

“To Repulse The State From Our Uteri”

Anarcha-Feminist Abortion Struggle

Spencer Beswick

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I’ve been working on an article on anarcha-feminism in the late 1980s-90s, focusing primarily on abortion struggle (in part in response to the new Texas anti-abortion law). As the anarcha-feminist Liz Highleyman put it in 1992, “The day when abortion is again made illegal may come sooner than we like to think. We must be ready to take our bodies and our lives into our own hands.”

Anarcha-feminists were on the front lines of the militant struggle for abortion. They were convinced that *Roe v. Wade* would not last forever and that they could not depend on the state and the legal system to protect abortion, so their analysis and political practice feel particularly relevant today. Anarcha-feminists generally took a three-pronged approach to abortion struggle: construction of women’s infrastructure, defense of abortion infrastructure, and a combative relationship with the state. (Note that the language in this post is very gender-normative because this is the language that the feminists I’m looking at used at the time.)

1. Construction of women’s infrastructure: establishing autonomous infrastructure (health clinics, etc.) and self-help groups in which women learned to take care of their own bodies and induce abortions on their own terms. As one anonymous anarchist put it in an article called “Laws and Outlaws,” “Medicine is something we must take into our own hands. Because how can you smash the state if you’re still walking funny from a visit to the gynecologist’s?”

This meant first and foremost an urgent need to (as Highleyman wrote) “rebuild the network of feminist women’s health and reproductive resources that existed in the late 1960’s and early 1970’s,” particularly organizations like the Chicago Jane Collective which provided underground abortions before they were legalized. While anarcha-feminists supported abortions provided by accredited doctors, their focus on women’s autonomy led them to draw on alternative traditions of women-controlled health practices. This includes herbal and holistic methods which women have used “throughout the ages [...] to control their fertility and reproduction.” Thus anarchists advocated expanding grassroots infrastructure and self-organization to gain the knowledge and skills necessary to perform their own reproductive care. This would produce true reproductive freedom and autonomy, independent of the state and its laws.

2. Defense of abortion infrastructure: physically protecting abortion clinics from the attacks of Operation Rescue and others. Many non-anarchists took part in this, of course, but

anarcha-feminists brought Black Bloc tactics and a willingness to engage in physical confrontation, and they were very successful in preventing Operation Rescue from shutting down clinics in NYC, Minneapolis, San Francisco, and in many other places across the country.

But anarcha-feminists believed that defense of infrastructure was not enough. They vowed to go after Operation Rescue, prevent them from meeting, and disrupt them anywhere they went. When Operation Rescue attempted to host a summer training camp in Minneapolis in 1993, anarchists physically confronted Operation Rescue, blocked them in their church, disrupted their meetings, vandalized their materials, protected clinics from their attacks, and generally made them unwelcome. Although some liberals opposed these tactics, anarchists and other militants handed Operation Rescue a major defeat and ran them out of town.

Reflecting on the experience, an anarchist named Liza wrote in an article titled “Minnesota Not Nice to Operation Rescue,” that “it seems like no matter how hard activists fight, we rarely win. Except this time we were victorious. We fought against these fascists [...] We saw the demise of Operation Rescue in the Twin Cities, partly due to our unprecedented aggressiveness and opposition, and partly because their movement is losing, big time.”

3. Combative relationship with the state: anarcha-feminists did not appeal to the state to maintain the right to abortion. They believed that the state was inherently patriarchal and was ultimately the enemy of women. In place of the slogan “we’re pro-choice and we vote,” anarcha-feminists marched behind a banner reading “we’re pro-choice and we riot.”

Anarcha-feminists attempted to insert anarchist analysis into the mainstream feminist movement and convince feminists not to focus on legalistic, state-centered activism. They supported struggles to maintain legal abortion, but they cautioned that the state could not be trusted to maintain the right to abortion, and women must be ready to act on their own terms to maintain their bodily autonomy and self-determination. This meant taking power into their own hands.

As Sunshine Smith remarks, forming self-help medical groups and abortion infrastructure in the Bay Area “has, in very concrete ways, made our struggle against the anti-abortion 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.”

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