating ourselves irrationally before the dead gods of faith and reason.

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