

"Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood," new book by Kristin Luker

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The origin, meaning, and likely future of the current debate about abortion in America is the subject of a new book by Dr. Kristin Luker, associate professor of sociology at the University of California, San Diego.

In her book, *Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood* (University of California Press, 1984), Luker discusses why, although both legal and illegal abortions have been performed in this country for more than 150 years, the subject has recently become so controversial.

For most of the prior century and a half, the medical profession had routinely performed abortions in the first trimester of pregnancy in order to save the life of the mother, or in cases of rape, incest, or for other health reasons. But advances in medical science, the advent of birth control, the rise of the feminist movement, and the increasing political power of religious groups as well as the "Right to Life" advocates, have served to make the issue much more ambiguous than it once seemed, according to Luker.

"It turns out that only relatively recently in our history is the claim made that abortion is wrong in all periods of pregnancy," Luker says. "What has happened is that an underlying issue which had never been resolved about abortion suddenly came back into the open. And that issue revolves around the question of whether an embryo is actually a person, or only a potential person."

The 1973 Supreme Court decision which legalized abortion during the first trimester changed the procedure from being strictly a medical decision into a grass roots issue, Luker says.

"And once that happened," she adds, "It pulled into the debate two new groups of women who had vested interests in the outcome because they had different visions of motherhood."

Relatively recent improvements in obstetric and gynecological care diffused the medical argument that abortions were "necessary to save a woman's life," and doctors came into conflict with one another over the morality of doing the procedure.

"In fact," says Luker, "all along physicians had been doing some abortions for reasons other than the safety of the mother, but as long as the argument could be made that some abortions were needed to save lives, few people questioned them."

But once doctors went to legislatures asking for laws to specify under what circumstances abortions were legal, the debate was opened to include non-medical people.

Luker adds that the controversy expanded to include groups of women with widely differing views on the meaning of "motherhood" as well as varying interpretations of when an embryo is actually considered to be "alive."

"There's no disagreement about the facts concerning what goes on during a pregnancy," says Luker. "There's only disagreement about what those facts mean."

Luker, who earned her Ph.D. in sociology from Yale University, drew her data from more than 20 years of public documents and newspaper accounts, as well as more than 200 personal interviews with both "pro-life" and "pro-choice" activists around the country. She is the author of an earlier book, *Abortion and the Decision Not to Contracept* (UC Press, 1975).

For more information contact: Paul Lowenberg, 452-3120

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