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Book Review: ProLife Feminism: Yesterday and Today

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ProLife Feminism: Yesterday and Today (2nd Expanded Edition). Mary Krane Kerr, Rachel MacNair, and Linda Naranjo-Huebel. 2005. Kansas City, MO: Feminism and Nonviolence Studies Association. 474 pp. (Incl. appendices; bibliography; and index). \$18.99 (Trade Paperback). \$26.99 (Hardback).

Reviewed by Kimberly Kelly¹

ProLife Feminism: Yesterday and Today is an edited volume of historical and contemporary writings by prolife feminists. The book is divided into two parts covering the years 1790-1960 and the time period from the 1960s to the present respectively. Writings and speeches by more than 70 people are featured, the vast majority of whom are women. Some helpful summary readings scattered throughout the text are written by the editors and intended to provide the historical, social, and political context of a particular time period in the prolife feminist movement. Most primary sources are prefaced with biographical information about the particular contributor. The second edition of *ProLife Feminism: Yesterday and Today* expands upon the 1995 edition by including additional selections originating after the original publication date. The basic premise of the volume is abortion is a form of violence inflicted on women and the unborn and will be solved only by addressing the social causes of abortion. Particularly notable people featured include Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Mary Wollstonecraft, Jane Addams, Fannie Lou Hamer, Wangari Maathai, and Benazir Bhutto.

The book is published by Feminism and Nonviolence Studies, Inc. (FNSA), a prolife organization dedicated to a radical feminist stance viewing abortion as parallel to social injustices such as war, child maltreatment, discrimination against minorities, and the death penalty. Such abuses exist because the victims are not valued enough by the societies they live in to be shielded from these forms of violence. FNSA Board of Directors members and coeditors Mary Krane Kerr, Rachel MacNair, and Linda Naranjo-Huebel state their activist intentions in the preface, saying “[o]ur purpose is to offer a largely untapped but nonviolently powerful resource for healing and preventing the personal, familial, and societal wounds surrounding abortion and other forms of lifetaking (13).”

Part 1 is subdivided into two chronological parts. Selections in the earlier section are dominated by a white, middle-class perspective speaking on behalf of all women generally. The next section speaks more explicitly to the concerns of working class and poor women, although very few such women are doing the writing. It is disappointing that discussions of unique issues facing women of color and economically disadvantaged women written *by* these women are so infrequently included in the anthology. One can appreciate more privileged women recognizing and using their status to speak out in support of other women, but this is not a substitute for the voices of the groups directly affected. Part 2 is more inclusive, with writings by Black, Native American, Latina, lesbian, and disability activists and a few international figures. Linkages between the treatment of the unborn/fetus and other marginalized groups are logical and well-articulated. As a prochoice feminist, I found these writings thought-provoking and astute

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in their recognition of the structural causes of abortion and potential solutions to the problems of women in a society that assigns them virtually all responsibility for childrearing and uses that status to subjugate them. Noticeably absent were moralistic or person-blame approaches.

Prolife women have often been portrayed as the willing dupes of men bent on maintaining patriarchal control of women via control of their reproduction. The writings in Part 1 reveal a group of activists distinctly at odds with the masculinist power structures of their time. Their opposition to abortion was not a failure to recognize gender inequality, but the result of the conviction that abortion was a part of the oppression of women. In the eyes of these feminists, women's and fetus' interests were complementary, not oppositional. Only when women were systematically exploited and abused would they turn against their own unborn children. Many saw the issue of abortion as part of a broader social justice movement and called for the transformation of men's social roles as well as women's status via community child care, paid employment, decent work conditions, poverty alleviation, property rights, education, and suffrage for women. These twin trajectories would ease the social causes of abortion.

The readings in Part 1 celebrate motherhood while simultaneously recognizing it as a source of repression for women. Women abort as a result of being the property of men on the basis of gender and race inequality, thus there is little difference between a voluntary and coerced abortion. These feminists stressed other dangers of male-controlled reproduction as well, including stigmatization of unwed mothers, social rejection of illegitimate children, women's inability to refuse sexual advances, lack of effective family planning, and compulsory motherhood. Part 1 may strike a dissonant chord with some contemporary readers with its emphasis on women's natural proclivities for mothering and the assumed anguish of all aborting women. However, what cannot be ignored is the overwhelming opposition to abortion by early feminists, many of whom are currently touted as the foremothers of today's *prochoice* feminism. Many people, including some feminists, are undoubtedly unaware of the revisionist history employed in such practices. Also interesting are the nuances of many prolife feminist positions of this time. For example, despite their belief that women were inherently nurturing, early prolife feminists did not advocate motherhood as the only appropriate destiny for women. No woman should be forced to have more children than she wanted or any children at all. However, the proper approach to ending abortion lay within pregnancy prevention; once conception occurred the pregnancy should not be terminated, according to these feminists.

