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“To Repulse the State from Our Uteri”

**Anarcha-feminism, Reproductive Freedom, and Dual
Power**

Spencer Beswick

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Abstract

This article analyzes how anarcha-feminists in the United States critiqued the state and attempted to build feminist dual power in response to the New Right's attacks on reproductive freedom. Anarcha-feminists in the Love and Rage Revolutionary Anarchist Federation (1989–98) argued that petitioning the state for reproductive rights was a dead end because, as their political statement put it, patriarchy "operates as a foundation of state power, used to justify a paternalistic relationship between the rulers and the ruled." Anything the state gives—including *Roe v. Wade*—can be taken away, for it is ultimately a tool of sexual and class violence in the hands of the patriarchal, capitalist ruling class. Building on the legacy of anarcha-feminists in the women's liberation movement, Love and Rage argued that the only way to guarantee reproductive freedom was to struggle for autonomy against the state rather than reform within it. This article explores how anarcha-feminists sought to build grassroots infrastructure, knowledge, and organizations with an orientation toward establishing feminist dual power. Ultimately, Love and Rage argued, the only way to guarantee reproductive freedom and women's liberation is the revolutionary construction of a libertarian socialist society.

Keywords: abortion, anarcha-feminism, dual power, reproductive freedom, state violence

Introduction

Anarcha-feminists declared that "our choice is revolution" as they fought for reproductive freedom and women's liberation in the 1990s. The US Supreme Court's ruling in *Roe v. Wade*, which protected abortion under the guise of privacy, had been under attack from the Christian Right and the US government since it was

passed in 1973. By the 1990s the mainstream feminist movement had been on the defensive for years. Unlike the combative women's liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s, much of the feminist movement consigned itself to fight on the terrain of the state: legal battles, electoralism, and individual "freedom of choice." As the state and the Christian Right increased their attacks on abortion, it became increasingly clear to many activists that this strategy was insufficient.

Anarcha-feminists went on the offensive in the fight for reproductive freedom in the 1990s. Women in the Love and Rage Revolutionary Anarchist Federation (1989–98), the leading US anarchist organization of the period, advanced sharp critiques of the liberal abortion strategy that had ceded so much ground to the Right. Anarchists offered radical alternatives for women to take back control of their lives and bodies. Rather than petition the state for reforms, they mobilized to defend abortion clinics from the Far Right and taught themselves how to perform reproductive care at the grassroots level. They maintained that abortion restrictions were a form of state violence, especially as they corresponded with the structural violence of white supremacy, patriarchy, and capitalism. Anarchists argued that feminists must oppose the state itself as the ultimate patriarchal institution and the source of much of the violence they faced. Thus, rather than the slogan "We're prochoice and we vote," anarchists often marched behind a banner reading "We're prochoice and we riot!"

This article analyzes how anarcha-feminists critiqued the state and attempted to build feminist dual power—through institutions that challenge the dominance of the state and provide the foundation for a new world—in response to the New Right's attacks on reproductive freedom. The first part gives historical context by laying out a brief account of abortion struggles in the 1960s–1970s women's liberation movement. This section analyzes both how *Roe v. Wade* was won and the implications of protecting *Roe* through a liberal state-centric strategy as abortion came under sustained

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attack. The second part analyzes the critique of state power developed by anarcha-feminists in the 1970s. Building on the classic anarchist analysis of the state, they argued that it was an inherently patriarchal institution that could only ever be the enemy of women. The third part turns to anarcha-feminist abortion struggles in the 1990s. It uses primary source materials from *Love and Rage’s* newspaper, internal discussion documents, and oral history interviews to explore how the organization’s intersectional critique of the state influenced its political practice.¹ Anarcha-feminists argued that women must organize themselves from below “to repulse the state from our uteri” by defending abortion infrastructure, forming self-help groups in which they learned to perform reproductive care, and building dual power institutions. In their conception of dual power—influenced more by the 1[994] Zapatista uprising in Mexico than by the 1[917] Russian Revolution—it was strategically necessary to build autonomous institutions such as alternative health clinics and workers councils that challenged the hegemony of the state and capitalism and concretely prefigured a new world. Ultimately, *Love and Rage* argued, the only way to guarantee reproductive freedom and women’s liberation is the revolutionary construction of a libertarian socialist society.

