Joy Macready reviews Katha Pollitt, Pro: Reclaiming Abortion Rights, Picador, 2014, pp258, $25

?We need to talk about ending a pregnancy as a common, even normal, event in the reproductive lives of women?We need to see abortion as an urgent practical decision that is just as moral as the decision to have another child ? indeed sometimes even more moral.?

Finally, someone has had the courage to reject the almost universal depiction of abortion as a tragedy for every single woman at any given point in her life. For many women, ending a pregnancy can be akin to a life-saving act, one of self-preservation. But it is also so much more than that.

As Katha Pollitt writes, ?Legal abortion presents the issue of women?s emancipation in particularly stark form. It takes a woman?s body out of the public realm and puts her, not men and not children, at the centre of her own life.?

Through her book, Pro: Reclaiming Abortion Rights, Pollitt attempts to reframe the debate around abortion, rejecting the commonly held view that it 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.?

Abortions happen whether they are legal, performed by medical professionals and covered by national health care insurance, or illegal, performed in dirty clinics or dangerous back streets.

Millions of women worldwide are forced to break the law to end a pregnancy. Just recently the body of a young Brazilian woman, Jandyra Magdalena, was found mutilated beyond recognition the day after she went for an abortion, a ghastly reminder of the life-threatening risks women take to end a pregnancy.

From the very beginning of the book, Pollitt goes to the heart of the material need for abortions, exposing the scarcity of resources for single mothers and even two-parent families, and the contradictory pressures on young women to be simultaneously sexually alluring and withholding ? ?hot virgins?.

Her main argument is that abortion needs to be a normal part of healthcare for women, not just in a biological and physical context but also a social context. As she explains,

??access to legal abortion is a good thing for society and helping a woman obtain one is a good deed. Instead of shaming women for ending a pregnancy, we should acknowledge their realism and self-knowledge?Society benefits when women can commit to education and work and dreams without having at the back of their mind a concern that maybe it?s all provisional, because at any money an accidental pregnancy could derail them for life. It?s good for people to have sexual experiences and not fear birth control failure.?

Pollitt rightly challenges the ?awfulisation of abortion?, where even pro-choicers use negative language: sad, tragic, thorny, vexed, complex, difficult, etc. There is a general acceptance that abortion is a terrible tragedy and no woman could do it with a clear conscience.

Ending a pregnancy needs to be seen as a choice like all other choices in our lives, she argues. ??it can at times be
difficult but for many women, but abortion is an incredibly good thing and allows them to go on to lead productive lives, instead of being chained to the home.?

She calls for free abortion on demand, arguing that it is central to women?s emancipation to have control over their own fertility, when and if to have a family. ?Without this right, it?s as if motherhood is the default setting for every woman from first period to menopause, and needs to say yes to every zygote that knocks on her door.? She also demands better sex education and birth control.

US reactionary tide

As an American feminist, Pollitt writes predominantly about the situation in the US, which recently saw the Republicans (now in control of both the House and Senate) drop its most recent attempt to ban abortions after 20 weeks, instead settling for permanently banning federal money from going to pay for abortions on the 42nd anniversary of Roe versus Wade.

Even the 1973 landmark decision by the US Supreme Court gave women the right to abort only until viability. The decision effectively gave a foetus limited rights around the time of viability, or 24 weeks. However, what it did give American women was a choice.

As Pollitt says, ?Legalising abortion doesn?t just save women from death and injury and fear of arrest, and 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 fate.? Today, the reactionary anti-abortionist movement is gaining ground in the US, led by the Republicans and the religious right. Between 2011 and 2013 US states enacted 205 new restrictions on abortion availability.

This includes waiting periods ? counselling and 24 hour ?cooling down? periods; inaccurate scripts that doctors must read to patients, i.e. abortion causes breast cancer, mental illness suicide; bans on state Medicaid payments; restrictions on insurance cover; and parental notification and consent laws.

