Foreword

How do people decide whether to regard fetuses as the single-celled creatures they once were or as the babies they will become?

Kristin Luker's book explains why the opposing positions in the abortion debate are held with such fervor and why the issue of the appropriate legal status of abortion has become such a divisive one in American society. On the basis of extensive interviews with activists on both sides of this issue, Dr. Luker shows how positions on abortion depend on broader commitments and, in particular, on contrasting views of the place of motherhood in a woman's life.

This book's contribution to the understanding of contemporary society is apparent; its place in the California Series on Social Choice and Political Economy may be less so. The books in this series are concerned with connections between individual choices and social outcomes. We welcome Dr. Luker's book because it gives content to an idea frequently stated but rarely worked out in convincing detail: that our understanding of moral choices is illuminated by an examination of their social setting. Her analysis of how technological and social changes have combined to create a new moral agenda in politics also helps to explain how people decide to participate in movements that are based on moral issues.

Scholars interested in applying models of decision making to social movements have generally concentrated on issues or movements where people attach no value to participation in the movement for its own sake. That is, studies have emphasized situations in which contributions to a movement are viewed purely as costs, and where individuals consider their contributions solely in terms of their own ultimate benefits. In contrast, participation in the movement for or against

abortion is viewed as having value irrespective of whether that participation affects the ultimate outcome of the struggle. Dr. Luker shows that the outcome of the debate over the constitutionality and social validation of abortion may affect activists' senses of identity and esteem. To both pro-choice and pro-life activists, the Supreme Court decision on abortion was important not so much for its practical consequences (Dr. Luker is studying activists in California, where abortion was already legal before the 1973 Supreme Court decision) as for the increased legitimacy they felt the decision accorded to abortion and the lifestyle it facilitates. Lifestyles require validation and support, and the pro-choice and right-to-life movements provide milieux that uphold starkly contrasting lifestyles based on widely divergent views of motherhood.

There are also intimate relationships, Dr. Luker shows, between medical technology, social roles, and the attractiveness of movements furthering moral values. The abortion issue, for example, is affected by changes in our technical ability to detect pregnancy. Once improved technology verifies with certainty whether a woman is pregnant, looking the other way when medicines are used to bring on menses becomes less easy. The development of the contraceptive pill also directly affects the emergence of abortion as a mass issue. The pill, along with easier and safer abortion, enables women to schedule pregnancy and therefore to subordinate childbearing to an entire life plan.

These developments in technology, along with the emergence of opportunities for women in nearly all sectors of American life, have led to the emergence of a new, highly prestigious social role—the career woman. A woman can now live a life of status and glamour without children, even without marriage. The validation of such a life trajectory has led to a perceived devaluation of the roles of mother and wife. The major social significance of this change has been the creation of a chasm between women who have options outside the family and women who do not.

Those not intimately involved with the history of abortion or the history of women's issues may be surprised to discover that abortion was as prevalent in America at certain times in the nineteenth century as it is today. Why, then, has abortion become a mass issue for the first time in our own era? Luker argues that abortion is a widespread issue today because of women's increased ability to incorporate children and marriage into a long-term career plan. A hundred years ago, one

issue—the status of the fetus—dominated the abortion controversy. Today, there are two issues: the status of the fetus and the status of motherhood in American society. The modern debate over abortion taps not only attitudes about the sanctity of life but also deep-seated feelings about the place women should occupy in society and about what the proper family structure should be.

Dr. Luker's comparison of women in the pro-choice and pro-life movements makes clear that the moral status of the fetus is not a trivial issue. Beyond concern with the fetus, however, those committed to either side in the abortion controversy are deeply convinced that its resolution is a key to resolving a whole set of struggles about the distribution of careers and jobs in America. The pro-choice women see the ability to plan childbearing as necessary to fulfilling their potential as human beings. The pro-life women, in contrast, view pregnancy and childrearing as central to the lives of all women. The right-to-life movement is an attempt to form a moral cartel to use state power to define the social role of women. Dr. Luker shows that this movement represents an attempt not just to protect the fetus but also an attempt to ensure that family is a higher priority than career among women and that women whose work is within the home are not accorded lower prestige than women whose work is all or partly outside the home. Dr. Luker is one of the first scholars to investigate the rise of movements that seek to put the power of the state behind moral positions. In so doing, she helps us understand the importance to many people of the validation of their moral outlook by legitimating political institutions.

Brian Barry
Samuel L. Popkin

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