

PALGRAVE STUDIES IN THE
HISTORY OF SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Series Editors: Stefan Berger
and Holger Nehring

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**THE RIGHT-TO-LIFE
MOVEMENT,
THE REAGAN
ADMINISTRATION,
AND THE POLITICS
OF ABORTION**

Prudence Flowers



Palgrave Studies in the History of Social Movements

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Around the world, social movements have become legitimate, yet contested, actors in local, national and global politics and civil society, yet we still know relatively little about their longer histories and the trajectories of their development. This series seeks to promote innovative historical research on the history of social movements in the modern period since around 1750. We bring together conceptually-informed studies that analyse labour movements, new social movements and other forms of protest from early modernity to the present. We conceive of 'social movements' in the broadest possible sense, encompassing social formations that lie between formal organisations and mere protest events. We also offer a home for studies that systematically explore the political, social, economic and cultural conditions in which social movements can emerge. We are especially interested in transnational and global perspectives on the history of social movements, and in studies that engage critically and creatively with political, social and sociological theories in order to make historically grounded arguments about social movements. This new series seeks to offer innovative historical work on social movements, while also helping to historicise the concept of 'social movement'. It hopes to revitalise the conversation between historians and historical sociologists in analysing what Charles Tilly has called the 'dynamics of contention'.

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SERIES EDITORS' PREFACE

Around the world, social movements have become legitimate, yet contested, actors in local, national, and global politics and civil society, yet we still know relatively little about their longer histories and the trajectories of their development. Our series reacts to what can be described as a recent boom in the history of social movements. We can observe a development from the crisis of labor history in the 1980s to the boom in research on social movements in the 2000s. The rise of historical interests in the development of civil society and the role of strong civil societies as well as nongovernmental organizations in stabilizing democratically constituted polities has strengthened the interest in social movements as a constituent element of civil societies.

In different parts of the world, social movements continue to have a strong influence on contemporary politics. In Latin America, trade unions, labor parties, and various left-of-center civil society organizations have succeeded in supporting left-of-center governments. In Europe, peace movements, ecological movements, and alliances intent on campaigning against poverty and racial discrimination and discrimination on the basis of gender and sexual orientation have been able to set important political agendas for decades. In other parts of the world, including Africa, India, and South East Asia, social movements have played a significant role in various forms of community building and community politics. The contemporary political relevance of social movements has undoubtedly contributed to a growing historical interest in the topic.

Contemporary historians are not only beginning to historicize these relatively recent political developments; they are also trying to relate them to a longer history of social movements, including traditional labor organizations, such as working-class parties and trade unions. In the *longue durée*, we recognize that social movements are by no means a recent phenomenon and are not even an exclusively modern phenomenon, although we realize that the onset of modernity emanating from Europe and North America across the wider world from the eighteenth century onwards marks an important departure point for the development of civil societies and social movements.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the dominance of national history over all other forms of history writing led to a thorough nationalization of the historical sciences. Hence social movements have been examined traditionally within the framework of the nation-state. Only during the last two decades have historians begun to question the validity of such methodological nationalism and to explore the development of social movements in comparative, connective, and transnational perspective taking into account processes of transfer, reception, and adaptation. Whilst our book series does not preclude work that is still being carried out within national frameworks (for, clearly, there is a place for such studies, given the historical importance of the nation-state in history), it hopes to encourage comparative and transnational histories on social movements.

At the same time as historians have begun to research the history of those movements, a range of social theorists, from Jürgen Habermas to Pierre Bourdieu and from Slavoj Žižek to Alain Badiou as well as Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe to Miguel Abensour, to name but a few, have attempted to provide philosophical-cum-theoretical frameworks in which to place and contextualize the development of social movements. History has arguably been the most empirical of all the social and human sciences, but it will be necessary for historians to explore further to what extent these social theories can be helpful in guiding and framing the empirical work of the historian in making sense of the historical development of social movements. Hence the current series is also hoping to make a contribution to the ongoing dialogue between social theory and the history of social movements.

This series seeks to promote innovative historical research on the history of social movements in the modern period since around 1750. We bring together conceptually informed studies that analyze labor

movements, new social movements, and other forms of protest from early modernity to the present. With this series, we seek to revive, within the context of historiographical developments since the 1970s, a conversation between historians on the one hand and sociologists, anthropologists, and political scientists on the other.