The Women’s Liberation Movement and the Historical Struggle for Abortion

A growing body of scholarly literature recognizes the central role of the radical feminist movement in the struggle for abortion

¹ The entire run of the newspaper is online in the *Arm the Spirit* collection at <https://issuu.com/RandallJayKay>. The newspaper as well as various internal documents were accessed in print at the Interference Archive in Brooklyn, New York. The article also draws on oral history interviews that I conducted as well as on documents from the personal collections of former *Love and Rage* members who generously agreed to share them.

rights in the 1960s and 1970s. Feminist historians have challenged the popular narrative seen in accounts like David J. Garrow's *Liberty and Sexuality* that focus primarily on legal battles and internal Supreme Court deliberations.² The feminist scholar Mary Ziegler argues in *AfterRoe* that although "conventionally, historians and legal scholars suggest that the interference of the courts transformed the abortion wars," they have greatly inflated the importance of the Supreme Court's legal decision. Instead, Ziegler situates *Roe* and the broader abortion debate within major social developments of the postwar period, including the key role played by feminists who challenged abortion restrictions and "created new constituencies in favor of reproductive rights."³ The feminist historian Leslie J. Reagan argues in *When Abortion Was a Crime* that although doctors and lawyers initiated early efforts to reform abortion laws, "ultimately, women's pressing need for abortion fueled a mass movement that succeeded in reversing public policy toward abortion in the late 1960s and early 1970s."⁴ In her classic history of the radical feminist movement *Daring to Be Bad*, Alice Echols details the growth and power of the movement as feminists fought for the repeal of all abortion laws as a foundational component of women's liberation.⁵ Militant mass struggle by a new generation of radical feminists transformed society and produced an opening for legal strategies to succeed.

Reproductive rights were won by grassroots feminist movements working in conjunction with electoral and legal strategies. Doctors, lawyers, and even many clergy spent decades fighting legal battles to lift restrictions on abortion and birth control. As they do today, they often limited their focus to cases based on health concerns or rape rather than arguing for the fundamental right to bodily autonomy and reproductive freedom. These tactics laid the

² Garrow, *Liberty and Sexuality*.

³ Ziegler, *After Roe*, 9, 8.

⁴ Reagan, *When Abortion Was a Crime*, 1.

⁵ Echols, *Daring to Be Bad*.

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legal foundation for *Roe v. Wade*, with the Supreme Court's 1[965] decision in *Griswold v. Connecticut*, which legalized birth control for married couples on the basis of the right to privacy, playing an especially important role. Yet the reliance on the framework of privacy limited the scope of reforms by obscuring the actual fight for reproductive freedom and bodily autonomy. It was only with the birth of a militant feminist movement that fought to repeal all laws restricting abortion that there was substantive progress regarding abortion access at the level of the state.

Radical feminists in the late 1960s and 1970s employed new strategies for building power and effecting change. Feminists in the women's liberation movement, many of whom were veterans of the antiwar movement and New Left organizations like Students for a Democratic Society, began forming autonomous women's groups in the late 1960s. They organized consciousness-raising groups across the country in which women discussed their shared experiences.⁶ This provided the foundation for women to speak out publicly about their abortions and to fight openly for the repeal of all abortion restrictions. Feminists began disrupting male-dominated medical spaces and challenging men's supposed expertise. The Redstockings led the way when they spoke out at a 1[969] New York State joint legislative committee hearing and proclaimed that "the only real experts on abortion are women!"⁷ In addition to speak-outs and demonstrations, feminists also built grassroots women's infrastructure including underground abortion networks. Women across the country took reproductive care into their own hands, including through the new at-home abortion technique of menstrual extraction developed in 1971. Feminists were inspired to put into practice what they learned

⁶ See the essays on consciousness-raising in Firestone and Koedt, *Notes from the Second Year*, including Carol Hanisch's influential piece "The Personal Is Political" as well as multiple essays on abortion. For a classic history of radical feminism and the women's liberation movement, see Echols, *Daring to Be Bad*.

⁷ *Hard Crackers*, "Who Are the Experts?"

from the Boston Women's Health Book Collective's landmark text *Our Bodies, Ourselves*.⁸ The Chicago Jane Collective, for instance, performed over ten thousand illegal abortions between 1[969] and 1973. Feminists demanded the repeal of all abortion laws and advocated for women themselves—not the state or the male-dominated medical system—to control their bodies. The feminist scholar-activist Jenny Brown argues that it was these “massive feminist mobilizations” that “brought hundreds of thousands into the streets,” alongside consciousness-raising and underground abortion provision, that “in just four years forced a reluctant Supreme Court to legalize most abortions across the country.”⁹ Militant mobilization and widespread public disobedience, in combination with ongoing legal cases, pressured the court into granting limited abortion rights via the 1[973] *Roe v. Wade* ruling.

Immediately after *Roe*, however, the antifeminist New Right commenced what became a decades-long attempt to overturn the ruling and restrict abortion provision. The 1[976] Hyde Amendment prevented federal funds from being used for abortion, thus limiting access for poor people.¹⁰ The antiabortion movement continued to grow within the broader backlash against feminism, buoyed by the official stance of President Reagan and the New Right condemning abortion.¹¹ Yet the radical wing of the movement was unsatisfied that Reagan did not push hard enough to end abortion at the federal level. They resolved to go on the attack, and extremists began bombing clinics and murdering doctors who provided abortions. In 1[986] Randall Terry founded Operation Rescue, which tacitly endorsed violence while presenting itself as a more respectable “mainstream” organization that regularly picketed and blockaded clinics in an effort to prevent abortion.

