

Abortion Struggles Beyond Voting

Women's Liberation, Reproductive Care, and Dual Power

Spencer Beswick

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At recent pro-choice demonstrations, we have been told that the only way to protect abortion is to vote for Democrats in November. Yet the Supreme Court reversed *Roe v. Wade* under a Democratic president, house, and senate. The Democrats appear more interested in fundraising off of *Roe* and attacking grassroots activists than they do fighting the right-wing assault on abortion. But reproductive rights were not won by electoral means, and that is not how we will defend them. The historical experiences of feminist abortion struggle between the 1960s and 1990s offer alternative strategies for building power and transforming society.

Women's Liberation and Reproductive Freedom

Why did the Supreme Court originally pass *Roe v. Wade* in 1973? The ruling did not come from voting or legal struggles. Professional-class health advocates—primarily doctors and lawyers—had spent decades fighting legal battles to expand exceptions to abortion restrictions. Like today, many focused on relatively rare cases based on health concerns, rape, and incest, rather than the fundamental right to bodily autonomy. These legal tactics accomplished very little.

Instead, the right to abortion was won through militant mass struggle over the course of only a few years. Beginning in the late 1960s, feminists in the Women's Liberation Movement spoke out publicly about their own abortions and organized consciousness raising groups across the country. They discovered that their personal issues, including reproduction, were deeply political. Instead of relying on politicians and professionals, these feminists built power from below and took control of their lives and bodies. They marched in the streets, disrupted male-dominated medical spaces, and built underground networks to provide abortions—including the Chicago Jane Collective, which performed over 10,000 abortions between 1969–73. Feminists took reproductive care into their own hands and built a mass movement to fight for the repeal of all abortion laws, rather than tinkering around the edges.

These mass movements forced the Supreme Court to act. Faced with militant mobilization and widespread public disobedience, the Court calculated that the easiest way to respond while preserving its legitimacy was to codify limited abortion rights into law. This history of struggle has largely been erased. Instead, we are told a narrative of enlightened liberals pursuing legal strategies that convinced the Supreme Court to protect the constitutional right to privacy.

After *Roe*, the Right launched a concerted attack on reproductive freedom and on the Women's Liberation Movement more broadly. First came the 1976 Hyde Amendment, which prevented many poor women from receiving care by forbidding the use of federal funds for abortion. In the 1980s, a growing anti-abortion movement pressured the government to impose further state and federal restrictions. As Reagan and the New Right attacked women from the heights of the government, right-wing extremists bombed clinics and assassinated abortion providers. Operation Rescue, founded in 1986 by Randall Terry, advanced the slogan "If you believe abortion is murder, act like it's murder" and tried to physically shut down clinics.

Much of the feminist movement retreated and conceded ground to the right by framing the struggle around "pro-choice" activism rather than fighting openly for abortion rights and women's liberation. The radical conception of reproductive freedom, autonomy, and liberation was subsumed into a liberal framework that regarded abortion as an individual choice and as a right for the state to protect. Liberal legal strategies laid the basis for the Supreme Court's 1992 ruling in *Planned Parenthood v. Casey* that substantively upheld *Roe v. Wade* but opened the door

to further restrictions provided there was not an “undue burden.” But not all feminists accepted this retreat.

Clinic Defense, Feminist Infrastructure, and Dual Power

Anarchists (anti-state socialists) within the movement rejected voting and legal reforms in favor of radical grassroots activism. Following the example of second-wave feminists, they framed abortion once again as a question of bodily autonomy and women’s liberation. Anarcha-feminists were convinced that *Roe v. Wade* would not last forever and that they could not depend on the state and the legal system to protect reproductive freedom.

The first task was to defend clinics from Operation Rescue, who regularly harassed patients and blockaded clinics. Anarchists introduced militant street tactics—including the use of black bloc and the anti-fascist street fighting practiced by Anti-Racist Action—to the broad feminist and queer coalitions who mobilized to protect clinics. Feminists in Anti-Racist Action argued that anti-abortion militants were a key component of contemporary fascism and they resolved to bring anti-fascist street tactics to bear on Operation Rescue. Activists used these confrontational tactics to successfully protect clinics in NYC, Minneapolis, San Francisco, and across the country.

