From Social Justice to Social Conflict: Reframing Abortion Access in the United States

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From Social Justice to Social Conflict:
Reframing Abortion Access in the United States

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Swarthmore College
Peace and Conflict Studies Senior Honors Thesis
Advised by Professor Michael Wilson-Becerril
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Abstract:

In our social world, the way we talk about things matters. Our construction of the social factors that influence us affects how we perceive them and what we can do about them. The United States fosters intense domestic hostility and hatred, often manifest through problems considered “social justice issues.” A liberal framing of “social justice” related to individual injustice negatively affects how we think about resolving these conflicts. Using reproductive justice in the United States as a case study, my thesis argues for reframing “social justice” as “social conflict.” While “social justice” and “social conflict” need not be mutually exclusive, the reframing offers new possibilities for resolution.

A Note on Timing:

Much of this work was researched and completed in the midst of—as of May 2024—an ongoing genocide in Palestine. Scholarship in Peace and Conflict Studies is remiss without acknowledging the significant crimes of the Israeli government and military against Palestinian civilians. Every university in Gaza has been razed. I find it necessary to recognize that my contribution to the literature happens in the context of the murder and martyrdom of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians. May peace prevail for those who pursue justice.
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“Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced”
(James Baldwin, 1962)

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Introduction: I am a PeaceBuilder

I spent every summer as a child at Peace Camp. My mom would shuttle me and my sisters off to a church basement, and we would start the day by reciting the PeaceBuilding Pledge:

I am a PeaceBuilder. I pledge
to talk to others with respect,
to treat people with care,
and to make peace,
not break peace,
to build peace
at home, at school, and in my family
each day.¹

Peace Camp was generally divorced from my real world—we would learn the language of making peace and breaking peace and sing songs about how hands are for loving and would then proceed to provoke each other in the car on the way home. Peace, in my childhood, was a happy, kind of vague concept, related to figures like Martin Luther King Jr. and Mother Teresa, who were “perfect” figures and had brought kindness to the world. Peace was something that had already happened and could happen again when we had a spat at camp, but only really when we were at camp.

The connection between Peace Camp and my high school activism would not appear until both had ended. I was a social-justice-oriented teenager, starting a Pax Christi club at my all-girls Catholic high school and attending every large protest march that came to my hometown of Washington, DC. Social justice and peace were two sides of the same coin—representative of the good and just action one can take in the world, vaguely religious, and something I cared about but that people did not talk about as much as academics or sports.

¹ There are quite a few versions of the Pledge online, but I cannot find a citable source for the particular one I have memorized; credit to MJ Park.
When I got to college in the first year of a pandemic, the first class I signed up for was Introduction to Peace and Conflict Studies. Though virtual, I was excited about a course description reminiscent of the questions I had been asking in high school: Why is there still conflict? Why do people not just talk to each other? How could Trump have possibly gotten elected and why is he still in the running for reelection? Why is there still speculation about how serious climate change is? Why does everything feel... bad?

Peace Camp had shied away from conflict—the focus was on peace as the right and happy and worthwhile tool. The non-mention of conflict is reminiscent of conflict in the general American lexicon:

I often meet with students and ask them to think about their definition of conflict. They come up with a list of words they feel are synonyms for conflict. Usually, the words are negative: violence, hatred, fear, war, injustice, and anger. I think it reminds them that these words reflect how conflict is represented in the news media and in popular culture: conflict is bad, and something we want to avoid.2

Political socialization in the United States orients toward conflict as “bad” or a threat. Conflict scholar Danya Rumore finds that “we”3 see the world through a scarcity lens, feeling that there are not enough resources to share and that there must be winners and losers. Fear and vulnerability put the neurological system on guard, effectively scaring us into thinking that since whatever threat we have perceived must be bad enough to warrant such a response, conflict must be unwelcome and wrong.4 Rumore’s blog post is surface-level (other conflict scholars have come up with more detailed and theoretical answers) but provides a broad explanation about why we—Americans? Humans?—are socialized to see conflict as bad.

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3 This article was published in the University of Utah’s College of Law blog. The “we” is unspecified, so I left it in quotation marks.
4 Danya Rumore, “The problem with conflict is that we see conflict as a problem,” last modified February 1, 2023, https://www.law.utah.edu/news-articles/the-problem-with-conflict-is-that-we-see-conflict-as-a-problem/.
The good news (or maybe bad news) is that conflict is normal in everyday life. Human social relationships cannot and do not exist without conflict. Conflict allows differences to come to light to the extent that “the absence of conflict usually signals the absence of meaningful interaction.”

Conflict, on its own, is neither good nor bad, though how we approach it can make it constructive or destructive (or both!). Conflict is not limited to the interpersonal—inequalities and injustices we see in contemporary society are conflicts.

That first college class had a chapter assigned that called for the discipline to pay attention to the “war at home.” Similar to how conflict is bad, conflict also happens “somewhere else.” The American Peace Movement is often associated with nuclear disarmament, which concerns someone “over there.” We do not, in general conversation, have conflict here. The reluctance to bring Peace and Conflict Studies—and conflict itself—to the United States is limiting. How we talk about things matters for how much we decide it relates to us. The language and framing of issues determine their relevance to our individual lives and actions and how much we think we have a stake and a duty to do something about it. Social constructionism, a fundamental concept of the social science canon, suggests that we construct meaning based on our contexts. If the context does not demand action or significant attention, we construct meaning differently than we would if the context asked something different.

In the United States, we do not call conflict what it is. We are scared of conflict, we think it is bad, and so we must not have it—and if we do have it, it is not conflict. What we have, in the U.S., are “social justice issues.” Social justice issues are instances in society when there is some individual injustice: racism, sexism, and classism are all perceived as individual problems.

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6 Momo Chang, “Where’s the Color in the Anti-War Movement? Organizers Connect the War Abroad to the War at Home” in We Have Not Been Moved: Resisting Racism and Militarism in 21st Century America, eds. Elizabeth Betita Martinez, Mandy Carter, and Matt Meyer (PM Press, 2012), 443.
instead of systemic issues. Social justice issue connotes something very different than conflict—social justice, using the language of in/justice suggests that something caused inequality and there can be a personal remedy. The term is actionable and exceptional—social justice issues are not inevitable but moral because they suggest positive movement toward exemplary concepts (like justice). While social justice and conflict can exist in the same realm—calling something a conflict does not remove it from being a matter of social injustice—the choice to paint conflict as “bad” as opposed to the “good” cause of social justice affects public perception and reception of problems.

I use a definition of “social justice” specific to its occurrence in a neoliberal state that prioritizes personal liberty in the interest of economic growth and prosperity. Liberal social justice is about the effect of injustice on the individual within the state, a framing with severe shortcomings in dealing with injustice. Characterization of liberal social justice relies on individual, nondisruptive ways to deal with the issue. Liberal social justice, as a function within the state, connotes specific senses of morality and acceptability, affecting the context in which we think about dealing with injustice. Because Martin Luther King Jr. gave a speech that “solved racism,” speeches must be an effective way to deal with injustice.7 The methods that liberal social justice creates ask us to work within a larger system (one that often engineered that injustice).

Liberal social justice in the United States is framed as a really good thing. It appears on trendy website blogs like “5 Current Social Justice Issues and How You Can Help,” (the issues in question include racism, poverty, and bodily autonomy) and accompanies media you can

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consume to help solve the problem. Liberal social justice becomes a nonurgent, trendy thing you can do and be aware of, which opens the door for commodification, dilution of the issue, and then poaching by opponents. Social justice becomes popular as something you can speak about but not actually have to act on. When we construct an issue as “social justice,” we leave out necessary dynamics that affect the tenor of the conflict.

The following thesis will first introduce you to these definitions and flaws of social justice. Chapter 1 sets up social constructionism and framing theory to argue that social justice is the current (and insufficient) framing of conflict in the United States. Defining both justice and social justice, Chapter 1 goes through the trouble with liberal social justice: the primacy of capital accumulation, the inattention to race, the depletion of meaning through trendiness, the over-commodification, and then the language appropriation. Chapter 1 concludes that social justice is not enough.

Chapter 2 introduces a case study about abortion access in the United States. Abortion has been framed and constructed as a social justice issue based on unequal in/access to reproductive health services. Abortion often falls into contemporary and popular lists as a pressing social justice issue. Looking through the history and construction, however, revealed that it is not really an issue of injustice. Abortion was made socially relevant through political power moves, evangelical spinning, and long-standing beliefs about how women and mothers should act. Social justice is ineffective in talking about abortion—the elevation of abortion requires it to be considered a conflict because it cannot be transformed or de-escalated otherwise. Social justice language limits the argument. “Injustice” is ultimately only a small piece of the abortion debate as it sits alongside power, identity politics, and religion. “Social justice” prevents

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meaningful engagement with the problem. Chapter 2 goes through a chronological account of the construction of womanhood and the elevation of abortion in contemporary U.S. political thought and experience.