Unlike most of the concepts and theories developed by social scientists, we do not see social movements as directly linked, a priori, to processes of social and cultural change and therefore do not adhere to a view that distinguishes between old (labor) and new (middle-class) social movements. Instead, we want to establish the concept "social movement" as a heuristic device that allows historians of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to investigate social and political protests in novel settings. Our aim is to historicize notions of social and political activism in order to highlight different notions of political and social protest on both left and right.

Hence, we conceive of "social movements" in the broadest possible sense, encompassing social formations that lie between formal organizations and mere protest events. But we also include processes of social and cultural change more generally in our understanding of social movements: this goes back to nineteenth-century understandings of "social movement" as processes of social and cultural change more generally. We also offer a home for studies that systematically explore the political, social, economic, and cultural conditions in which social movements can emerge. We are especially interested in transnational and global perspectives on the history of social movements, and in studies that engage critically and creatively with political, social, and sociological theories in order to make historically grounded arguments about social movements. In short, this series seeks to offer innovative historical work on social movements, while also helping to historicize the concept of "social movement." It also hopes to revitalize the conversation between historians and historical sociologists in analyzing what Charles Tilly has called the "dynamics of contention."

The Right-to-Life Movement, the Reagan Administration, and the Politics of Abortion is an important study of one of the most important global social movements of the last decades, the Right-to-Life Movement. It is difficult to classify on a left-right spectrum, as it is essentially concerned with ethical and moral issues that evade a straightforward left-right division. Nevertheless, it has been drawn into such divisions, as women's liberation has been associated so much with the

right of women to have an abortion and a left-of-center political agenda. Hence the “pro-lifers” were often associated, in the United States and elsewhere, with the political right, influenced by powerful Christian and other religious beliefs. Prudence’s book assesses the pro-life movement during the Reagan years in the United States by tracing its movement from high hopes at the beginning of the Reagan presidency to almost complete disillusionment and internal strife at the end of Reagan’s terms of office.

Based on an impressive amount of primary research in eight major libraries and archives across the United States, Prudence Flowers seeks to answer a variety of different questions, ranging from the question how divided the right-to-life movement in the United States was via the question to what extent it can be classified as a moral crusade to the question of how successful it has been in the United States in reorienting the debate surrounding abortion.

She delivers a lucid contextualizing history of the US movement to end abortion before discussing in detail the opposition of pro-lifers to the appointment of Sandra Day O’Connor to the Supreme Court. Subsequently, she highlights the divisions among pro-lifers using the example of the Helms/Hatch struggle over legislation to ban abortion in the United States. In both cases, the movement failed, among much internal infighting, to generate political decisions that would foster their agenda. Defeat led to a reorientation of strategies and policy goals would eventually result in what many class as the most important success of the pro-life movement in the 1980s, the 1984 Mexico City policy that led to a defunding of organizations advocating population control.

Yet the Reagan legacy was often more rhetoric than reality, as shown by the impact of some of the key alleged pro-life decisions made by Reagan in 1987. New regulations for domestic family planning grants, the President’s Pro-Life Bill, and the nomination of archconservative Robert Bork to the Supreme Court all were more symbolic than real victories for the pro-life movement. While the Reagan years are hailed by the pro-life movement until this very day as somehow golden years for the movement, Flowers can show clearly that those years were incredibly divisive for the movement. The 1980s were a decade of symbolic victories and practical defeats for the movement. Reagan was the first in a succession of Republican presidents that talked the talk but did not necessarily walk the walk of the pro-lifers who in turn had to

adopt very pragmatic and piece-meal strategies to ensure their final goal. Unfortunately, the book also provides ample evidence that these strategies have led to important successes, especially at state level during the 2010s, when, ironically, a Democratic president ruled in the White House.