In 1993, Operation Rescue tried to host a summer training camp in Minneapolis. They wanted to repeat the success of their 1991 “Summer of Mercy” mobilization in Wichita. Unlike in Kansas, however, anarchists defended clinics from them, blockaded them in their church, vandalized their materials, and ultimately ran them out of town. Reflecting on the experience, a local anarchist named Liza wrote that “it seems like no matter how hard activists fight, we rarely win. Except this time we were victorious. We fought against these fascists ... We saw the demise of Operation Rescue in the Twin Cities, partly due to our unprecedented aggressiveness and opposition, and partly because their movement is losing, big time.”

In addition to defending clinics, anarcha-feminists built reproductive care infrastructure to perform abortions outside the reach of the state. Anarchists believed that the state was inherently patriarchal and was ultimately the enemy of reproductive justice. Thus, the Love and Rage Revolutionary Anarchist Federation (1989–98) argued in its draft political statement that “our freedom will not come through the passage of yet more laws but through the building of communities strong enough to defend themselves against anti-choice and anti-queer terror, rape, battery, child abuse and police harassment.” Instead of the slogan “we’re pro-choice and we vote,” anarchists often marched behind a banner reading “we’re pro-choice and we riot!” Rather than petitioning the state to protect abortion, Love and Rage argued for reviving “women-controlled health care and abortions” along the model of Chicago’s Jane Collective (which disbanded after *Roe v. Wade*).

While anarcha-feminists supported abortions provided by accredited doctors, their focus on women’s autonomy and critique of the male-dominated US healthcare system led them to draw on alternative traditions of women-controlled health practices. This includes herbal and holistic methods which women have used “throughout the ages ... to control their fertility and reproduction.” They sought to build autonomy on their own terms by organizing self-help groups in which, San Francisco activist Sunshine Smith explained, “women learn the basics of self-cervical exams, do pelvics on each other, and learn how to do menstrual extraction.” Anarchists thus sought to

develop the knowledge and skills necessary to induce abortions on their own terms and provide their own reproductive care.

If women controlled their own bodies and institutions, they would no longer depend on the state to protect their rights. Establishing reproductive healthcare infrastructure is a key component of feminist dual power that challenges the rule of the state and capitalism. Inspired in part by the Zapatistas, anarchists sought to build grassroots infrastructure along with the capacity to defend it from the violence of the state. This kind of infrastructure prefigures—and concretely establishes—a new world defined by mutual aid, solidarity, and autonomy.

Grassroots reproductive infrastructure laid the foundation for further revolutionary action. As Sunshine Smith remarked in 1990, forming self-help medical groups and abortion infrastructure in the Bay Area “has, in very concrete ways, made our struggle against the anti-abortion group Operation ‘Rescue’ and the ‘Supreme’ Court stronger and more effective. We have learned that if the time comes, we can and will do home abortions. We are becoming physically aware of the invasion the government is conducting into our bodies. We are now able to repulse the state from our uteri because we are gaining the knowledge that enables us to control our own bodies.”

With parallel strategies undertaken in the courts and in the streets, feminist activists successfully defended abortion from both the Supreme Court and anti-abortion mobilization during the 1980s-90s. Yet abortion activism has remained on the defensive since reproductive rights were first won nationally in 1973. The framing of “pro-choice” activism—rather than women’s autonomy or the right to abortion—reflects a retreat from the strategy of women’s liberation.

The anarchist and feminist traditions of mass mobilization, autonomous health infrastructure and grassroots struggle offer alternatives—or at least a radical complement—to voting. Reversing *Roe v. Wade* will not stop abortions; it will only make them more dangerous and less accessible. As anarcha-feminist Liz Highleyman argued in 1992, “the day when abortion is again made illegal may come sooner than we like to think. We must be ready to take our bodies and our lives into our own hands.”

That time is now.

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