Abolition, Abortion, and the Case for Personhood

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Abstract

This research explores the similarities between the 19th century abolition movement and the 21st century pro-life movement. In both situations, activists fought against legal decisions and public sentiment that modified discrimination based on bigotry, be it that of the racism of skin-color or the dependency of physical development.

Scott Klusendorf (2009), a pro-life advocate and author, said, "In the past, we used to discriminate on the basis of skin color, but now with elective abortion, we discriminate on the basis of size, level of development, location, and degree of dependency. We've simply swapped one form of bigotry for another. (pg. 66)"

In court cases animating each movement, the US Supreme Court ruled that the slave and the fetus, respectively, were not people guaranteed rights. Generally, the public believed either:
- Slavery/Abortion was wrong.
- Slavery/Abortion was not wrong.
- Slavery/Abortion was wrong but individuals can choose for themselves.

However, Christian morality motivated both groups of social activists, and attempted to change public opinion to reflect their moral perspective. Activists in both movements used similar tactics to argue for their causes, including use of popular media, rebellion, and, in some instances, violence.

Legality

Abolition

Supreme Court Decisions

Dred Scott v Sanford – 1857

• It is the court's duty to determine whether the plaintiff is a citizen of the United States. Chief Justice Taney in the Majority Opinion

The denial of personhood was critical in both cases, because they had been people, they would have had undeniable rights.

Abolition

Pro-Life

Confronting Public Sentiment

Public sentiment on these issues takes on three different forms. Generally, people either believe that the issue is morally wrong, that it is not wrong, or that it is wrong, but individuals can choose for themselves. Abolitionists and pro-life activists used different tactics to attempt to change public sentiment and, through doing so, change the law.

Songs

Abolitionists and pro-life activists both use songs as media tactics. Abolition songs were mostly sung by slaves, but some were also sung by abolitionists, mainly in the north. Pro-life songs are sung by a variety of bands ranging in genre from contemporary Christian to death metal. These songs tended to have two messages; they either tell of the horrors of the slave trade and abortion process, or attempt to show the slave and the fetus as people.

These songs included:

Abolition:

- "Am I Not a Man and Brother?"
• "I am not a man and brother! / Ought I not to be free? / Sell me not to one another. / Take not thus my liberty! / ... Christ our Saviour! / Died for me as well as thee!"
- "1848 Song of the Coffee Gang"
- "Wives and husbands sold apart. / The children's screams! - It breaks my heart; / O, gracious Lord! when shall it be? / That we should poor souls shall all be free?"
- "1848"

Pro-Life:

While You Were Sleeping

- "United States of America / Looks like another silent night. / As we are sung to sleep by philosophies / That save the trees and kill the children"
- "Roe v. Wade opinion"
- Silent Screams
- "Beaten and torn / Sacrifice the unborn. / ... Pain, suffrage toyed / Life's little fragments destroyed" / Slay, 1988

Christian Morality

Both movements argue:

- The immorality of slavery/abortion
- The hypocrisy in slavery/abortion
- Slaves/fetuses are protected in some instances but not in others.
- Both slaves and fetuses feel pain
- Both slaves and fetuses are people, not property and are part of family units

Christian morality grounded the actions of both abolitionists and pro-life activists.

Limiting States’ Rights

- "The class of person who had been imported as slaves... were [not] then acknowledged as part of the people... were an inferior order... all together unfit to associate with the white race, and were therefrom unable to be slaves.
- Chief Justice Taney, Dred Scott v Sanford majority opinion

The Supreme Court made decisions it had no authority to make. Slavery and abortion are not rights for the federal government to decide on based on the constitution and are therefore the rights of states, and both decisions undermined the states’ authority.

Images

Activists also attempted to get people to see the slave and the fetus as people.

- The sketch on the left (n.d.) attempts to show the humanity of Negroes by showing a bound man with scars saying, "am I not a man and brother?"
- The image on the right (n.d.) attempts to say that size does not matter, but that life begins at conception.

Activists confronted the devaluing of humans based on parentage. In each situation, the circumstances around which the human is born determines their validity as people in society's view.

- In the first image (n.d.), the sketch artist revealed that slave owners often took the children of slaves to sell them, and that the children's parents mourned for them.
- In the last image (2013), the creator brings to light that children conceived in unplanned ways are no less deserving of the status of “human” or “person” than others.

In many states, the rights of slaves were so dependent on the whims of their master, and the enforcement of the law was dependent on the integrity of single judges. The right to be a human was determined by the court, and the king had no right to determine the properties of people. The King of Spain and the Governor of Pennsylvania could not be king of our life. The people were sovereign, and where sovereignty was divided, the people were sovereign.

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