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CONTENTS

1	Introduction	1
	<i>Chapters</i>	4
	<i>A United Movement?</i>	5
	<i>A Moral Crusade?</i>	6
	<i>A Politically Successful Movement?</i>	8
2	A Brief History of the National Movement to End Abortion	15
	<i>An Institutional History</i>	16
	<i>Ronald Reagan and Abortion Politics</i>	25
	<i>Partisan Shifts</i>	28
	<i>The Pro-life Movement in the Reagan Years</i>	32
	<i>Perception and Reality</i>	33
3	“A Prolife Disaster”: The Sandra Day O’Connor Nomination	41
	<i>A Series of Promises</i>	42
	<i>Choosing a Nominee</i>	44
	<i>Sandra Day O’Connor: Pro-abortion, Pro-ERA, Anti-family?</i>	45
	<i>Divisions Among Conservatives</i>	48
	<i>Opposing the Nomination</i>	52
	<i>The Senate Votes</i>	54
	<i>Insights</i>	56

4	“A Movement in Disarray”: The Hatch/Helms Fight	63
	<i>Abortion and the Legislative Branch</i>	65
	<i>The Human Life Bill and the Human Life Federalism</i>	
	<i>Amendment</i>	67
	<i>The Movement Divides</i>	70
	<i>The Catholic Church</i>	71
	<i>“Name-Calling, Backbiting, Threats, and Scurrilous</i>	
	<i>Behind-the-Scenes Intrigue”</i>	73
	<i>Republican Priorities</i>	75
	<i>Abortion in the Senate</i>	79
	<i>Aftermath</i>	81
5	“Voodoo Demographics”: The Right-to-Life Movement	
	Confronts the Population Establishment	89
	<i>Pro-lifers and Population Aid</i>	90
	<i>The One-Child Policy</i>	93
	<i>An Expedient New Policy</i>	96
	<i>The Mexico City Conference and the 1984 Election</i>	99
	<i>Defunding the Population Establishment</i>	102
	<i>Monitoring AID</i>	103
	<i>Exporting the Abortion War</i>	106
6	Cultivating Reagan’s Abortion Legacy: His Last Years	
	in Office	113
	<i>In the Doldrums</i>	115
	<i>The President’s Pro-life Bill</i>	118
	<i>Rewriting Title X</i>	121
	<i>The Nomination of Robert Bork</i>	125
	<i>A Pro-life Legacy</i>	130
7	The Lessons of the Reagan Years	137
	Index	153

ABBREVIATIONS

ACCL	American Citizens Concerned for Life
AHCDL	Ad Hoc Committee in Defense of Life
AID	Agency for International Development
ALL	American Life League/American Life Lobby
AUL	Americans United for Life
CAC	Christian Action Committee
CC	Conservative Caucus
CV	Christian Voice
CWA	Concerned Women for America
EF	Eagle Forum
FotF	Focus on the Family
HHS	Department of Health and Human Services
HLI	Human Life International
IPPF	International Planned Parenthood Federation
IWYC	International Women's Year Conference
LAPAC	Life Amendment Political Action Committee
LC	Library Court
MCCL	Minnesota Citizens Concerned for Life
MM	Moral Majority
NAE	National Association of Evangelicals
NCCB	National Conference of Catholic Bishops
NCHLA	National Committee for a Human Life Amendment
NOW	National Organization for Women
NPFC	National Pro-Family Coalition
NPLPAC	National Pro-Life Political Action Committee
NRLC	National Right to Life Committee

NRLPAC	National Right to Life Political Action Committee
NWPC	National Women's Political Caucus
OR	Operation Rescue
PF	Pathfinder Fund
PP	Planned Parenthood Federation of America
PLAL	Pro-Life Action League
PPLF	Pennsylvania Pro-Life Federation
RR	Religious Roundtable
SBC	Southern Baptist Convention
UN	United Nations
UNFPA	United Nations Fund for Population Activities
USCC	United States Catholic Conference
USCL	United States Coalition for Life



CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Abstract This book offers a political, ideological, and social history of the national right-to-life movement under President Ronald Reagan. It explores anti-abortion activism and engagement with the legislative, judicial, and executive branches, and offers what is frequently a narrative of disappointment and factionalism. It is driven by a desire to understand why most of the movement against abortion stayed loyal to the Republican Party in the 1980s and beyond. This chapter outlines the empirical basis for the analysis, the core concerns and historiographical interventions, and summarizes the rest of the chapters. It ends by exploring questions of unity, morality, and success, three themes that link the specific case studies and raise insights into activism, social movement formation, religion, and politics.

Keywords History · Abortion · Social movements · Religion · Politics · Ronald Reagan

In 1987, near the end of the conservative presidency of Republican Ronald Reagan, Nellie Gray and Paul Brown, two prominent figures in the national pro-life movement, publicly excoriated Reagan for his lack of leadership on abortion.¹ Gray, the founder and president of March for Life (MfL), had spent years railing against the use of local funds to provide abortions for low-income women in Washington, DC.

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