Chapter 3 uses Louis Kreisberg’s definition of a social conflict to advocate a new way we might think about conflict in the United States. A social conflict is a relationship in which “two or more persons or groups manifest the belief that they have incompatible objectives.” Each of the “social justice issues” the website blogs address involves multiple actors, disagreements, and methods. Using the literature of conflict allows for a discussion of power imbalance and violence where liberal “social justice” often does not. Reframing how we think about conflict can help shift the social and normative licenses of the problem. While “social justice” is not mutually exclusive from a framing of conflict, the framing as a social justice issue directly leads to incapacity to act. Chapter 3 breaks down the concerns of the abortion pro-life/pro-choice binary to find that the binary is both severely limiting and also does not encompass many (if not most) of the thinking of everyday Americans.

Chapter 3 then proposes that reframing can open up more full use of the Peace and Conflict Studies scholarship. Social justice practitioners tend not to tap into extensive research on conflict transformation. Peace and Conflict studies canon occasionally refers to these “issues” as conflicts, but they are not in the common vernacular and thus not yet connected. However, language plays an active role in how we conceive conflict. The scholarship has yet to be bridged toward actual reframing. Reframing also means that something can be both (or neither)—these issues all involve conflict, but saying something is a conflict should not affect the morality or justness of a cause. It just changes how we think about it and what we can do.

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I am still a PeaceBuilder. But in order to make peace, not break peace, I need to recognize what gets in the way of peace. Peace and conflict are inextricable, and that becomes important to mention. My pledge does require conflict.
Chapter 1: Framing Theory and Social Justice

What’s in a name? William Shakespeare, on behalf of his characters Romeo and Juliet, wrote in the 16th century that “a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.”\textsuperscript{11} Said in the context of forbidden lovers, Romeo’s family name does not affect what he means to Juliet. Other literary characters disagree—Lucy Maud Montgomery’s Anne (of Green Gables) has “never been able to believe” Juliet’s claim. Anne steadfastly maintains: “I don’t believe a rose \textit{would} be as nice if it was called a thistle or a skunk cabbage.”\textsuperscript{12}

Anne’s point—that the words we use matter—aligns with theories of rhetoric and discourse. The language used to describe concepts affects how we think about them and the role they play in our lives. Exploring this framing and rhetoric can be very useful, particularly in conflict resolution. The way we think and talk about conflict affects what we think will be possible for resolving them. And the reverse is also true: the way we do \textit{not} think and talk about conflict limits what we consider possible for resolution.

Peace and Conflict Studies (PCS) theory considers conflict a normal part of human relationships as it involves clashing goals between multiple parties, from the individual to the interstate level.\textsuperscript{13} In the United States, conflicts over national and individual values and interests are often constructed as “social justice issues.” Even though these grievances are widespread, harmful, and polarizing, they are not traditionally considered “conflicts.” Often created by state apparatuses, the framing as “social justice concerns” reduces the options possible to resolve them. “Social justice” repertoires can include approaches like marching in the streets, lobbying in Congress, advocating voter registration, and consuming books and other educational materials.

\textsuperscript{12} Lucy Maud Montgomery, \textit{Anne of Green Gables} (S.l: The Floating Press, 2009), 67.
\textsuperscript{13} Ron Fisher, “Sources of Conflict,” 1.
Additional possibilities beyond these actions are more difficult to achieve without reframing how we think. Naming “conflict” in the United States would open new options for resolving deeply-held grievances. John Paul Lederach’s theory of the moral imagination—the transcendence of violent conflict through practicing relationship building, paradoxical curiosity, and creativity—suggests that to resolve violence, we must more thoroughly name and understand violence.14 Defining domestic conflicts as “social justice issues” limits how they are understood, and a redefinition into the scholarship of PCS would allow the use of new tools (like the moral imagination).

Grounding my argument in framing theory, I will think through how social movements are constructed by organizers and perceived by their targets. I will then consider different definitions of “justice” and “social justice.” I use “social justice” to refer specifically to a liberal conception that relies on individual rights. To argue that “social justice” is an example of framing that limits the change potential of an issue, I will discuss its shortcomings, from racial and capital limits to commodification, trendiness, and the twisting of the language. Would social justice still smell as sweet under any other name?

**Theoretical Background: Framing**

How we talk about and construct social movements creates meaning. The language we use matters, though not just for social movements—all that resonates with us comes from its relation to our lives. Social constructionism, the idea that meaning originates in the “matrix of relationships in which we are engaged,” suggests that everything we know is formed by our context and sustained by our social relationships.15 Meaning is not intrinsic to an object, formed

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instead through the interpretive process of human interaction. The language we use to construct these objects or events then helps reproduce and reconstruct power relations through how they are granted social approval.

All that we understand as truth is affected by our lived experience and background, on both small scales (like the clothes we deem “fashionable”) and larger scales (like the value we assign to pieces of paper and metal as methods of purchase). Cultural understandings and norms influence social structures—the contemporary definition of race is not an “objective” biological difference but a socially constructed category. Our knowledge is contextual and sustained by social processes.

Since everyone experiences a different context, discord arises naturally in social construction. Groups may construct objects or events in contrary or opposing ways. Brofenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory outlines network circles that illustrate how meaning construction changes as relationships do. Individual constructions may be more differentiable than structural norms (even though my construction of “fashionable” may vary from yours, we are both likely to accept that one size of a coin is worth more than another). However, the interactive nature of our social lives makes these constructions fluid. Differences in meaning-making can cause ambiguity and debates, particularly when they disrupt “normal” or “taken-for-granted” practices. The cultures and customs we grow up with affect how we perceive social stimuli.

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19 See diagram.
20 Snow et al., “The Framing Perspective on Social Movements,” 392.
Social construction is a valuable foundation for understanding social movements. Our interpretations of a movement’s efficiency, methods, and engagement are constructed based on our contexts. We perceive movements, like abortion access in the United States, through our relationship webs and dominant social discourses. Social norms and constructions influence our sense of right and wrong.

David A. Snow, Rens Vliegenthart, and Pauline Ketelaars are concerned with social change and areas for disruption through movements. They find that social movements help interpret and clarify constructed realities and meaning.\(^{22}\) Social movements help address the ambiguities that appear when different groups of people construct an issue differently. Such differences in construction have far-reaching implications as dominant social constructs influence policy that affects daily life.


\(^{22}\) Snow et al., “The Framing Perspective on Social Movements,” 392.
For example, narratives of the border between the United States and Mexico create a site of crime and danger that necessitates defense against an immediate threat. The rhetoric of the U.S.-Mexico border is very different from that of the U.S. and Canada—even though there are distinct circumstances, notions of the “border” are constructed and do not inherently exclude all people. The particular Mexico rhetoric is part of a cycle of social construction, both created by and then creating meaning about the border for people. Tweets by former President Donald Trump illustrate how border narratives are constructed to frame exclusion as necessary:

The border’s construction aligns with what Snow et al. call framing theory. Social constructionism manifests in framing theory, which claims that we can “frame” constructed meanings because those understandings are generally negotiable and open to other interpretations. These frames create scaffolds for understanding that allow people to “locate, perceive, identify, and label” events in their lives, which creates meaning and helps mobilize

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23 Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump), “People have been saying for years that we should talk to Mexico,” Twitter, June 2, 2019, 7:44 AM, https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1135150118120939521.
24 Snow et al., “The Framing Perspective on Social Movements,” 393.
Frames organize the context that gives meaning to our life experiences. Placing a frame on a social movement affects its interpretation and can thus clarify specific goals. Creating this frame serves three primary purposes: focusing attention on a particular subject, articulating one coherent set of meanings, and transforming how some objects are understood to relate to one another. Social movement organizers can create frames to develop how they want the movement to fit into social consciousness.

Frame creation for social movements is a careful process since it can impact movement success. Conflict and social justice frames are often broad to evoke the power of past movements and highlight historical achievements. Distinct frames can serve different goals. “Collective action frames” specify “action-oriented beliefs” that justify campaigns with specific attention to mobilization. While all frames help organize life experience, collective action frames are attuned to gathering support and preempting opponents. Social movement frames also shape their repertoires of contention, performances that characterize the interactions among actors used as sets of tools for action. Repertoires draw on the identities, social ties, and organizational forms that create community and individual contexts, appearing as the particular choice of methods by movements for actions.

Movements construct themselves with frames like these to appeal to the public by resonating with existing constructs. Clarity of goals, rhetoric, and timing all influence how a movement organizer understands what makes a frame effective. “Equal rights” is a frame

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26 Snow et al., “The Framing Perspective on Social Movements,” 393.
27 Snow et al., “The Framing Perspective on Social Movements,” 395.
28 These frames differ from everyday interactional frames, which are social understandings like knowing someone is winking versus twitching (à la Clifford Geertz); Benford and Snow, “Framing Processes and Social Movements,” 614.
construction that movements orient towards the all-encompassing positive connotation of including everyone. It is hard to argue against an “equal rights” frame because popular social understanding denotes that thinking a contrary frame (like “unequal rights”) would be unacceptable.