⁸ Boston Women's Health Book Collective, *Our Bodies, Ourselves*.

⁹ Brown, *Without Apology*, 2.

¹⁰ For more on the rise of the post-*Roe* antiabortion movement, see Ziegler, *Abortion and the Law in America*; and Schoen, *Abortion after Roe*.

¹¹ See Susan Faludi's classic *Backlash*.

When the question has been put on the ballot—even in conservative states like Kansas and Kentucky—voters have enacted stronger protections on abortion.⁵⁷ But it has become clear that voting is not enough. Feminists originally won *Roe v. Wade* by organizing mass movements and grassroots reproductive care infrastructure in conjunction with legal and electoral struggles. Even in the 1970s, however, anarcho-feminists cautioned against orienting toward legal reforms and other state-centric strategies. They argued that anything the state gives—including *Roe v. Wade*—can be taken away, for it is ultimately a tool of sexual and class violence in the hands of the patriarchal, capitalist ruling class.

In the 1990s anarcho-feminists in Love and Rage picked up the torch of radical feminism and analyzed how state violence intersected with patriarchy, white supremacy, and capitalism. Rather than fight legal battles to protect abortion, they defended abortion clinics in the streets and built autonomous feminist infrastructure from below. Inspired by the Zapatistas, they believed that this was an important step in building feminist dual power that would eventually overthrow the state and capitalism. Love and Rage collapsed in 1[998] after several years of acrimonious ideological debates in which several leading members repudiated anarchism. But the grassroots fight for reproductive freedom continues. Today we bear witness to the failures of the “prochoice” framing and of the liberal belief in the state. Movements today have much to learn from Love and Rage's analysis of the intersection of the state, capitalism, patriarchy, and white supremacy—and its commitment to building autonomy and feminist dual power from below.

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⁵⁷ Lysen, Ziegler, and Mesa, “Voters in Kansas Decide”; Kimball, “Kentucky Rejects Anti-abortion Constitutional Amendment.”

infrastructure is a key component of building autonomy and feminist dual power that challenges the rule of the state and capitalism. Inspired in part by the Zapatistas, anarchists began to build and defend new institutions as part of a broader project challenging the patriarchal violence of the capitalist state.⁵⁵ Grassroots reproductive infrastructure laid the foundation for further revolutionary action. As Love and Rage member 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 antiabortion 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.⁵⁶

Expelling the state and capital from the process of reproduction provided a model for doing so in other areas of life ranging from the workplace to community safety. This strategy provided a tangible example of the new world for which anarchists fought.

Conclusion

After decades of right-wing activism, in June 2022 the Supreme Court finally overturned *Roe v. Wade*. In response, feminists mobilized to defend abortion both in the street and at the ballot box.

⁵⁵ Jessica, “Women in Zapatista Territory.” For more on Zapatista women, see Klein, *Compañeras*.

⁵⁶ Smith, “East Bay Women’s Community Gets Rolling,” 10–11.

Many mainstream feminists, discouraged by the defeat of the Equal Rights Amendment in 1[982] and the broader attack on the women’s movement, ceded ground to the Right by embracing a limited framework of “prochoice” activism instead of openly fighting for abortion and women’s liberation.¹² Bodily autonomy and reproductive freedom were increasingly replaced by more abstract notions of individual rights for the state to protect, even as those rights were further whittled away through legal rulings like *Planned Parenthood v. Casey* (1992) that allowed states to impose restrictions on the procedure as long as they did not constitute an “undue burden.” Yet many feminists rejected the mainstream movement’s retreat into liberal prochoice advocacy.

Anarcha-feminism and the Patriarchal State

In the 1970s a growing current within the women’s liberation movement began to embrace a conscious anarchist orientation. These activists rejected the liberal turn of the mainstream wing of the movement as well as the state socialism of Marxist feminists. Small groups of women “rediscovered” Emma Goldman and began to theorize a synthesis of feminist and anarchist politics. The feminist historian Julia Tanenbaum explains that “most anarcha-feminists were initially radicalized by the political and cultural milieu of the antiwar movement, but it was their experiences in the women’s liberation movement combined with the influence of Emma Goldman that led them to develop anarcha-feminism as a strategy.”¹³ Although self-identified anarchists formed only a relatively small portion of the women’s liberation movement, their political impact stretched far beyond their small groups and publications. The feminist movement generally practiced what Helen Ellenbogen called an “intuitive anarchism”: they organized in

¹² See Ziegler, *After Roe*, chap. 4 (“The Rise of Choice”).