At least 73 clinics have closed down or stopped performing abortions during the same period.

Working class and poor women are the most affected by these new limitations to abortion, which means that clinics are too far away, too expensive, too encumbered by restrictions, regulations and humiliations.

As of May 2014, 23 states had passed laws regulating ultrasound scans before abortion; three states require that it must be shown to the pregnant woman, while others must offer to show it. Many state legislatures have tabled ?personhood amendments? to state constitutions, which proposed that the terms ?people? and ?person? should apply to every human being ?at any state of development? ? but these have failed at the ballot box.

Last summer, the Supreme Court exempted the Hobby Lobby crafts store chain from providing IUDs and certain emergency contraception under insurance cover under Obamacare because the CEO believes they are ?abortifacients? which infringes his religious beliefs. So a boss has more rights and control over a woman?s body and her fertility than she does.

Abortion is a class issue

Pollitt argues that denying women the right to end a pregnancy is effectively opposing women?s independence and full participation in society. Reproductive rights are an economic issue, she says, and without the ability to limit and time their pregnancies, women will always be disadvantaged at work and subordinate to men.

A man who accidentally impregnates a woman isn?t forced to drop everything; he isn?t expelled from school, shamed for being promiscuous, and forced to accept a life of difficulties and dimmed hopes in order to co-parent.
Rightly, Pollitt identifies that the origin of women’s oppression lies in the home. She exposes how the whole world runs on women’s unpaid or grossly underpaid labour. When that work is an extension of female domestic roles – caring for children or elderly, preparing food, cleaning houses – it is ill paid, low skilled and low status, she writes. And yet, if women rejected labour within the family, society would have to pay enormous sums to replace it.

But she doesn’t make the link to the overarching economic system in which social norms are constructed. Capitalism is based on private property and the appropriation by the capitalist class of surplus value produced by workers. As soon as human society developed to where a surplus was created, i.e. more means of subsistence than were required for immediate consumption, someone had to control the surplus, marking the origin of class society. Private property underpins women’s subordination in that it is essential to ensure to pass on the surplus (wealth) to legitimate heirs. Therefore women’s fertility and sexuality has to be tightly controlled within the patriarchal monogamous family structure.

Industrial capitalism, which revolutionised the nature of human production, maintained the family structure and women’s private role in the home, providing free labour to reproduce the next generation of workers and labour power. Hence it is only through the overthrow of capitalism and the class system that women will truly be liberated. However, without a class analysis, Pollitt’s answer is solely to build a stronger pro-choice movement through feminist, pro-choice and reproductive justice organisations, coupled with community activism. She reports a pushback on the legislative front, with 51 pieces of pro-choice legislation passed in 14 states in 2014.

But without a political alternative to capitalism, this is destined to be a labour of Sisyphus – with the pro-choice movement making some gains that are then rolled back as the reactionary right recovers power in an age of austerity.

Therefore, in line with theme of Pollitt’s book, we have to reframe the debate around what our society should look like. We need to create a society based on need, not greed; where women will have equal access to jobs and education, housing and healthcare, and the ability to decide whether or not to have children based on their desires, not under economic or societal pressure. Consequently our aim should be the overthrow of capitalism and replace it with a socialist system.

For that to happen, we need working class organisations to take up the fight for women’s liberation and for the liberation of the working class as a whole against the exploitative capitalist class.

The weakness in Pollitt’s argument, even though she talks about poor, working class and women of colour, she doesn’t mention self-organisation along class lines. She doesn’t argue for the trade union movement to take up such a vital issue for their members – both women and men – and to take strike action to force Hobby Lobby’s CEO to back down, instead of letting a bourgeois court decide the fate of women workers.

In order to effect change, we need build a working class women’s movement that fights together hand-in-hand with working class men, and together we can truly challenge women’s oppression in all spheres of our lives and smash the system of oppression that keeps all of humanity under its tyranny.

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