Frames may be elaborate but are ultimately ineffective if they do not resonate with targeted audiences.\(^{30}\) Pauline Ketelaars’ study on the effects of framing qualities on movement connection found that frames that appeal to everyday experiences or a specific target of blame resonate more than those invoking abstract concepts or theoretical causes.\(^{31}\) People like to be seen and heard, and connecting a frame to lived interactions helps ground them to a cause.

Creating the right frame can be difficult. No combination of rhetoric and goals will automatically create a foolproof and “perfect” frame, but there are instances in which frames may go awry. “Framing errors” include how ambiguity over correct and appropriate frame application can destabilize a movement because of unclear goals; overextension and disputes over the conditions of frames can complicate a sense of timeline and tangible goals; and changes in the conditions that created the need for the frame can negate its usefulness.\(^{32}\) Frames can also be interpreted differently by unassociated groups and movements, which can lead to disagreements in political agreements.\(^{33}\) “Unequal rights” would be an unpopular frame but renaming something unequal with a better name can still achieve the goal. “Merit-based” is a positively connoted framing but can easily exclude those who do miss a particular threshold of merit.\(^{34}\)

\(^{30}\) Snow et al., “The Framing Perspective on Social Movements,” 401.


\(^{32}\) Snow et al., “The Framing Perspective on Social Movements,” 403-404.

\(^{33}\) Snow et al., “The Framing Perspective on Social Movements,” 405.

\(^{34}\) Such thresholds are also constructed and can be arbitrary.
Shifting and taking over a frame can be advantageous for one movement and treacherous for another. One example of frame co-opting is the Green New Deal, a climate plan popularized by a few Democratic Congressional Representatives in 2018. The following summer, the Washington Post, in partnership with the Kaiser Family Foundation, surveyed adults and teenagers about the plan. Of the adults who had heard about the Green New Deal and felt comfortable passing a judgment, 40% stated they were “strongly opposed” to the plan, and 53% found it “not realistic.”

However, further questions revealed that most of the goals of the Green New Deal are pretty widely popular. The survey showed high support for different subsections of the plan:

- 78% of respondents would support the Green New Deal if it would “guarantee jobs with good wages for all U.S. workers”
- 70% would support the Green New Deal if it would “upgrade all buildings in the U.S. to increase energy efficiency”
- 68% would support the Green New Deal if it would “increase federal spending on infrastructure to help communities prepare for climate-change-related disasters”

All of these provisions are included in the proposal text of the Green New Deal (GND).

If so many support the tangible policies, why does the name “Green New Deal” provoke such opposition? Framing theory helps explain that rhetoric, language, and identity politics helped disadvantage the plan in the public eye. Though Congresswoman Ocasio-Cortez initially

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estimated the cost as $10 trillion over several years, Grandoni and Clement write that
Republicans condemned the plan as “costly and unrealistic,” citing how “President Trump and
other conservative lawmakers are saying it could be as high as $100 trillion, an estimate based on
a tweet by a Manhattan Institute scholar.” Republicans portrayed the GND as a “socialist
takeover” that proved Democrats were out of touch with constituents. Then-President Donald
Trump’s tweets and public statements on the plan ridiculed it, painting it as extreme, expensive,
and impractical:

The framing of the plan affected how people thought about it. Learning about the Green
New Deal first through its opponents as they cast it as radical and expensive affected how it was
seen and perceived in the mainstream. Some of the intent behind associating the plan with the
New Deal Programs of the 1930s was to ride the plan’s positive associations of creating jobs and
economic stimulation. The analogy did not align well with framing ambiguity and unclarified

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41 Grandoni and Clement, “Green New Deal’s goals.”
43 Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump), “I think it is very important for the Democrats to press forward with their
historical foundations. The Green New Deal’s framing of clean energy jobs (in conjunction with the identity politics of its young, Latina, progressive Representative) was not strong enough to withstand attacks from adversaries.

Framing is not the only factor at play in the rhetorical decline of the Green New Deal, but it played an invaluable role in trying to amass widespread support. For Americans staunchly against “radical socialism,” the rival framing (whether or not it was true) primed audiences to disfavor it. When articles claimed it would “harm the American people more than it would help,” the potential for support declined (even if the article cited misinformation). While effective framing with clear goals can coalesce a supportive base, unclear or loose framing can be co-opted by adversaries and sow division. We should not discount the stake of framing on social movements.

**Definitions: Social and Justice and Social Justice**

The United States has seen rapid change and heightened division over the last twenty years. The PBS Learning Media U.S. History Collection showcases some topics as part of the “Struggle over Justice and Equity.” These include the left-behind working poor in the Rust Belt, the impact of deportation, attempts to redefine stereotypes that follow ethnic groups, campaigns for racial justice, voter disenfranchisement, childhood poverty, and other issues that make up a “Divided America.” These are only a few of the concerns that appear for Americans in this age. Intense political polarization marked the turn of the century, coming to a formidable

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point with the election of Republican Donald Trump in 2016. The former President’s inflammatory remarks about different groups (notably Mexicans, Muslims, and women) created new ire from Democrats and liberals, though it is important to note that the problems did exist before Trump.\(^48\) As the 2020s began, the political system experienced high partisanship and deadlock, with differences about “what is true and what is false, about who is to be believed and who is not.”\(^49\) At the risk of oversimplifying the rampant white supremacy and hatred of the era, the United States manifests massive political division, severe class disparity, ever-worsening climate disasters, the remnants of a global pandemic, an enduring pattern of racial trauma, increasing distrust in social and political institutions, easy access to semi-automatic rifles, near-unbridled inflation, attacks on gender nonconformity and bodily autonomy, and a general sense of impending doom. Many of these intersect into crests, like the intense embroiling of hostility around abortion access and reproductive justice. Under the neoliberal state, many of these would be considered “social justice issues.”

The liberal conception of “social justice” in this U.S. context is, in many ways, framing theory at work. The dominant discourse of social justice highlights individual rights, civil liberties, democracy, and free enterprise. “Social justice” is the avenue in which to pursue collective change in the United States, with the term encompassing both problems with social life (inequity, injustice, insufficiency, etc) and the mechanisms to address them (marching, lobbying, flyering, etc). While conflict can be defined formally as the manifestation of incompatible goals between two or more groups, many expressions of conflict are named “social


justice issues.” This construction of the complex conflicts plaguing modern life as “social justice issues” demonstrates how framing can fundamentally limit thorough confrontation.

What is social justice? Though generally accepted as a good thing, social justice conceptually tends to lack a singular definition. “Social” evokes relation to society or community. Distinctly not individual, “social” involves human relationships and engagement. “Social” connotes understanding issues relevant to our social lives—not necessarily our politics or survival, but our shared and communal life. “Justice” is trickier. Hundreds of scholars have debated this question. What is justice, and what does it hope to do?

Justice

Plato’s Republic names four cardinal virtues necessary to live a happy human life. These virtues—prudence, justice, temperance, and courage—laid the foundation for systems of morality that would follow from the Greeks into Christian theology and beyond. This early conception of justice meant being “fair and reasonable,” in everyday life but especially in relationships with others. Justice was often devised as the interaction of the other three virtues to embody someone who can create a “just” society, “just” then becoming a combination of fair, equal, equitable, and unbiased. Columbia Law School’s Initiative for a Just Society defines its mission as bringing about a human society in which everyone is equally fulfilled, respected, and able to flourish. However, justice continues to be nebulous in both definition and pursuit.

Different interpretations of justice help create practical distinctions. The meaning of justice changes across real-world applications, sometimes being used as “virtually

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indistinguishable from rightness in general.” Beyond Intractability defines justice as taking steps in the interest of supporting law that ensures individuals receive fair treatment. The “justice” included in “social justice” is not always clearly articulated (especially considering that Plato’s definition would consider all justice inherently social).

Though justice takes many forms, a handful of interpretations are referenced most in contemporary conversations about justice. Distributive justice defines injustice as members of society having unequal shares of the benefits of society. Under the distributive sphere, justice means everyone has the “right” allocation of material resources. Unlike distributive justice, comparative justice judges what one individual should have compared to another. Non-comparative justice, like distributive justice, tries to determine the “right amount of material benefits,” though it uses a “sufficiency” to decide what is “enough” for each person. Each member of society is due what is sufficient for them, which becomes complicated when figuring out what is “enough.”

Moving away from the material, procedural justice ensures fair proceedings and consistent/unbiased rules. Under this framework, some procedures are better than others at bringing about justice, and the procedure can be as important as the substantive outcomes. Procedural justice intends for equal treatment, expanding justice to try and prohibit an unequal balance of social pressure. Retributive and restorative justice also concerns the fairness of theoretical processes. Focused on the aftermath of injustice (whether distributive,

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57 Maiese and Burgess, “Types of Justice.”  
58 In distributive justice, one need not have already owned something to be due it. They are owed it simply by being a member of society… which then asks what membership is and who gets it.  
60 Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, “Justice.”
non/comparative, or procedural), retributive justice determines punishment, often punitive or physical remediation of injustice.\textsuperscript{61} Restorative justice conceptualizes a response to injustice that tries to repair the harm done to relationships. Concentrating on the crime against individuals, restorative justice answers material maldistribution, comparative misalignment, and procedural misgivings with methods of building new connections.\textsuperscript{62}

Each of these interpretations of justice involves how states and societies should organize to benefit their people and treat them fairly. However, “justice” fundamentally rests on constructions of what the dominant system thinks could be “just,” in and of itself becoming a paradox. It relies on the assumption that the organizing body (the one allocating justice) is committed to the act of justice. In the context of the United States, the endless search for justice happens in a place where structures were intentionally unjust in the first place. Approaches that rest on justice apparatuses remain within a system that has decided what justice is and excluded those issues.