¹³ Tanenbaum, “To Destroy Domination in All Forms.”

decentralized groups, rejected hierarchy, and embraced horizontal notions of sisterhood.¹⁴

Anarcha-feminists built on the classic anarchist principle that the state is an institution of hierarchy and domination. Anarchists agree with Marxists that the state is a tool of class rule; thus, in a capitalist society, the state generally represents the interests of capital. Unlike Marxists, however, anarchists do not believe that it is possible to seize the state and wield it in the interests of liberation. The state does not simply represent a certain class's interests but stands above all of society to rule over it from its own privileged position. Thus the state in any form, whether under supposedly bourgeois or proletarian dictatorship, necessarily promotes inequality and injustice. As the Russian anarchist Mikhail Bakunin put it in 1873, "Since every state power, every government, by its nature and by its position stands outside the people and above them, and must invariably try to subject them to rules and objectives which are alien to them, we declare ourselves the enemies of every government and every state power, the enemies of state organization of any kind."¹⁵ This applies equally to the possibility of a socialist state. Indeed, the Italian anarchist Errico Malatesta cautions even more strongly against an ostensibly revolutionary state, arguing that it "would end up as usual, in an *oligarchy*," for "what an all-powerful, oppressive, all-absorbing oligarchy must one be ... that has at its disposal, all social wealth, all public services, from food to the manufacture of matches, from the universities to the music-halls!"¹⁶ Anarchists thus distrust any strategy for liberation that passes through the state.

Anarchists maintain that the only path toward a socialist society is nonhierarchical, voluntary federation from below. Peter Kropotkin, the foremost nineteenth-century theorist of anarchist

¹⁴ Quoted in Tanenbaum, "To Destroy Domination in All Forms," 19.

¹⁵ Bakunin, *Statism and Anarchy*, 136.

¹⁶ Malatesta, "Anarchy."

In the 1990s many feminist self-help groups (anarchist and otherwise) embraced the technique of menstrual extraction.⁵³ Rebecca Chalker and Carol Downer (one of the original creators of the technique) published *A Woman's Book of Choices: Abortion, Menstrual Extraction, RU-486* in 1992, which helped revive its use for a new generation. Feminists pointed out that abortion through menstrual extraction—removing the contents of the uterus around the time of an expected period—is a safe home health care technique that puts women in control of their own bodies. It cannot be performed by oneself but relies on a group of lay practitioners who have studied and practiced together. Unlike official medical settings, a small group of close friends could be in control of the entire process. As Os notes: "The woman having the procedure gets to be at home, or a safe place of her choice. Unlike a clinical setting, she is in control. If she wants to put in her speculum or needs to take a break, she can. What a difference from any clinical medical procedure!"⁵⁴ This individual and collective sense of empowerment was a key outcome of self-help groups. Anarchists in Love and Rage organized a "Wimmin's Health Tour" in 1[993] that spread the technique and encouraged women to get organized. In part due to this effort, feminist self-help groups proliferated across the United States in the 1990s. Although their underground nature means that we have little idea just how many abortions were performed in this manner, they made a real difference in people's lives. Beyond the benefits to individual people seeking abortion, the ability to perform reproductive care without having to deal with the state or the medical system has significant political implications.

Love and Rage members argued that women's capacity to care for their own bodies and reproduction materially lessens state power. Establishing grassroots reproductive health care

⁵³ See Cindy Pearson's contemporary account in "Self Help Clinic Celebrates Twenty-Five Years."

⁵⁴ Os, "Public Cervix Announcement," 5.

bodies and our lives into our own hands.”⁴⁹ In the issue of the *Love and Rage* newspaper dedicated to the twenty-fifth anniversary of *Roe v. Wade*, Scarlet Os wrote what she called a “Public Cervix Announcement: Learn Self-Help Menstrual Extraction!” After briefly discussing the scope of the abortion access challenge—including the fact that 85 percent of US counties had no abortion provider—she argued that “while movements for liberation need to step up our battle for reproductive rights in the streets, women can also learn how to provide basic gynecological care, including how to end early term pregnancies safely with a group of friends.”⁵⁰ This meant revisiting traditional methods developed across generations—including herbal and holistic approaches—while also focusing on the technique of menstrual extraction that was first developed in the early 1970s but had fallen out of use after *Roe v. Wade* was won. The key step was to get organized: “Getting involved in a self-help group rather than waiting to see what awful things the antiwomen/antiabortion forces come up with next is a potent offensive move in the battle for women’s freedom.”⁵¹ Building on the example of consciousness-raising groups and self-help groups in the 1960s–1970s, anarcho-feminist self-help groups were small groups of women who committed themselves to collective study to develop their capacity to take care of their bodies. Unlike many study groups focused on theory, these were largely oriented toward practice: “Women teach each other how to check their cervixes for irregularities (potentially detecting precancerous cells), study and practice identification and treatment of basic infections and STDs, do self-breast exams, check ovaries and uteruses for growths or cysts.”⁵² All of this laid the foundation for learning to provide abortions.

