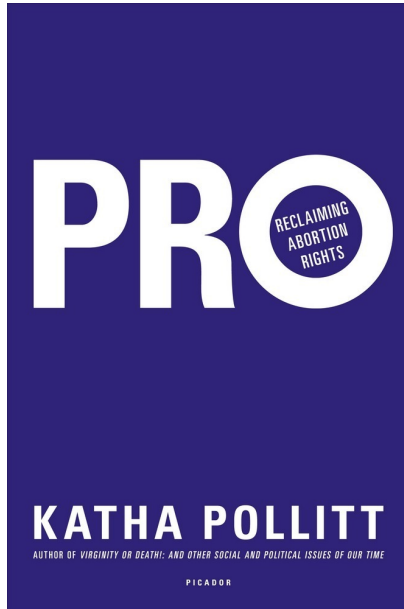


Review: Katha Pollitt, *PRO: Reclaiming Abortion Rights*

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Katha Pollitt, *PRO: Reclaiming Abortion Rights* 2014 Picador \$25.00

The US writer, poet and activist Katha Pollitt in her new book *PRO: Reclaiming Abortion Rights*, has written a powerful polemic appealing for a new generation of activists to reclaim the right to abortion for women living in the United States. Abortion has been legal in the United States since the 1973 landmark decision in the Roe V Wade case by the US Supreme Court.

Pollitt reminds us that legal right to have an abortion, free from criminal persecution and the risk of imprisonment was a transformative event for both the idea and the struggle for women's liberation: 'Legalizing abortion didn't just save women from death and injury and fear of arrest; it didn't just make it possible for women to commit to education and work and free them from shotgun marriages and too many kids. It changed how women saw

themselves; as mothers by choice not by fate.'

Pollitt begins her book by reminding us how throughout history, regardless of time or place the ending a pregnancy is 'a common, even normal, event in the reproductive lives of women'. Anthropologists have shown us that abortion is found in virtually every society and we can find evidence of women deliberately terminating pregnancies that goes as far back as 4,000 years. Abortions happen regardless of the legal status of abortion; in countries like Canada, the Netherlands and Britain, where it is legal and performed by medical practitioners, and in countries like Ireland, where it is illegal and women order abortion pills online and self-abort. In other words, making abortion illegal does not reduce the number of abortions; it reduces, by limiting access, the safety of abortion.

According to the World Health Organisation 20 million of the 42 million abortions performed every year are illegal and unsafe. In every country where abortion is illegal the result is the same: it is young, rural and working-class women who bear the most suffering from illegal abortion. When women do not have safe access to abortion, they still seek abortion but they are forced to try to abort using sharp instruments or unsafe chemicals, or they seek help from people with no medical training. As a result, a woman dies of an unsafe abortion every 10 minutes (about 47 000 women every year).

Over the course of the four decades since abortion was legalized in the US abortion rights have come under sustained political attack and, little by little, the right to abortion been eroded. US anti-

abortion activists have pursued a clever strategy since the late 1980s, early 1990s. After numerous failed attempts to reverse the *Roe v Wade* judgment they shifted tactics and began to focus on limiting access to abortion. Therefore while women living in the US have the theoretical right to have an abortion getting access to abortion, in many states, is a very different story.

In the past four years alone, state legislatures have enacted 231 restrictions on sexual and reproductive health care access. In Texas, over 80 percent of abortion clinics have been shut down in the last two years with only 13 remaining. A report published by the Centre for Reproductive Rights in January 2015 found that 57 percent of women now live in states either hostile (having four or five abortion restrictions) or extremely hostile (having six or more restrictions) to women's abortion rights.

However, the political attacks on abortion rights in the US cannot be understood solely in terms of attacks by the political right. The women's movement also began to shift politically during the 1980s and 1990s moving away from social and political activism and focusing instead on lobbying Democratic politicians and seeking alliances with the US State. Abortion and motherhood became re-conceived as the

private choice of each individual woman, not a public issue. Today women living in the US are encouraged to lay claim to their reproductive choices as consumers not citizens.

That is why, Pollitt, concludes the movement needs to shift tactics and defend, openly, proudly and without apology the right for women to have abortions. She writes: '[W]e need to talk about it [abortion] differently. Not as something we all agree is a bad thing about which we shake our heads sadly and then debate its precise degree of badness, preening ourselves on our judiciousness and moral seriousness as we argue about this or that restriction on this or that kind of woman.'

Irish activists have much to learn from Pollitt's powerful book; indeed I would go so far as to insist that it is essential reading for every activist. As Irish activists embark on a new campaign to repeal the eight amendment and legalize abortion in Ireland, there are many lessons that we can take from the experience of US activists. Not least of these is the need to organize and to build a movement independent of mainstream political parties and legal experts and, instead root ourselves in communities, trade unions and activists, to fight for free, safe and legal abortion for all women living in Ireland, North and South.