



Up Next

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MATTHEW CHAPMAN

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Camille Paglia: Feminists have abortion wrong, Trump and Hillary miscues highlight a frozen national debate

Reproductive rights have become ideological tool ruthlessly exploited by my party to inflame passions, raise money

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60



CAMILLE PAGLIA

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Like stumbling twin mastodons, both Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton fell into the abortion tar pit this past week. Trump blundered his way through a manic inquisition about abortion by MSNBC's resident woodpecker, Chris Matthews, while Hillary committed an unforced error on NBC's "Meet the Press," where she referred to the fetus as an "unborn person," scandalizing the vast pro-choice lobby, who treat all attempts to "humanize" the fetus as a diabolical threat to reproductive rights.

While the Hillary flap was merely a blip, given the consistency of her pro-choice views over time, Trump's clumsy performance was a fiasco, exposing in his fiat that women should face "some sort of punishment" for illegal abortions how little he had thought about one of the major issues in American public life over the past 40 years. Following his supercilious mishandling of the controversy over his campaign manager's crude yanking of a woman reporter's arm, Trump's MSNBC flame-out was a big fat gift to Democratic strategists, who love to tub-thump about the Republican "war on women"—a tired cliché that is as substance-less as a druggy mirage but that the inept GOP has never been able to counter.

Then this week Hillary raised eyebrows when she was asked by conservative co-host Candace Bure on ABC's "The View" if she believes someone can be both a feminist and against abortion. "Absolutely," Hillary replied, possibly not realizing the implications of what she was saying: "Of course you can be a feminist and be pro-life." Was this an election-year pivot toward conservative women, like Hillary's fantastical praise of Nancy Reagan as an AIDS activist? If it was rooted in genuine conviction, why have we not heard a word about it before? Hillary is usually wedded cheek-by-jowl with the old-guard feminist establishment.

The real issue is that U.S. politics have been entangled and strangled for far too long by the rote histrionics of the abortion wars, which have raged since Roe v. Wade, the 1973 Supreme Court decision that defined abortion as a woman's constitutional right under the 14th Amendment. While I am firmly pro-choice and support unrestricted access to abortion, I have been disturbed and repelled for decades by the way reproductive rights have become an ideological tool ruthlessly exploited by my own party, the Democrats, to inflame passions, raise money, and drive voting.

presidents: Robert Bork in 1987, David Souter in 1990, and Clarence Thomas in 1991. (Bork was rejected, while Souter and Thomas were approved.) Those hearings became freak shows of feminist fanaticism, culminating in the elevation to martyr status of Anita Hill, whose charges of sexual harassment against Thomas still seem to me flimsy and overblown (and effectively neutralized by Hill's following Thomas to another job). Abortion was the not-so-hidden motivation of the Democratic operatives who pushed a reluctant Hill forward and fanned the flames in the then monochromatically liberal mainstream media. It was that flagrant abuse of the Senate confirmation process that sparked the meteoric rise of conservative talk radio, led by Rush Limbaugh, who provided an alternative voice in what was then (pre-Web) a homogenized media universe.



Abortion has been central to the agenda of second-wave feminism since the 1972 issue of Ms. Magazine, which contained a splashy declaration, "[We have had abortions.](#)," signed by 53 prominent American women. A recurrent rubric of contemporary feminism is Gloria Steinem's snide jibe (which she claims to have heard from an old Irish woman taxi driver in Boston), "If men could get pregnant, abortion would be a sacrament." But Steinem herself can be credited or blamed for having turned abortion into a sacrament, promoted with the same religiosity that she and her colleagues condemn in their devoutly Christian opponents.

First-wave feminism, born in 1848 at the Seneca Falls Convention in upstate New York, was focused on property rights and on winning the vote, achieved by ratification of the 19th Amendment in 1920. Abortion entered the feminist canon with Margaret Sanger's bold campaign for birth control, a violation of the repressive Comstock Act for which she was arrested in 1914. Her organization, the American Birth Control League, founded in 1921, later became Planned Parenthood, which remains a lightning-rod for controversy because of its lavish federal funding. Sanger remains a heroine to many feminists, including me, despite her troubling association with eugenics, a program (also adopted by the Nazis) of now discredited techniques like sterilization to purify and strengthen the human gene pool. It was partly because of Sanger's pioneering precedent that I joined Planned Parenthood and contributed to it for many years—until I realized, to my disillusion, how it had become a covert arm of the Democratic party.

My position on abortion is contained in my manifesto, "No Law in the Arena," from my second essay collection, "Vamps & Tramps" (1994): "Women's modern liberation is inextricably linked to their ability to control reproduction, which has enslaved them from the origin of the species." However, I argue that our real oppressor is not men or society but nature—the biological imperative that second-wave feminism and campus gender studies still refuse to acknowledge. Sex is nature's way—coercive, prankish, and pleasurable—of ensuring survival of the species. But in eras of overpopulation, those pleasures spill into a multitude of directions to slow or halt procreation—which is why I maintain that homosexuality is not a violation of natural law but its fulfillment, when history wills it.

has the moral high ground. I wrote in "No Law in the Arena": "We career women are arguing from expedience: it is personally and professionally inconvenient or onerous to bear an unwanted child. The pro-life movement, in contrast, is arguing that every conception is sacred and that society has a responsibility to protect the defenseless." The silence from second-wave feminists about the ethical ambiguities in their pro-choice belief system has been deafening. The one exception is Naomi Wolf, with whom I have disagreed about many issues. But Wolf showed admirable courage in questioning abortion in her 1995 essay, "[Our Bodies, Our Souls](#)," which was reprinted at the 40th anniversary of Roe v. Wade by the New Statesman in London three years ago.