⁴⁹ Highleyman, “Reproductive Freedom in Everyday Life,” 6.

⁵⁰ Os, “Public Cervix Announcement,” 5.

⁵¹ Os, “Public Cervix Announcement,” 5.

⁵² Os, “Public Cervix Announcement,” 5.

communism, supports social movements that build federated structures from below, for “modern progress is really towards the free aggregation of free individuals so as to supplant government in all those functions which formerly were entrusted to it, and which it mostly performed so badly.”¹⁷ Bakunin concurs, explaining that anarchists “believe that the people can be happy and free only when they create their own life, organizing themselves from below upward by means of independent and completely free associations.”¹⁸ Today most anarchists contend that the experience of the twentieth century, from the Soviet gulag to the disappointments of social democracy, has proved the classical anarchist analysis of the state correct.¹⁹ Yet whatever their prescience in some areas, these nineteenth-century anarchist theorists generally failed to consider the role of patriarchy—as a hierarchical social system rather than interpersonal prejudice—in relation to their understanding of state power.

A crucial innovation of anarcho-feminists within the 1960s–1970s women’s liberation movement was their analysis of the patriarchal nature of state power. As Arlene Wilson of the Chicago Anarcho-Feminists put it in a manifesto published in the *Siren* newsletter in 1971, “The intelligence of womankind has at last been brought to bear on such oppressive male inventions as the church and the legal family; it must now be brought to reevaluate the ultimate stronghold of male domination, the State,” which she describes as “rule by gangs of armed males.” Indeed, the manifesto declares that

we believe that a Woman’s Revolutionary Movement must not mimic, but destroy, all vestiges of the male-dominated power structure, the State itself—with its whole ancient and dismal apparatus of jails, armies,

¹⁷ Kropotkin, “Anarchist Communism,” 67.

¹⁸ Bakunin, *Statism and Anarchy*, 136.

¹⁹ See, e.g., Grubačić and Graeber, “Anarchism.”

and armed robbery (taxation); with all its murder; with all of its grotesque and repressive legislation and military attempts, internal and external, to interfere with people's private lives and freely-chosen cooperative ventures.²⁰

The state was inherently patriarchal because it replicated the paternal rule of the father over society. As Love and Rage later put it in its 1[997] "Draft Political Statement," patriarchy "operates as a foundation of state power, used to justify a paternalistic relationship between the rulers and the ruled." The state reproduces at a higher scale the father's rule over the family, which is "disguised as protection and support" but is "often enforced through violence and sexual terrorism."²¹ Thus the state could only be the enemy of all women. Simply electing women to the top of the government could never change the basic patriarchal structure of its hierarchical power. Anarcha-feminists brought their antistate socialist analysis to various social movements from the late 1970s through the 1980s. They played an important role in the growing direct-action movement that began with antinuclear activism—most famously in the Clamshell Alliance, which helped introduce the concept of decentralized, consensus-based affinity groups.²² A new generation of radicals in the 1990s took up the torch of anarcha-feminism, expanded its analysis, and applied it to contemporary struggles for reproductive freedom.

²⁰ Chicago Anarcho-Feminists, "Who We Are."

²¹ Love and Rage Revolutionary Anarchist Federation, "Love and Rage Draft Political Statement."

²² See Barbara Epstein's classic history of the movement in *Political Protest and Cultural Revolution*. For a broader history of the development of direct-action tactics and movements in this period, see Kauffman, *Direct Action*.

tant fight against the Far Right.⁴⁵ Influenced by feminists within Anti-Racist Action, a segment of the anarchist movement began to see antiabortion activism as central to contemporary fascism.⁴⁶ Anarchists brought antifascist tactics to the struggle around abortion clinics, including the practice of disrupting their opponents' meetings and using black bloc tactics in street fights against the likes of Operation Rescue. This was often very successful, such as when a coalition of anarchists, leftists, and feminists of many stripes ran Operation Rescue out of Minneapolis in 1993. Operation Rescue had attempted to hold a major summer training camp for antiabortion activists there as a follow-up to its successful "Summer of Mercy" action in Wichita in 1991.⁴⁷ Love and Rage helped organize the leftist-feminist Action Coalition for Reproductive Freedom to defend clinics from Operation Rescue. Rather than solely defend clinics from antiabortion activists, however, anarchists went on the offensive. They blocked access to the church that was hosting Operation Rescue members, disrupted their meetings, vandalized their posters and other materials, and physically prevented them from carrying out both their planned clinic blockades and the trainings.⁴⁸ But defending existing clinics was not enough, particularly when anarchists worried that the government seemed poised to outlaw abortion.

