

What Does Civil-Rights History Have to Say About Abortion?

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Date : September 16, 2021

Jennifer Holland, [Tiny You: A Western History of the Anti-Abortion Movement](#) (2020).

Jennifer Holland's well-researched, captivating history will open a new chapter in historiographic debates about the pro-life movement's roots—and about the racial politics of abortion. Focusing on antiabortion organizing in the Four Corners region of the United States (an area encompassing all or part of Colorado, Utah, Arizona, and New Mexico), *Tiny You* explores how abortion became (and remained) the defining political issue for social conservatives. Holland offers a provocative look at the long shadow cast by civil rights law on so many of our debates, exploring how conservative social movements have laid claim to those traditions in profoundly consequential ways.

In recent years, historians of the 1960s and 1970s have documented how abortion foes redefined their cause as a quintessentially legal, rather than religious, cause. The movement successfully leveraged the strategies of the civil rights movement to justify restrictions and outright bans on abortion. Pro-lifers relied on the rhetoric of civil rights in the political and legal arena. In court, pro-life attorneys invoked race-discrimination jurisprudence, pointing to the Equal Protection Clause to establish unborn children as a protected minority. Some scholars suggest that pro-lifers' turn to civil rights was both sincere and transformative. What had been a Catholic movement won allies with different political perspectives and religious backgrounds. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, some secular activists, Mormons, Orthodox Jews, and mainline Protestants had joined the movement. By the 1980s, evangelical Protestants, even those opposed to busing and key planks of the civil-rights agenda, joined the movement in increasing numbers. By moving away from explicitly Catholic arguments—and by playing down opposition to contraception—abortion foes built a more religiously diverse movement. All the while, as pro-lifers painted their struggle as a fight for civil rights, the movement remained predominantly white.

Holland makes sense of the complex racial politics of abortion. She argues that the struggle over abortion allowed conservative white Christians “a new type of racial identity, one based on [...] claims to morality and common sense.” (P. 28.) In her view, abortion foes appropriated civil rights rhetoric all while changing what it meant, neglecting questions of racial justice, repositioning (often white) fetuses as victims, and reclaiming the moral high ground for white activists opposed to abortion.

Starting in the 1960s and 1970s, *Tiny You* begins by examining how conservative Catholics mobilized to oppose pornography and contraception. These fights created conservative Catholic networks that would later field prominent activists in the abortion conflict. Central to this mobilization was the circulation of powerful fetal images. From the beginning, these images had everything to say about race and racism in America. Holland chronicles how antiabortion leaders like Dr. John Willke and his wife, Barbara, courted support in Utah by stressing images of white fetuses, all the while pitching their cause as a fight to protect embattled minorities. Antiabortion leaders insisted that by denying the personhood of human beings, abortion resembled slavery and the Holocaust. Abortion opponents Denying fetal personhood would create a slippery slope, abortion foes maintained. Soon, the United States might deny the personhood of the elderly, the disabled, or other vulnerable groups.

Tiny You challenges leading historical accounts of why and how the antiabortion movement turned to civil rights arguments. Holland, like historian [Daniel K. Williams](#), recognizes that the antiabortion movement relied heavily on the history of civil rights. The adoption of civil rights rhetoric unquestionably had a strategic dimension. The antiabortion movement faced headwinds as long as many believed it was a front for the Catholic Church. Williams, however, asserts that this shift reflected deeply held beliefs about “the feminism of difference” and “the social welfare politics of

New Deal liberalism.” (Williams, Pp. 6-7.) New Dealers embraced programs intended to protect the vulnerable, especially the poor. Pro-lifers believed that protection for the unborn (as well as for low-income mothers) would fit well in this kind of New Deal vision. Williams highlights the work of antiabortion Democrats who supported workers’ rights, a living wage, and employment protections for minorities and women. In his view, the fight over abortion pitted two visions of liberalism against one another, at least before the Supreme Court decided *Roe v. Wade* and abortion foes aligned with the Republican Party. Holland’s rich narrative complicates this account and forces us to revisit the complex racial politics of abortion.

These arguments had a legal as well as political dimension. Invoking the Thirteenth Amendment, abortion opponents insisted that *Roe v. Wade* denied fetal personhood just as slavery had denied the personhood of Black Americans. After 1973, abortion foes demanded a constitutional amendment of their own. But Holland shrewdly notes that antiabortion activists in the Four Corners region rarely put direct effort into fights against racism or anti-Semitism. In New Mexico, for example, antiabortion leaders did not work with Chicano or American Indian activists concerned about sterilization abuse. Holland reasons that members of a predominantly white antiabortion movement meant something very different by human rights and civil rights than did their nonwhite neighbors. Indeed, antiabortion advocates often insisted that abortion was worse than the Holocaust or slavery because “fetuses were the only innocents, the truly helpless.” (Pp. 88-89.)

Holland meticulously documents how the racial politics of abortion shifted in the 1980s and 1990s, as the movement began to focus on woman-protective arguments. *Tiny You* offers an inside look at crisis pregnancy centers (CPCs) that helped to spread these arguments. These organizations set out to mobilize what they called post-abortive women, contending that the procedure denied them civil rights. CPCs primarily identified white activists but provided services to a diverse clientele. But while ministering to women of color, CPC leaders played down any role played by race or class in the struggles their clients faced. Instead, CPCs pressed the claim that abortion alone was to blame for what women faced. *Tiny You* offers a different perspective on the rise of the conservative movement in the West in the period, showing how abortion foes grappled with racial politics in complex, sometimes surprising ways.

The effects of abortion’s racial politics were legal as well as political. CPC leaders helped to pass informed-consent laws and overhaul the allocation of federal family planning dollars. The movement also made its impact felt in sex education policy. After Congress passed the Adolescent Family Life Act in the early 1980s, antiabortion activists used federal money to pitch their own sex education programs, including Sex Respect, an abstinence-centered approach that framed both premarital sex and abortion as “deadly.” (Pp. 171-73.)

Holland explores how this campaign, like so many, contested the meaning of civil rights in modern America. By often foregrounding the abortion of white children, abortion opponents claimed that whites too were victims. And by arguing that abortion was at once “the root of racism” and “the source of women’s oppression,” the activists in Holland’s story found ways to claim the mantle of the civil rights movement without embracing measures to eliminate discrimination on the basis of race or sex.

The pro-life movement’s complexity makes it even more important to have compelling histories like this one. Readers need not accept every dimension of Holland’s story to recognize its importance. Those most likely to have abortions, or to feel the effects of abortion restrictions, are not white. Yet as Holland convincingly shows, white conservative activists have worked to redefine our civil rights tradition, with consequences that we still just beginning to understand.

Cite as: Mary Ziegler, *What Does Civil-Rights History Have to Say About Abortion?*, JOTWELL (September 16, 2021) (reviewing Jennifer Holland, ***Tiny You: A Western History of the Anti-Abortion Movement*** (2020)), <https://legalhist.jotwell.com/what-does-civil-rights-history-have-to-say-about-abortion/>.