Social Justice

Despite the wide variety of justice interpretations, “social justice“ does not inherently rely on a single definition of justice. Just as justice developed and changed to serve different purposes, social justice became fine-tuned for other goals. Concepts of social justice are difficult to separate from religious beginnings. From Plato came the virtue of justice in Christian theology and the Catholic social teachings. The intentions of social justice have been clarified through statements by religious leaders and adopted by various faiths.\textsuperscript{63}

\textsuperscript{61} Maiese and Burgess, “Types of Justice.”
\textsuperscript{62} One of the famous caveats with restorative justice includes it being “impossible to restore relationships to rightness when they were never ‘right’” in the first place, which goes into the more foundational understandings and proactive conditions of justice.
Social justice in the 19th century was originally a “formal concept rather than a material one.” Thomas Patrick Burke writes that the term was initially just another branch of justice (akin to distributive, comparative, or procedural) and did not imply any particular philosophy or worldview. Attributed to Jesuit priest Luigi Taparelli d’Azeglio, the term meant to provide new conditions for how justice should appear in society. Even though all justice is social, there are ways to amend how justice is received. The context for the first application of social justice was a “righteous” society through maintaining unity between large societies (the State) and small societies (communities and local organizations). Social justice was a mechanism to keep that unity and was essentially distributive (“between man and man”) and meant to balance the accounts of individuals in a society.

After World War II, social justice became more material and stood for a more specific stance on social right and wrong. Contemporary application of the term now cites 20th-century moral philosopher John Rawls. Rawls applies a justice framework nearest to distributive, arguing that fairness appears when fixing an unequal distribution to allocate the most benefits to the least advantaged. Rawls extends distributive justice beyond the material, including social institutions and judgment/imputations that should see reform or abolition if unjust. Rawls argues that social justice should target how social institutions distribute rights to individuals and how that may advantage some over others. The effects of this distribution are “profound,” particularly since

71 Rawls, A Theory of Justice, 5.
institutions tend to favor particular backgrounds and “starting places” over others. The profundity appears in how lives are affected in ways that cannot be justified “by an appeal to the notions of merit.” For Rawls, social justice can tackle unequal distributions and their effects.

Social justice concerns social institutions to the extent that they protect individual liberty. Rawls supposes two principles of justice to create a roadmap of possibilities for social justice, understanding as fundamental that humans act, above all, in self-interest. The first principle declares that everyone should have the same right to the same social freedom and liberty. The second principle says that social and economic inequalities should be “reasonably expected” to happen to everyone and attached to positions anyone can access. Under this principle, everyone should be able to achieve the same financial and material resources of “social primary goods.” These goods only include what can be reasonably allocated, excluding “natural goods” outside society’s control (health, intelligence, aptitude, imagination, fitness, etc). As distributive justice applies to the material, this outline of social justice applies to intangible benefits and responsibilities and the fair distribution of access. The “fair distribution” highlights freedom and security, prioritizing individual fairness as essential to human freedom.

This conception of social justice highlights the individual, framing society as a mechanism to ensure personal rights and benefits. To borrow from Rawls’ definition but extend into the contemporary United States, the liberal definition of social justice emphasizes that individual liberty should be preeminent in social distribution. Liberty, in liberal social justice,

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guarantees government neutrality in tangible harms so individuals may maximize their own understanding of freedom so long as they cause no tangible or overt harm to others.\textsuperscript{80} The government should allocate “fairly” and then remove control to allow individual aptitude.

Liberty and liberalism appear in other evolved explanations of social justice. In the 21st century, social justice has expanded beyond Rawls. Definitions range from “a commitment to equal right and to an equitable distribution of wealth and power among citizens”\textsuperscript{81} to “the elimination of all forms of social oppression.”\textsuperscript{82} Based on values of “fairness, equality, respect for diversity, access to social protection, and the application of human rights in all spheres of life, including in the workplace,”\textsuperscript{83} social justice has been used as a blanket term by activists wanting to ensure recognition for marginalized identities so that “assimilation to majority or dominant cultural norms is no longer the price of equal respect.”\textsuperscript{84} Social justice appears as a term on the Investopedia website, which calls it a “fair and equitable division of resources, opportunities, and privileges in society,” interchangeable with distributive justice.\textsuperscript{85} Social justice highlights the individual and can be anything good you want it to be. Social justice is virtuous for seeking proper distribution and brave for fighting against systemic inequality. Social justice is also vague and limits what social movements can actually do.

\textsuperscript{80} Roberts, \textit{Killing the Black Body}, 295.
The Trouble with Liberal Social Justice

Those definitions of social justice tell us that social justice movements intend to create conditions for equity in spaces where there is discrimination, underrepresentation, or an insufficiency of human rights. Social justice issues in the post-2015 U.S. context are situations where justice (whatever conception it may be) is missing. State systems delineate what justice means, affecting how social justice issues are addressed. Because this liberal social justice focuses on the rights of individuals within an institutional structure, approaches are often subject to the structure: social justice advocates take actions like lobbying government officials, increasing voter awareness, marching in the streets, and reading books. Different kinds of actions appear—methods of noncooperation and nonviolent intervention appear in social justice spaces—but they continue to abide by larger goals of lobbying political machines in the interest of individual protection.

Social justice framing in the United States prioritizes the individual and the protection of personal rights. Liberty, the freedom from state restrictions on lifestyle, behavior, or political views, is a core tenet of American philosophy. Alongside life and the pursuit of happiness, liberty was a foundational principle upon which American revolutionaries founded a nation. Liberalism, a political doctrine based on liberty that highlights individual rights, civil liberties, democracy, and free enterprise, has become central to individual operations in the United States. The individual as the core of society fits the classical, historical, and dominant model of the state. Liberalism and liberty inspire some of the mechanisms of social justice because they

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86 The founders declared independence from an empire that taxed them unfairly and imposed what they felt were unwarranted invasions on lifestyle, behavior, and political views. It is historically sound that they decided the new nation would protect their liberty (at a cost).
create actions that do not disrupt the state and highlight individual advantage over collective strength.

The reliance on liberty supersedes actual change. Dorothy Roberts finds that this dominant conception of liberty appears in an unjust social structure that, under liberal doctrine, the government should already not interfere with. Liberty in social justice protects choices from “the most direct and egregious abuses of government power” but does not change the social structure that creates those abuses in the first place. The precedence of individual rights comes at the expense of equal access—liberty alongside other state interests of private property allows notions of “equality” to feel mythical. Proclaimed commitments to liberty over equality validate state belief and effort that “inequality may be inevitable in a liberal society.” While the intentions of social justice are good, the individual liberal framing limits its effectiveness in other tangible ways.

**Primacy of Capital Accumulation**

“Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” was not an original idea for Thomas Jefferson. Inspired somewhat by English philosopher John Locke, the Declaration of Independence supported the vision of a social contract between human beings. Locke’s 1764 *Two Treatises of Government* asserts that one may not impede the “liberty, health, limb, or goods of another.” American social rhetoric builds in protection for private property in much the same way as liberty. The structure approached by social justice mechanisms intentionally facilitates the accumulation of capital. Liberty and property intertwine in the interest of the individual.

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Denise Ferreira da Silva’s paper on the racial limitations of social justice clarifies the historical entrenchment of the United States in capital accumulation. Social justice policies fundamentally work within institutional frameworks of individual liberty and justice as determined by the state. These policies are grounded on a “compelling state interest” to meet the needs of global capital. The situation of social justice within institutions means that mechanisms are allowed only insofar as alignment with the interests of accumulation.

da Silva’s particular case is about affirmative action. Affirmative action, a set of institutional procedures meant to improve opportunities/reduce discrimination for members of marginalized groups, can be a critical tool for social redress. Under understandings of justice as procedural, distributive, and comparative, affirmative action seeks to remedy historical wrongs, fitting well with John Rawls’ “equality of opportunity.” And yet, the justifications for affirmative action focused instead on the state.

*Grutter v. Bollinger* (2003), the landmark case to protect affirmative action under the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment, was decided under a “compelling state interest” in preserving affirmative action policies. Sandra Day O’Connor’s majority opinion argued,

Major American businesses have made clear that the skills needed in today’s increasingly global marketplace can only be developed through exposure to widely diverse people, cultures, ideas, and viewpoints. High-ranking retired officers and civilian military leaders assert that a highly qualified, racially diverse officer corps is essential to national security.