That a pro-life wing of feminism is possible is proved by this thoughtful letter recently sent to me at Salon by Katherine Carlson in Calgary, Canada:


Many women like myself (a gay liberal) are deeply upset over the abortion issue. Ultrasound technology has allowed us to see into the womb like never before, and the obvious face of humanity is clear. I totally respected your take on abortion precisely because you never tried to dehumanize the preborn vulnerable. You were clearly pro-choice but made the harsh reality of the decision very clear.

I was thrilled when they took down Gloria Steinem's interview on Lands' End. To me, she is someone who tried to normalize abortion, and I despise her for it. The Democrats have become callous and extreme on the issue, and I feel completely shut out. And obviously, I am no right-winger. I have listened to the testimony of phenomenal women who have survived abortion attempts and were left to die (were saved only because some took their Hippocratic oath seriously).


I am tired of being bullied by women who equate women's equality with abortion on demand. I know some women who use abortion as a method of sex selection and it rattles me to my core.



If you ever decide to write a piece on silenced women like myself, I would be entirely grateful.

I totally agree with Carlson that pro-choice Democrats have become "callous and extreme" about abortion. There is a moral hollowness at the core of [Western careerist feminism, a bourgeois secular code that sees children as an obstruction to self-realization](#) or as a management problem to be farmed out to working-class nannies. 

Liberals routinely delude themselves with shrill propaganda about the motivation of "anti-woman" pro-life supporters. Hillary deals in those smears as her stock in trade: for example, while campaigning last week, she said in the context of Trump's comments on abortion, "[Women's health is under assault in America](#)"—as if difficulty in obtaining an abortion is more of an assault than the grisly intervention required for [surgical termination of a pregnancy. Who is the real victim here?](#) 

Or we have Gail Collins, former editorial page head at the New York Times, asserting last week in her column, "[Trump, Truth, and Abortion](#)," "In reality, the anti-abortion movement is grounded on the idea that sex outside of marriage is a sin....It's the sex, at bottom, that they oppose." I saw red: where the hell were these middlebrow Steinem feminists of the prestige Manhattan media during the pro-sex insurgency of my rebel wing of feminism during the 1990s? Suddenly, two decades later, Collins is waving the sex flag? Give me a break!

To project sex phobia onto all pro-lifers is vulgar. Although [I am an atheist who worships only great nature](#), I recognize the superior moral beauty of religious doctrine that defends the sanctity of life. The quality of idea and language in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, for example, exceeds anything in grimly utilitarian feminism. In regard to the Commandment "Thou shalt not kill," the Catechism says: "Human life is sacred because from its beginning it involves the creative action of God....God alone is the Lord of life from its beginning until its end: no one can under any circumstance claim for himself the right directly to destroy an innocent human being" (#2258). Or this: "Human life must be respected and protected absolutely from the moment of conception. From the first moment of his existence, a human being must be recognized as having the rights of a person—among which is the inviolable right of every innocent being to life" (#2270). 

Which embodies the more authentic humanism in this area—the Catholic Catechism or pro-choice feminism? If the latter, then we have much work to do to develop feminism philosophically. In "No Law in the Arena," I argued from the point of view of pre-Christian paganism, when abortion was accepted and widespread: "[My code of modern Amazonism says that nature's fascist scheme of menstruation and procreation should be defied, as a gross infringement of woman's free will...](#)As a libertarian, I support unrestricted access to abortion because I have reasoned that my absolute right to my body takes precedence over the brute [claims of mother nature, who wants to reduce women to their animal function as breeders.](#)"  

There are abundant contradictions in a liberal feminism that supports abortion yet opposes capital punishment. The violence intrinsic to abortion cannot be wished away by magical thinking. As I wrote: "Abortion pits the stronger against the weaker, and only one survives." My program is more ideologically consistent, because I vigorously support abortion but also call for the death penalty for horrific crimes such as political assassination or serial rape-murder. However, the ultimate issue in the abortion debate is that, in a modern democracy, law and government must remain neutral toward religion, which cannot impose its expectations or values on non-believers.

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rights in cases where a pregnant woman has been attacked or killed: "It is progressives who have historically pushed to expand civil rights, yet who now find themselves concerned about the expansion of rights to fetuses." Progressives need to do some soul-searching about their reflex rhetoric in demeaning the pro-life cause. A liberal credo that is variously anti-war, anti-fur, vegan, and committed to environmental protection of endangered species like the sage grouse or spotted owl should not be so stridently withholding its imagination and compassion from the unborn.

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