Anarchist women thus took it upon themselves to build autonomous institutions and learn to care for their own bodies. As Love and Rage member Liz Highleyman put it, the possibility of abortion being outlawed meant that "we must be ready to take our

⁴⁵ For a broader history of the fight over abortion clinics, with a focus on how clinic escorts have volunteered to help people receive care in the face of the antiabortion attack, see Rankin, *Bodies on the Line*.

⁴⁶ Knutson, interview. See also Clay, Schwartz, and Staudenmaier, *We Go Where They Go*, chap. 6 ("Our Bodies, Our Choice").

⁴⁷ See Toner, "Minneapolis Clinics Brace for Siege."

⁴⁸ See one participant's account of this mobilization in Liza, "Minnesota Not Nice to Operation Rescue."

of radical groups that regularly collaborated in the fight to protect abortion clinics and develop autonomous reproductive care infrastructure, including Women’s Health Action and Mobilization (WHAM!), the Bay Area Coalition for Our Reproductive Rights (BACORR), the Fight Back Network, and Refuse & Resist! Each of these groups recognized the need to organize at the grassroots level and fight back against both the Far Right and the state itself. On the other side of the divide, mainstream feminists, like the Fund for the Feminist Majority (now the Feminist Majority Foundation), oriented themselves toward reforms and legal battles. These strategies clashed at a major mobilization to defend abortion clinics in Los Angeles in 1995. Anarchists and their allies attempted to physically protect clinics from Operation Rescue and the Missionaries to the Preborn. They were opposed by members of the Feminist Majority, who argued that confrontations were unhelpful and could cause harm to patients seeking care. Instead, the Feminist Majority called on activists to trust in the police and the legal system. President Clinton had recently signed into law the Freedom of Access to Clinic Entrances Act (FACE Act), which made it a federal crime to block clinic doors. This mobilization was a test case for the law.⁴³ The antiabortionists blockaded multiple clinics and were eventually arrested, but they were quickly released and in fact were never charged under the new law. Meanwhile, several anarcho-feminists were beaten and arrested by the police.⁴⁴ For the anarchists, the lessons were clear: the state would never protect them, and liberal feminists could not be trusted as allies.

Anarcho-feminists in Love and Rage argued for a multipronged strategy to build autonomy and power from the bottom up. First, it was important to fight some defensive battles to protect abortion. In particular, the struggle to defend abortion clinics was an impor-

⁴³ See the US Department of Justice’s description of the law in “Protecting Patients and Health Care Providers.”

⁴⁴ For two accounts of this action and its fallout, see Subways, “Clinic Defense in the Era of Operation Rescue”; and Laura [W.], “Liberal Attack on Choice.”

“Our Choice Is Revolution”: Dual Power and Reproductive Freedom in the 1990s

Although its role has often been overlooked, the Love and Rage Revolutionary Anarchist Federation made significant contributions to the grassroots feminist movement in the 1990s.²³ The federation was the foremost American anarchist organization of the late twentieth century.²⁴ Founded in 1[989] after a series of continental anarchist convergences that revitalized the North American anarchist movement, Love and Rage had major chapters in New York City, Minneapolis, and Mexico City as well as smaller groups across the United States and Canada.²⁵ Although it never claimed more than a couple hundred members—and usually had a core of only a few dozen active cadres—Love and Rage exercised an outsized influence within social movements because of its relatively strong organization, its widely distributed newspaper (typically with a bimonthly print run of close to ten thousand copies), and its commitment to making strategic interventions in key social struggles.²⁶ Beginning in 1994, Love and Rage had three main working groups: antifascism, antiprison struggle, and Zapatista solidarity. It attempted, with some success, to infuse

²³ Its role has been neglected in the emerging historical scholarship on feminism in the 1990s, such as Lisa Levenstein’s book *They Didn’t See Us Coming*, which—despite its claim to uncovering a “hidden history”—focuses much more on the world of mainstream feminist nongovernmental organizations, nonprofits, and foundations.

²⁴ See Beswick, “From the Ashes of the Old.”

²⁵ For more on these convergences, see Wood, “Anarchist Gatherings.”

²⁶ Relatively little has been written about Love and Rage. See San Filippo, *A New World in Our Hearts*. For a broad account of anarcho-feminism in Love and Rage, including internal struggles against “anarchist patriarchy,” the organization’s role in the student movement at the City University of New York, and members’ interventions in queer and trans liberation movements, see Beswick, “We’re Pro-choice and We Riot!” For more on Love and Rage’s antiracist activism, see Beswick, “Smashing Whiteness.”

each struggle with feminist and antiracist principles. Much of its feminist activism took place in the antifascist working group because of its analysis of how the antiabortion movement had become a key component of contemporary fascism.²⁷ Love and Rage’s revolutionary strategy rested on building dual power institutions that would challenge the dominance of the state and lay the foundation for a libertarian socialist world.