O’Connor argues that affirmative action is acceptable because it produces and sustains American capital—not because it creates conditions for a fairer allocation of resources. Victories for racial

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inextricably linked to American capitalist projects, social justice creates a paradox: capitalism relies on injustice. Liberal frameworks of social justice within the state have a general orientation (and vested interest) toward maintaining the structural injustice created for and upon capitalist institutions.

**Inattention to Race**

The liberal framing of “social justice” as reliant on individual rights inside institutions limits the actual allocation of fairness. Social justice mechanisms become ineffective when considering the racial landscape of the United States. Social justice rests on the principles of equal liberty, but only in an “ideal capitalist context” that believes inequality comes from the self-interested decisions of individuals. The individual liberty focus assumes that all people are autonomous beings making decisions of their own free will. When individuals are subject to constructs outside their control, that framing of the origins of inequality falls short. Race determines how justice is received—because racially minoritized are “governed by necessity—that is, by violence,” the state can decide when they are outside “justice” principles.

Inequality creates the social conditions that affect individual decisions. When social justice supposes that inequality is a static social arrangement, it ignores the historical impacts of “colonial expropriation (of lands and labor), racial (symbolic or total) violence, or heteropatriarchal subjugation” that cause injustice. If a distributive approach to social justice seeks to remedy material insufficiency, how does the structure determine who has enough?

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The role of allocation tends to fall to the state (the one that created the need for reallocation in the first place). Since the distribution that social justice advises can only be achieved with state permission, the actual application of justice is finite. The framing of social justice that permits action only within state auspices is limiting when the nation has well-documented legacies of slavery and racial capitalism. The liberal social justice framework that emphasizes personal rights is inadequate in institutions founded on white supremacy.102

**Depletion Through Trendiness**

“Social justice” is also applied and used in ways beyond these more theoretical explanations. As social justice moves into the mainstream, analyzing the theory and definitions can be helpful but ultimately redundant if that is not how individuals understand it. In his Christian writing blog, Neil Shenvi writes that social justice can become a catchphrase, a synonym for “a very good thing that everyone wants.”103 He uses it colloquially:

So if your roommate says that he cares about ‘social justice’ and you say “what’s that?” it’s possible that he’ll respond: “Uh… you know… it’s justice… but social. Social. Justice. It’s just one of those things that everyone loves, like ice cream or puppies or baseball. And if you don’t love it, you’re a monster!”104

Intentionally reductionist and flippant, this line characterizes how social justice can seem vague but positive. Further conceptualization reveals the extent of the progression into the mainstream. Social justice is trendy now—it is a good thing, and you should like it.

The movement of liberal social justice into public sentiment appears in popular and contemporary media. Social justice has made its way to Investopedia, the “world’s leading source of financial content on the web.”105 As a term beginning with S, social justice fits nicely

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103 Shenvi, “Strengths and Weaknesses.”
104 Shenvi, “Strengths and Weaknesses.”
alongside “social entrepreneur” and the “Smoot-Hawley Tariff Act.” Investopedia’s definition names access, equity, diversity, participation, and human rights as principles of social justice and suggests a “bottom line” line of equitable distribution of resources to establish a fairer society. For social justice to appear on an economic self-help website, it must be helpful to private investors. Focusing on liberty, individual rights, and accumulation helps investment as an institution. Social justice becomes relevant to economists because it can be helpful to their brand.

A 2022 New Roots Institute article entitled “5 Current Social Justice Issues and How You Can Help” uses blog-style rhetoric to expand access to education about social justice and human rights. Summarizing social justice as a way to create human dignity, compassion, and kindness, the article highlights the five issues of racial justice, climate justice, poverty and food insecurity, ageism, and body autonomy. The article covers necessary principles of equity and regeneration (among others) and then cites podcasts, films, papers, books, and organizations to learn from. The closing section, called “How Can You Help?,” suggests that you can figure out how to help by taking the time to “listen to yourself, learn from others, and be courageous.” They then instruct readers,

Imagine the change you want to see in the world. Look for other people who are making—or who want to make— the changes you want to see happen... And always be ready to take a deep breath, nurture your strengths, and hug yourself. Because we need more people to stay and grow with us in the movement for social justice.

Efforts like these are valuable. Disseminating principles of compassion, publicizing injustice, and signal-boosting consumable media are all indispensable in raising awareness. However, raising awareness can only go so far. The article is hyper-individual, sharing that the best

solutions are hugging yourself and staying educated. The New Roots Institute’s examples are readily available under the liberal vision of social justice. While general relationship-building and individual growth and strength are essential for sustainable movements, state social justice frameworks create an inattention to mechanisms for collective action. Focusing on individual action (abiding by liberty and not treading on toes) limits the imagination for radical change.\textsuperscript{110} When the options suggested to remedy oppression are reading books, there is a longer path to direct collective action.

Consumption measures do not ruffle feathers, making the concept of human rights palatable because they do not interrupt everyday life. Non-disruptive methods of watching films are highly accepted under the purview of social justice and within the scope of the state. Collective action for further equality is inconceivable when the dominant narrative is of the individual paying attention to the system but ultimately taking individual actions. The New Roots Institute article is one example of many that display how liberal conceptions of social justice limit tangible methods of making change. “Well-behaved protest” activities sanitized to serve state and bourgeois interests fundamentally restrict the possibility of change.

Articles like these can gain traction through buzzwords. These popular phrases—grassroots, advocate, human rights, poverty, oppression, discrimination, awareness, systemic—make necessary connections about social justice goals. However, at some point, their use in a context that relegates action to individuals can dilute their meaning. Trendiness makes “social justice” a catch-all term that loses its original significance and power. When everything is a human rights issue you should care about, fewer issues and actions stand out. The words we use matter, and language can be a powerful tool when properly applied. Overusing “buzzwords”\textsuperscript{\textsuperscript{110}}

\textsuperscript{110} The rise of the individual recently is so fascinating. I think a lot of social strife can be attributed to state interests in championing the cultivation of individuality, but that is a thesis for later.
can correlate to a trend of virtue signaling, using specific language to supplant a moral reputation.\textsuperscript{111} Virtue signaling suggests that some actions seem worthy enough to boost public appearance. Though widespread support for a particular issue (through many public stances) can theoretically increase the visibility and growth of a movement, the virtue signaling act supposes that virtue ends as soon as you have made your support known. When choosing words or actions in the interest of signaling virtue, it can weaken the strength of the discourse by diluting the language into a commodity.

Buzzwords and virtue signaling play a role in situating social justice issues within binaries. When simplifying the concern into an answer that connotes either positive or negative virtue, the issue aligns itself alongside an either/or set of ideological choices or questions: Do gay people deserve rights? Is climate change real? Are you pro-life or pro-choice? The transition of social justice language into a trend establishes it within binaries, which assume certain preconditions supposedly experienced by everyone and create less room for opinions that fall on a spectrum.\textsuperscript{112} Flattening “social justice” to a black-and-white, virtue-intensive process allows it to lose nuance on its way to commodification.

\textbf{Over-Commodification}

Buzzwords and virtue signaling contribute to a commodification process that generates profit out of the efforts of social movements. The move into the mainstream creates space for increased capitalist accumulation and the continued sanitization of discontent. The growing trendiness of social justice secured the attention of corporations, then furthering state interests in ensuring protest mechanisms are nondisruptive and individually focused. Because the connotations of “social justice” are positive, corporations can use the language of social justice


\textsuperscript{112} Ruth Colker, \textit{Abortion and Dialogue: Pro-Choice, Pro-Life, and American Law} (Indiana University Press, 1994).
in marketing tactics. Social justice is cool and trendy—blogs are writing about it, and it can make individuals feel good, so naturally, it can make businesses money. Appealing to the public interest and the masses is economically advantageous for corporations. The trendiness of social justice (alongside the trendiness of “wokeness,” the state of being aware of social injustice) means businesses benefit from performative action to bolster their image and increase sales. Manufacturing commodities that center “wokeness” as the profit motive is in the interest of corporations.

The partnership between major sportswear company Nike and Colin Kaepernick exemplifies this commodification. Kaepernick, a 2016 NFL player, knelt during the national anthem to protest police brutality to national attention and controversy. Two years later, after a lawsuit and conservative backlash, Nike signed Kaepernick to market the brand as the “face” of a movement. The marketing campaign drew both ire and admiration, but the sponsorship alone commodifies Kaepernick. Kaepernick’s appearance in advertisements “misleads consumers into coupling activism with Nike’s products.” Presenting Kaepernick as a symbol reduces his message to a commercial good, equating and connecting the movement to a pair of sneakers. The trend of corporations using minoritized voices and faces as marketing diminishes them to material goods and slogans for profit. Commodifying human experiences of oppression is then at the detriment of those directly impacted by injustice because it reduces lives into a product available for public consumption. Kaepernick became the product—if you bought Nike shoes,

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117 Zinn, “Fight Like an Activist.”
you were putting “your money where your mouth is” in support of Kaepernick. When social justice focuses on individual action and protests as easy as buying sneakers, the potential for collective disruption leaves the imagination.