Selections in Part 2 differ from those in Part 1 in several ways representative of their respective social and historical settings. Earlier activists employed moralistic arguments against abortion, frequently drawing from religious values. As the editors point out in one of the summary selections, many early prolife feminists also supported eugenicist policies and alienated working class activists, women of color, and white ethnics with their positions. Contemporary prolife feminist writings take a noticeably different focus, often speaking directly to other feminists and seeking to persuade them that abortion is a form of violence stemming from racism, classism, and sexism. Given this target audience, it is not surprising that more recent readings are less likely to reference religion as a basis for their arguments. Instead, contributors utilize an explicit human rights perspective promoting tolerance and respect for diversity

The second half of the volume consistently portrays abortion as a clear indicator that women's rights have not progressed satisfactorily. In a persuasive introduction to the second half, the editors argue the root causes of abortion have changed only superficially, yet many people believe the problems of gender inequality to be solved. The need for abortion to preserve women's personal autonomy or place in the workforce demonstrates how little has changed. According to these feminists, so long as abortion is tolerated, so too will women's second-class status. This status may even be exacerbated by abortion through practices such as sex-selective abortion and consequence-free sexual gratification for men.

A particular strength of the work involves the editors' and contributors' willingness to consider prochoice concerns. Readings generally describe prochoicers as genuinely concerned for the well-being of women, if misguided in their position on abortion. Mary Krane Derr agrees with prochoice critiques of a traditional model of femininity that demands unending sacrifice and duty, saying such a model is nothing more than "unjust, unnecessary social construction masquerading as 'God's will,' 'survival of the fittest,' 'practical necessity,' or 'just the way things are' anyway (379)!" Criticisms of some prolife policies made by well-known reproductive studies scholars such as Rickie Solinger and Rosalind Petchesky are acknowledged and affirmed. However, some statements are too sweeping, such as when the editors claim many prochoice activists are motivated by the desire to alleviate the emotional pain they feel in the aftermath of their own experiences with abortion or suggest that the reduction in the number of abortion clinics and the abortion rate since the 1980s may simply be the result of people deciding abortion is undesirable.

The writers ultimately reject the prochoice position, but do so on feminist grounds. According to these activists, abortion sends the message that women's bodies and reproductive abilities are disabilities and promotes women's capitulation to the status quo. Forcing women's bodies to be more like men's reinforces assumptions about men and women's roles in society. Furthermore, the 'right' to abort is often forced upon minority and indigent women as a form of population control. Drawing on an implicit conflict perspective, several writers make the point that abortion is inherently patriarchal. When men owned women, a woman's value was based on whether a man wanted her as a wife, sex slave, domestic servant, etc. Today, the value of a fetus is determined by whether it is 'wanted,' and abortion necessitates that a woman see her own human rights, needs and value exceeding that of the fetus just as men saw their rights, needs and value exceeding women's. Daphne Claire de Jong argues against the classification of some fetuses as wanted/human and others as unwanted and therefore non-human, saying "to define humanity on the basis of one's emotional response is to rationalize prejudice (230)."

Non-feminist prolife positions are also taken to task. In a rejection of moralistic arguments against abortion, Serrin M. Foster points out that condemning nonmarital pregnancy and parenting does not discourage sexual activity or send a moral message; it tells young women children are incompatible with education and careers. Jane Thomas Bailey argues that many prolife organizations are too exclusive in their Christianity, and abortion should be argued on the basis of scientific and human rights principles. Furthermore, men should not be prolife leaders as they have never had to choose between family and career and therefore hold no creditability with women. Feminists writing in

this vein repeatedly criticize any acceptance of social institutions that make no allowances for pregnant and parenting women. This acknowledgement of the structural inequalities influencing women's reproductive decisions is in sharp contrast to non-feminist prolife critiques of abortion as a 'convenience' chosen by women to avoid allegedly inconsequential interruptions of their professional or personal lives. The distinction between the positions of prolife people generally and prolife feminists is made frequently in these readings, and prolife feminists express their disapproval and even condemnation of those proliferers who would outlaw abortion without alleviating the social problems that convince women they must abort.

ProLife Feminism: Yesterday and Today is likely to be appealing to a number of groups. Prolifers subscribing to the consistent life ethic will likely see the collection as a more holistic and accurate picture of their position. Prochoice readers may appreciate a nuanced prolife position that acknowledges the complex reasons women abort without necessarily agreeing with the conclusions of the contributors. Anyone interested in finding common ground and dialogue between two allegedly oppositional political movements will be encouraged by the explicit invitations extended to prochoicers in many of the readings. The readings in the text are appropriate for both undergraduate and graduate courses, particularly those examining social movements or women-led activism. However, given their brevity, they may be more appropriate for supplemental reading assigned alongside more in-depth pieces.

Finally, given that so many of the contemporary readings are aimed at other feminists, it is worth considering how prochoice feminists may interpret the volume. Since the *Roe v. Wade* decision in 1973, the pro-choice movement here in the United States has been a largely defensive movement, seeking to protect status quo legality from a prolife onslaught aimed at restrictions and attempts at repeal. This led some prochoice organizations to a concentrated focus on legality and the neglect of other issues such as the poverty and inadequate social supports that compel some women to choose abortion. Some prochoicers may reject any position that questions the legitimacy of abortion. However, to be prochoice is to support all choices-abortion, parenting and adoption-not just safe and legal abortion for women with no other meaningful options. Part of that support is striving to understand how different groups of women experience these decisions. As a prochoice feminist concerned with such issues, I feel it would be a mistake for other prochoice feminists to dismiss this collection or prolife feminists out of fear of undermining their own support of legal abortion.