Chris Day, a cofounder and leading theorist of Love and Rage, reimagined dual power through a Zapatista-tinted grassroots anarchism. Dual power is typically associated with a period of the 1[917] Russian Revolution in which workers’ soviets established parallel power structures that provided the basis to seize the state and establish a dictatorship of the proletariat. Day argues that building anarchist dual power means establishing nonhierarchical institutions and organizations that combat and eventually supplant the state without ever “seizing” it.²⁸ This approach draws on the Industrial Workers of the World’s attempt to “build the new world in the shell of the old”; this nascent world would contest the political and cultural dominance of the state without attempting to conquer it. This radical infrastructure serves two purposes. First, to begin to meet needs outside of the state and capitalism to lessen people’s dependence on the system and free up their time and energy for revolutionary activity. Second, to build genuine democratic institutions at the grassroots level that directly challenge the hegemony of bourgeois institutions. Women’s self-help groups and other grassroots feminist infrastructure were meant to do exactly that: to challenge the power of the patriarchal state and medical establishment and help lay the foundation for a revolutionary movement.

²⁷ See Beswick, “Smashing Whiteness”; and Katrina Knutson, interview by author, February 10, 2022.

²⁸ Day, “Dual Power in the Selva Lacandon.”

broadly, Laura W. predicted in 1[998] that “the tepid ‘pro-choice’ response, which the mainstream feminist leadership will broadcast at press conferences, will most likely focus on the need for more laws on the single issue of abortion.” This is problematic, she argues, because single-issue focus on legal access

does not speak to the reality of most women’s lives. While abortion is one of many significant issues women deal with, it is lack of access to all health services. Racism, inability to control fertility, a discriminatory, dead-end labor market and poverty are some of the real issues restricting women’s free exercise of choice in their lives—not simply the legal status of abortion. “Choice” is a middle-class construct that presumes women have the economic ability to “choose.”⁴¹

True “choice” would thus never be possible under capitalism. Faced with violent state repression, anarcho-feminists argued that working within the state for reforms was counterproductive. *Roe v. Wade* provided an example of the danger of co-optation that would defang movements and open them up to state repression. Instead, reproductive justice movements needed to operate outside the state to build autonomy and power from the ground up. What was needed, Laura W. argued, was “a clear vision of what we are fighting for. We are fighting for women’s freedom. ‘Choice’ just doesn’t cut it.”⁴²

These debates revealed important strategic differences within the broader feminist movement. While they criticized mainstream feminism, anarchists in Love and Rage often joined forces with other left-wing feminists. They worked with a growing network

⁴¹ Laura W., “Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of *Roe v. Wade*,” 1, 13.

⁴² Laura W., “Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of *Roe v. Wade*,” 13.

tive right either to have or not to have children as well as the necessary social support to raise children.³⁷ Anarcha-feminists were influenced by this framework but, as the former Love and Rage member Suzy Subways explains, they generally used the phrase “reproductive freedom” instead of “reproductive justice.” “Justice,” she argues, “implies that we could have that under the current system. We wanted to abolish the current system and create something better.”³⁸ Perhaps the difference was mostly semantic. Still, it underlines that anarcha-feminists fought not for reform but for revolutionary transformation into a society that their predecessor Emma Goldman described as “free communism, actuated by a solidarity of interests.”³⁹

Focusing on legal access to abortion was a losing strategy if it was not part of a comprehensive effort to transform society. Framing abortion as an individual right based on privacy—not a universally provided aspect of routine health care—set the stage for state violence targeted at poor women and women of color. Indeed, Laura W. argues, it was not just what came after *Roe* that was the problem. The initial Supreme Court ruling itself “was never enough. *Roe v. Wade* itself was a compromise, an effort to co-opt the powerful women’s movement that was demanding an end to all laws that regulate abortion. *Roe* made abortion a matter of privacy rather than an essential human right.”⁴⁰ *Roe* was an important reform, but in hindsight anarchists argued that it worked to co-opt and neutralize the militant feminist struggle for bodily autonomy and antipatriarchal revolution. This is the danger, they maintained, of orienting toward winning legal reforms through the state.

Love and Rage criticized the mainstream feminist approach that continued to cede ground to both the state and the Far Right. Despite the major threats to abortion and reproductive care more

³⁷ See Luna, *Reproductive Rights as Human Rights*.

³⁸ Suzy Subways, interview by author, November 2, 2021.

³⁹ Goldman, “What I Believe.”

⁴⁰ Laura W., “Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of *Roe v. Wade*,” 13.