It matters how we talk about movements. Although raising awareness about a movement can have baseline positive impacts, the framing affects how discourse evolves. When the ultimate goal is to sell something, profit becomes more important than the experience for whom the movement tried to advocate in the first place. Reducing human experiences—and activism motivated by oppression—to a commodity obscures movement goals and lessens its validity. Linking commodities to the movement shifts the organizing into a more mainstream consumptive perception, supposing that activism is just another product that can oscillate in and out of popularity. The attention to the dangers of commodification does not necessarily disallow companies from using platforms and resources to support movements, but companies often do not: instead of actually calling for change, Nike’s implied “support” of Black Lives Matter has “turned something very real and personal into sellable symbolism.” The Nike approach combines profit and action through venerating profit without committing to the action. Concentrating on profit can then paradoxically drive the inequity it disavows. As companies advertise and sell products with images of social justice/political upheaval, they “directly capitalize on the injustices and oppressive systems they pledge to denounce.” The coupling of profit and protest incentivizes corporations to maintain the systems and injustice that provoke such movements.

118 Munoz, “Commodification.”
119 Munoz, “Commodification.”
120 Munoz, “Commodification.”
121 Zinn, “Fight Like an Activist.”
An online search for “social justice,” produces colorful images with charming slogans and pictures. Visuals of peace signs and raised hands connote the goodness and togetherness of social justice for advocating a world with peace signs and hearts. But, because social justice lacks a concrete and unified definition, none of these depictions are unique to social justice. The nebulous nature of social justice produces inconsistent but feel-good images. This framing simplifies the concept into an easily-consumed set of symbols that can make viewers and consumers feel good about themselves without changing their lives or disrupting the status quo:

An online search for “social justice shirt,” produces merchandise with various slogans. The visual rhetoric is not all that different from the images of “social justice” but now creates a product. These slogans have all met approval by the mass consumer marketplace—they would not be here if they did not sell. Reducing movements to merchandise and slogans means corporations encourage a wave of superficial activism. The trendiness of “social justice activism” affects what is acceptable and worthy of sale:

123 Zinn, “Fight Like an Activist.”
Discussions of virtue signaling and commodification connect to another theme of performative allyship. Performative allyship and virtue signaling echo similar themes of taking surface-level actions (like changing a profile picture or retweeting posts) to demonstrate support for a social movement. The pejorative term suggests action as based on increasing status or popularity for the individual instead of those for whom they share. In social justice contexts, performative allyship becomes an accepted method of engagement that prioritizes individual action and impact (instead of, perhaps, communal action). The question is then if this matters—if people post public support, does it matter if it’s performative?

A study by Maja Kutlaca and Helena R. M. Radke found that praise received for symbolic or performative action may reinforce “personal over altruistic concerns,” which then can decrease engagement in more dire action. When one gets a lot of likes “just for changing their profile picture,” why would you need to do anything more time/reputation/energy

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124 Screenshot by author, “social justice shirt,” Google Images, January 17, 2024; These first product results are from SHEIN, a fast fashion brand often under fire for child labor and harmful environmental impact.

125 Maja Kutlaca and Helena R. M. Radke, “Towards an understanding of performative allyship: Definition, antecedents and consequences,” in *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 17, no. 2 (2023).
Beyond individual investment, performative allyship goes about as far as the trendiness of a popular social movement. Not extending to larger-scale liberation, the allyship lasts until the movement fails or something more beneficial to status comes along. The methods to approach public support do matter for sustained and thorough activism.

Kutlaca and Radke also conclude that tokenistic acts of support may sometimes have the positive effects of raising awareness and affirming egalitarian norms. Performance and marketing can increase movement visibility and support through social pressure. Sometimes, actions mean to be inherently performative, but in this context, performative activism becomes the norm. These methods can sometimes detract from the power of said movement. At some point, commodifying activism and social justice may pacify us, making it harder to identify oppression. Social justice emphasis on personal liberty with nondisruptive individual actions goes as far as states and corporate systems allow. Activism that is not “trendy” or popular can thus easily slip through consciousness. The slippage creates a false equivalence: valuable social justice concerns are commodified, so movements not championed by corporations must not be worth the effort. Mass support can trip businesses into taking a stance, but the wheel turns both ways. If a social justice movement is not popular on social media or by big corporations, then individuals may think it must not be worth supporting through action.

The framework and commodification of “social justice” limits the action possible. The signaling and performance that have evolved from a reliance on individual freedom and action circumvents how injustice is received. Normative influence can be powerful to some extent, but social pressure alone cannot sustain and build movements. “Social justice,” as determined by

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128 Munoz, “Commodification.”
the state and corporations, remains deeply individual and dependent on a perceived popularity of right and wrong.

Language Appropriation

Beyond a perceived power (or lack thereof) of commodifying and marketing social justice, the trendiness can lead to criticism and the co-opting of the mission. When social justice becomes mainstream through corporations, there becomes an opening for dilution and misrepresentation. Ablison, an organization “devoted to raising awareness about sustainable energy solutions,”130 published a blog post entitled “Pros and Cons of Social Justice.” The post starts with the claim: “Did you know that 87% of people believe in the importance of social justice?”131 Despite likely being AI-generated, the article lists those perceived pros and cons:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pros</th>
<th>Cons</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Raises awareness about social issues</td>
<td>Can lead to division and polarization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promotes equality and justice</td>
<td>Some argue it promotes a victim mentality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encourages dialogue and discussion</td>
<td>Can be seen as overly politically correct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fights against systemic oppression</td>
<td>Critics claim it stifles free speech</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can lead to positive policy changes</td>
<td>Some argue it focuses too much on identity politics</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Not inherently wrong, these pros and cons summarize some of the advantages and disadvantages of social justice frameworks. However, they, too, are an example of the shortcomings of “social justice.” The list clarifies how popular culture (or AI) sees social justice. The “pros” are vague, classifying social justice as a nebulous good that raises awareness and

fights against oppression (not mentioning methods, causes, or specific injustices/oppression). The “cons” focus on the aftermath, mentioning what social justice might do, from leading to division or promoting a victim mentality. The list aligns social justice issues with an emphasis on “wokeness,” elevating away from specific instances of injustice and into a realm of political correctness. The list supposes a binary project of an us-versus-them, constructing social justice as a vague but divisive entity that should be inherently unpowerful but provoke outrage.

When not being simplified by popular culture devices into an amorphous mechanism, social justice is poached by “alt-right” opponents to be derogatory. In contexts where social justice is a vague term that loosely opposes an unspecified injustice, the far right has made fun of lobbying for unstructured but all-consuming political correctness. Massanari and Chess studied how “social justice warrior” (SJW) has become a pejorative to describe individuals “overly invested in identity politics and political correctness.” Used by the right as a denigratory term, the SJW is a self-victimized “humorless shrill” taking pleasure in superiority and behavior policing. The initial connotation of “social justice” was positive, and when free of conservative construction, “warrior” may connote a strong, feminized Amazonian fighter or fantasy badass. The derogative transitions the term into a bastardized, out-of-control, “monstrous feminine.” The SJW, then, is constructed not just as someone worried about political correctness but as someone whose “emotional and psychological fragility required trigger/content warnings and safe spaces.” The SJW has become the subject of Internet memes created to diminish activists:

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SJW, as nearly synonymous with the weak and whiny “snowflake” overly sensitive to “perceived” injustices, means to bastardize movements and those involved in them. Distorting social justice harnesses a fear of abjection that creates space for hate speech. Framing theory tells us that words and images can condition audiences towards particular actions, potentially creating space for violence. The repositioning of social justice to villainize both femininity and social justice can mutate from “disparaging to a kind of hate speech.” Intended to denigrate individuals concerned with injustice and the project of social justice altogether, the move towards an SJW re-emphasizes a separatist binary construction—dividing people by claiming caring about injustice makes you “too sensitive” distracts from actual injustice. Pejoratives with the language of “social justice” taint the term’s value, rendering it even less effective as a framework for making change.

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So What? Impacts and Importance

The United States empire harms daily. Now more than ever, especially with the advent of contemporary technology and social media, people can share and talk about the active evils experienced in society. These injuries are categorized most often under a vast umbrella of social injustice. “Social justice issues” in the U.S. include racism, white supremacy, sexism, xenophobia, reproductive barriers, and many other deep atrocities. This classification is not enough. The “social justice” model we use as a mechanism for change relies on barriers to individual freedom and where preeminent access to personal liberty is restricted. The structure of the term and concept itself prioritizes nondisruptive action in the service of the individual, not the collective, creating a fundamental inability to address long-established injustice. The social justice project is also inherently nebulous and open to co-opting by corporations and opponents. States have a vested interest in ensuring attention to injustice happens apart from collectivity and disruption. The neoliberal state has an incentive to keep social justice vague and individual to

prevent the realization of interdependence. “Social justice” is ineffective in describing and motivating toward a more fulfilling justice.

Beyond the shortcomings of the term itself and its construction in the contemporary United States, the framework of social justice then asserts particular repertoires of contention. As it concerns action in the face of oppression, the model of social justice works within a dominant political and economic system that decides what methods of protest are allowed. Social justice activists can lobby the government, march in the streets, and raise voting awareness. The individual and state-limited definition of social justice means that the most acceptable actions allow the system to keep working. The popular repertoire of social justice movements removes large-scale disruption. Methods of nonviolent protest that interrupt are not within the acceptable repertoire of social justice, as revealed in the backlash against pro-Palestine actions in New York City in January 2024.140 The nonviolent yet disruptive blocking of bridge and tunnel traffic does not fall within the generally accepted individual repertory of lobbying and letter writing. Even marches, necessarily collective actions, are planned and published ahead of time for singular days when people can join before returning to their “regular” lives. The interruption of the mechanisms of daily life is unacceptable in the minds of institutions and those entrenched within them.

On the day after President Donald Trump’s 2017 inauguration, hundreds of thousands of women marched on Washington to protest the racist and misogynistic comments that had come under fire in the months leading up to his election. The Women’s March was massive, attended well by women in pink hats with signs about femininity, injustice, and annoyance. Most of the women in the pictures of the march are white, spurred to direct action by a political candidate

who had crossed a line.\textsuperscript{141} The rhetoric of the march, created through audience, posters, and marketing, indicates some of the other problems with “social justice.”

The missing piece of the trendiness of “social justice” is that many of the most directly angering pieces are symptoms of the problem, not the problem itself. Between the Ablison “cons” about political correctness, the production value, and the claims of oversensitivity, the “social justice” framework suggests that individual action is vaguely sufficient for remedying injustice... as long as you do not pay too much attention to where the injustice comes from. The Women’s March rhetoric, under the auspice of a social justice effort, rested on an individual freedom argument:

The sins that got Donald Trump elected would not have gone away had Hillary Clinton won, they just would not have a bright orange face. Under a structure of activism that prioritizes individual liberty and caring once it affects you, critiques of the Women’s March rhetoric align

\textsuperscript{141} Holly Rhue, “All the Best Signs From the 2019 Women’s March,” Elle Magazine, last modified January 20, 2019, \url{https://www.elle.com/culture/career-politics/g25969519/best-signs-2019-womens-march/}.

\textsuperscript{142} From Rhue, “All the Best Signs From the 2019 Women’s March,” slide 10 of 13.
with more extensive critiques of a white feminist framework that focuses on issues that affect white women but do not encompass the broader intersectional factors that affect women of color. Aligning with a history of white feminism that dates back to when Southern white women cited opposition to slavery through their husbands’ sexual relations with slaves, this approach rests itself within some of the shortcomings of the social justice construction. Social justice suggests that you march, on a planned date and time, and do so when something angers you individually in the hopes that a response will solve that personal problem.

Social justice appears as the most readily available instruction for tackling oppression, looming large for activists as it pertains to and involves individual but nondisruptive liberty. However, in studying other countries, these “social justice issues” would instead be called conflicts. Though social justice issues and conflicts can coexist, naming something a conflict changes the attention and approaches granted toward resolution. The seriousness of a conflict permits itself different and more complex repertoires of contention than social justice issues without many of the limits of state standards of disruption and justice. Reframing “social justice” into conflicts would allow for a more thorough use of the Peace and Conflict Studies canon, rendering different possibilities for change. Under another name, would social justice smell the same? What else could we do with it?

Chapter 2: Abortion Access in the United States (A Case Study)

Conflicts in the United States are habitually called “social justice issues.” This framework falls short in diagnosing the problem and understanding the solutions available for resolution. Through a case study of abortion access, I propose a reframing of liberal social justice. Abortion is an example of the power of framing and the limitations of liberal social justice.

Abortion access in the United States has been constructed as a “social justice issue” through the combination of a perceived moral imperative and resulting barriers to access reproductive health services. Abiding by a definition of social justice as unfair distribution, abortion access and reproductive justice are dually constructed as inequitable on the part of the fetus (with a “right to life” argument) and the part of the mother (with the restrictions on reproductive healthcare and access to conceptional decisions). Many of these constructions rest on social justice concerns of individual and unjust access to reproductive services and inequity faced across state and intersectional lines. This chapter traces the construction of abortion access along a “social justice” pathway, examining the chronology of the construction, the ideology it rests upon, and the deliberate actions taken to elevate abortion to an issue in the first place.

This framing of social justice is insufficient for encompassing the extent of the conflict. The history of abortion framing in the United States reveals it as a construction, elevated to a status of moral concern only in the 1970s. Abortion framing by political pundits was successful for their mission, exhibiting how deeply relevant framing theory can be to how we think about the social world. The intentional elevation of abortion to a national level of concern, a belief in the role of women as mothers, and a perceived value clash all work together to create a deeply contested conflict that liberal social justice repertoires are insufficient for addressing.
This chapter will use abortion as a vehicle for displaying the limitations of “social justice” in instances of conflict. Through discussing the confluence of factors that make abortion a legitimate conflict, the chapter lays the groundwork for a reconstruction of abortion as a “social conflict,” an instance where “two or more persons or groups manifest the belief that they have incompatible objectives” through aspects like value clashes or contested constructions. Transforming the conflict requires abortion access to be called a conflict and dealt with as such.

**Introduction: Why Abortion?**

“Abortion access” in the United States refers to the conversation about whether or not women should be allowed to terminate pregnancy. Subsets of the discussion include when termination should be permitted, where termination should be permitted, and whether termination should be permitted at all. Abortion access is deeply contested across the United States. Meeting at the intersection of political beliefs of bodily autonomy and rights of the state, religious beliefs of the sanctity of life, and baseline discussions of morality, abortion as a concept manages to span the consciousness of hundreds of thousands of Americans.

Abortion is one of the preeminent single-issue platforms for voters in both directions, with some motivated by its restriction and others by its immunity. Abortion has caused demonstrations on both ends of the political spectrum, occupying themes at the contemporary Women’s March and the annual “March for Life.” Abortion is unique for the supreme role it plays in political consciousness in the United States—lawmaker opposition to France’s 2024 constitutional amendment was not for opposition to the procedure but for a feeling that it was

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“unnecessary” given massive national support for abortion. This situation of abortion in national politics and the insistence that it remains an American “social justice issue” despite embroiled moral arguments and international exceptionalism makes it a particularly fascinating case study for domestic conflict reframing.

When simplified to its core—and how the French think about it—abortion is a routine medical procedure. One in three women have abortions, an occurrence which makes it a normal part of reproductive life. Abortion has fallen victim to a careful framing that makes it a social and moral forum for religious leaders and politicians. Abortion is often treated as a binary, simplifying the issue to “pro-life” (unborn fetuses are people and have a right to life) and “pro-choice” (everyone should be able to decide what to do with their bodies). However, a 2020 report by Tricia Bruce explored how “everyday” Americans perceived abortion frequency and access in the United States and the political attitudes that influence them. Among a dozen conclusions, Bruce’s study found that, for most Americans, abortion is much more complicated than a simple pro-life/pro-choice binary might suggest. One of her main conclusions was that “most Americans consider abortion with care, humility and some uncertainty, have something to say, and feel more comfortable in a conversation than a debate.” This study reveals framing theory at work—creating a binary affects the tenor of the conversation. The language and ways we talk about abortion matters.

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148 Bruce, How Americans Understand Abortion, 56.
The first section of this chapter will explore how the framing and construction of motherhood affect the framing and construction of abortion. Specific understandings of womanhood and motherhood allow abortion to be worthy of debate. The second section goes into the history of abortion and access in the United States and the construction and framing of the abortion procedure. The chapter will touch on the legal structures that determine rights to bodily autonomy and how reproductive liberty is experienced differently across racial and class lines to lead into a later examination of how the current iteration of social justice prevents imagination about abortion. Ultimately, the intersectional nature of the abortion issue demands it also be considered a social (or potentially even intractable) conflict, not only a social justice issue.

**The Rhetorical: Constructions of Motherhood**

Thoroughly discussing abortion begins with the rhetorical construction of womanhood, motherhood, and the illusions and implications of choice. Reproductive access is not negotiable in and of itself—certain conditions, like the social definition of all women as mothers or potential mothers, allow for abortion discourse to exist. The methods we use to construct concepts (like language tools of diction and metaphors) affect how they are seen and used. Tracing a rhetorical construction of women and mothers allows for a shared understanding of where social justice interpretations may come from and how to reimagine conflict.

**The Blueprint of Biblical Womanhood**

Social construction theory tells us that gender roles and norms are not inherent to individuals. They are constructed to ground meaning within our lives and how we engage with others. The famous Simone de Beauvoir quote—“one is not born, but rather becomes,
woman”—calls attention to created gender categories. Western conceptions of womanhood rest upon a framing of gender roles not uncommon for heteropatriarchal societies. Even though women do not all have a “face-to-face or word-to-word community,” they share framed experiences gender, from the definition as “women” to an ideological subordinate position “if not in their jobs, then in their families, and if not in their families, then in general cultural imagery and language.” A shared construct of womanhood and their “role” is a biological “responsibility” to reproduce. The pinnacle of motherhood is established in cultural norms and appears in how individuals conceive of themselves and their duties. But as social construct theory maintains, the rhetorical function of women is not intrinsic to her. Patriarchal framing does not innately define women but is intentional to sustain a particular social order.