Beginning in 1994, Love and Rage looked to the Zapatistas for models of how to build revolutionary feminist dual power. After a difficult first year of open struggle, the Zapatistas announced the creation of thirty-two “autonomous municipalities”—self-determined, self-governing, autonomous communities. Day describes them as “democratically chosen, independent governments based on popular assemblies that would exist parallel to the ‘official’ municipal governments of Chiapas.” This is a classic case of dual power in which parallel institutions compete for real power and authority. Day goes on to say that “the autonomous municipal governments were to take on all the functions of governance, including many that had been largely neglected by the ‘official’ PRI-dominated municipalities: public health, settling land disputes, education and so on.”²⁹ Since then this system has been greatly expanded and formalized. Crucially for women in Love and Rage, the Zapatistas challenged patriarchal power structures as they built revolutionary dual power. Subcomandante Marcos recounts that one Zapatista woman declared: “We aren’t going to ask the government to give us freedom, nor are we going to ask you male fools. We are going to ensure our freedom, our respect, and our dignity as women and as human beings.”³⁰ Marcos also famously described the struggle for the 1[993] Women’s Revolutionary Law (which recognized women’s rights to self-determination, dignity, and equality) as “the EZLN’s first uprising ... led by Zapatista women. There were no casualties, and they won.”³¹ For feminists in Love and Rage, this was how to win women’s liberation: through grassroots struggles and as part of a broader revolutionary movement, not through elections, legal battles, and liberal reforms.

²⁹ Day, “Dual Power in the Selva Lacandon,” 17. PRI is the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (Institutional Revolutionary Party).

³⁰ Jessica, “Women in Zapatista Territory,” 4.

³¹ Quoted in Klein, *Compañeras*, 73. EZLN is the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (Zapatista Army of National Liberation).

Feminists in Love and Rage refused to appeal to the state to protect abortion. As anarchists, they rejected the state's patriarchal power and argued that it could only be an enemy of reproductive justice and women's liberation. Thus Love and Rage 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 antichoice and antiqueer terror, rape, battery, child abuse and police harassment."³² They did not ignore struggles to maintain legal abortion—and warned of the negative impact of its potential criminalization—but argued that women must develop their own capacity for bodily autonomy and self-determination. Anarcha-feminists argued that establishing autonomous reproductive health care infrastructure was key to building feminist dual power.

Love and Rage members looked to the experience of the women's liberation movement for lessons in feminist struggle. As one anonymous older member of Love and Rage who had been involved in these struggles wrote in a letter to the newspaper, women discovered that their personal issues, including reproduction, were deeply political. She ends her letter on a hopeful note of intergenerational connection and solidarity, observing that "over the years, the Women's Liberation Movement has not died but has changed forms many times, based on the current status of women."³³ Anarcha-feminists in Love and Rage attempted this very transformation by expanding on the earlier generation's understanding of the patriarchal state as necessarily shaped by white supremacy and capitalism.

The US state attempted to control women and their bodies—particularly poor women and women of color—through a series of attacks on their ability to access safe and affordable reproduc-

³² Love and Rage Revolutionary Anarchist Federation, "Love and Rage Draft Political Statement."

³³ LM, "Women's Liberation Movement," 19.

tive care. In an article in Love and Rage's newspaper reflecting on the twenty-fifth anniversary of *Roe v. Wade*, the anarcha-feminist Laura W. emphasizes that activists cannot blame only the Christian Right for denying reproductive freedom. Rather, "the US state has controlled women's reproductive lives through policies of sterilization abuse and population control, within and across US borders. In government policies institutionalized racism and sexism are most apparent. The feds will not pay for Medicaid abortions, but they will pay for sterilization."³⁴ Given this context, it is not surprising that the legal right to abortion that was ostensibly guaranteed by *Roe v. Wade* was de facto severely curtailed. Liberal rights often meant little in practice, particularly for poor women and women of color. Indeed, Laura W. argues that despite the legal rights laid out in *Roe v. Wade*, "the ability to control our reproductive lives is not a reality for most women" due to a range of issues including cutbacks on welfare and social services, lack of health care, and the harassment and violence that women face inside and outside their homes. These obstacles take away women's ability to control their reproduction, which Laura W. deems the "critical aspect of women's freedom."³⁵ Recent work by feminist scholars including Laura Briggs and Sara Matthiesen has further underscored how the New Right's dismantling of social support for raising children and caring for families in the 1980s limited true "choice" in reproductive labor.³⁶

Love and Rage was almost all white, yet this argument drew on the experience of the reproductive justice movement led by women of color. Reproductive justice groups like SisterSong criticized the "prochoice" movement for ignoring the particular struggles of women of color. The issue, they maintained, was not solely individuals' legal access to abortion but the substan-

³⁴ Laura W., "Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of *Roe v. Wade*," 13.

³⁵ Laura W., "Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of *Roe v. Wade*," 1.

³⁶ See Briggs, *How All Politics Became Reproductive Politics*; and Matthiesen, *Reproduction Reconceived*.