Religion has sustained careful constructions of womanhood and motherhood over centuries. As a moral and ethical guidebook and a tool for meaning-making, religions give direction in making sense of everyday life. Religious belief borrows and builds from tradition to integrate, normalize, and sustain narratives. Under the auspices of a larger hetero-patriarchal society, Western religions have helped establish the woman’s role in part through creation narratives. Colloquially referred to as the most-sold book in the world, the Bible is a foundation for dozens of religions. As a blueprint for religious peoples globally, the text produces implicit understandings of human duties and their creation. The Hebrew Bible reveals a dominant logic about different types of women and what they should be doing.

The first book of the Hebrew Bible/Christian Old Testament discusses the creation of the Earth and its first people. As it distinguishes between the roles of men and women, Genesis produces a particular understanding of gendered interaction and engagement with the world:

The Lord God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.” … But for Adam no suitable helper was found. So the Lord God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man’s ribs and then closed up the place with flesh. Then the Lord God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man… she shall be called “woman,” for she was taken out of man.  

From her conception, woman is subordinate to man. She is “helper,” and should help as the gatherer, homemaker, and bearer of children. The Biblical framing situates women as firmly intended to be helpful to men, suggesting that any other action would be outside the purpose of their creation. The first woman does act outside this purpose. The first people are allowed nearly anything they choose in this first world, so long as they do not touch one forbidden fruit. Evil, manifest in the story as a serpent, approaches the woman and suggests she eat it. After she eats it, she feeds some to her husband. Distinctly unhelpful behavior, this betrayal provokes pain and suffering unto humans:

I will intensify your toil in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children. Yet your urge shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you. To the man he said: Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, You shall not eat from it, Cursed is the ground because of you! In toil you shall eat its yield all the days of your life. Thorns and thistles it shall bear for you, and you shall eat the grass of the field. By the sweat of your brow, you shall eat bread, Until you return to the ground, from which you were taken; For you are dust, and to dust you shall return.

The woman’s disobedience spells calamity for humankind. Her disregard for the creator and temptation to evil dispels humans from the perfect Garden of Eden and dooms them to a life replete with misery. Even though the man also ate the fruit, he blames her: “The woman whom

152 (Genesis 2:18-2:24).
153 (Genesis 3:16-3:19).
you put here with me—she gave me fruit from the tree, so I ate it.”154 This creation story suggests that every human plague is the woman’s fault. It was the woman who ate the fruit, the woman who offered man the fruit, and the woman who brought trials and tribulations to all humankind. It was the woman who was responsible for sin. When women step outside their role as helpers, they risk bringing more evil to the world.

The story of Genesis cements women as subordinates and warns against any actions that overstep responsibilities meant for the realm of man. As the first chapter of the most-read book in the world, Genesis grounds religious and social history. The textual narratives sustain how women should be and what they should do, suggesting extreme consequences for acting outside of those created duties. It was this “God-given nature of woman” that helped impose barriers to feminist efforts for increased political power.155

Other Biblical narratives offer more detailed accounts of feminine responsibility. Another role, besides obedience to men, is to bear children (especially in pain). Mothers in the Bible are inextricable from the category of womanhood. The New Testament enmeshes a vision of ideal womanhood through the Virgin Mary. Birthing, raising, and sacrificing her holy son, Mary is venerated as the perfect example of a woman, enshrining the sacrificial nature of motherhood.156 Mary was selected to bear the Son of God because she had “found favor” with the creator:

Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I have no relations with a man?” And the angel said to her in reply, “The holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God… for nothing will be impossible for God.”157

Mary said, “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word.” Then the angel departed from her.158

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154 (Genesis 3:12).
156 Peters, Trust Women, 125.
157 (Luke 1:34-1:37)
158 (Luke 1:38)
Pure and accepting of all done unto her, Mary bears holy children as is her essential duty. The implications of this role reverberate—women without children continue to need to justify childlessness in a way that women with children do not. Mary, obedient and chaste, is the blueprint for women.

These two images of ideal womanhood are contrasted later in the Bible with derogatory characterizations of Black women. Three books in the Hebrew Bible mention Jezebel, the wife of King Ahab. Portrayed as “immoral, careless, domineering, and devious,” the royal Jezebel promises to kill the prophet Elijah and manipulates the men around her. Her name is associated with desires for power, violence, and promiscuity, creating a stereotype of a woman who “calls herself a prophetess, who teaches and misleads my servants to play the harlot and to eat food sacrificed to idols.” The Jezebel characterization, replete with myths of hypersexuality and promiscuity, has been applied to Black women in comparison to the characterization of Mary. If Mary, the chaste, pure, white, “True Woman,” is an ideal icon for women, Jezebel is her opposite, signifying depravity and unworthiness of respect. Biblical narratives like these help justify racial hierarchy, demeaning Black women and normalizing their subjugation.

Western women continue to deal with the Biblical narratives that sustain a “normal” set of roles and responsibilities. Foundational texts present a specific image of accepted behavior that foregrounds what feels available for how women should act. This identity construction

159 Lowe notes that this happens for women “positioned as potential good mothers,” most often women who are white, heterosexually married, and at least middle-class; Pam Lowe, Reproductive Health and Maternal Sacrifice: Women, Choice and Responsibility (London: Macmillan, 2016), 80.
160 Roberts, Killing the Black Body, 8.
161 Roberts, Killing the Black Body, 10.
163 Roberts, Killing the Black Body, 10-11.
affects all levels of social function and how people relate to one another. With these ideas being
the foundation of how women should engage in the world, it is no wonder that women are treated
in such inglorious ways. Everything is, after all, her fault.

Women for Motherhood: Power, Expression, and Capital

Power affects language, and language affects power. Narratives and norms about how
to engage in society exist for particular purposes. The standards created by the Bible are
sustained through language to serve the goal of exalting the reproductive capacity of women. 
Although Western religions can create supportive and revelatory communities, their function
within a larger structure of capital accumulation and systems of domination helps create and then
perpetuate a status quo. Christian religions, as borrowed from the Hebrew Bible, prominently
feature women through their biological capacity for reproduction. Creating an example of
woman as mother benefits state interests—men alone cannot reproduce, and nations need
children to maintain population wealth. Capitalist nations do not exist without workers, and
women produce the future laborers of the land. While not all women bear children and not all
child-bearers are women, it is within state incentive to make women feel a desire or obligation to
have children.

The language of womanhood intertwines with eventual motherhood under a dominant
social framework of mothering as imperative. Much of the constructed duty of women in the
story of Genesis abides by a narrative that women, as helpers and producers, should devote every
function of their bodies and selves to that goal. This framing relies upon women as responsible
for human suffering; the least she can do is fulfill her moral obligation to bear children. A
prevailing notion of maternal sacrifice follows women around the world: “proper” women raise

166 Peters, Trust Women, 124.
the welfare of children—born, unborn, or yet to be conceived—above any of their own choices or desires. The potential of the child is not limited to those already ex-utero. The unborn child has unlimited prospects as a future worker, relegating the fetus (or future fetus) to a commodity with inherent value in the possibility of contributions to a system of constant growth.

Construction of the woman’s role in the home is paramount for ensuring women remain “producers of the collective.”

These roles, however, are highly racialized. State interest in having women devote themselves to childbearing occurs only under certain circumstances. Race tempers the potential of the child. Although all children could theoretically serve the labor force, much of U.S. history desired the free labor of slave children. Reproduction in American slavery replenished the enslaved labor force because slave-born children immediately belonged to the slaveowner. White slaveowners could have unrestrained ownership and continued control of their labor force. While all children ensured the wealth of the nation, slave children provided continued domination. However, Black reproduction became undesirable after chattel slavery was made illegal in 1865. Where white children were beneficial for personal joy and national flourishing, Black children became a form of “moral decay.” After labor stopped being free and easily controlled, Black mothers were no longer fruitful to state interests and framed as corrupting reproduction through the transmission of inferior physical traits that caused Black poverty and marginality. Arguments of racial inferiority and eugenics then led to forced sterilization procedures in the 1970s. While the language and construction of the role of woman as mother

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167 Lowe, Reproductive Health and Maternal Sacrifice, 3.
168 Lowe, Reproductive Health and Maternal Sacrifice, 209.
169 Roberts, Killing the Black Body, 23.
170 Roberts, Killing the Black Body, 23.
171 Roberts, Killing the Black Body, 9.
172 Roberts, Killing the Black Body, 9.
becomes very relevant for discussing abortion framing, the impacts and extent of the framing vary significantly based on race and class.

Arguments that make abortion negotiable rest on a particular narrative of womanhood that is not universal. Vested interests by the state mean that expectations of motherhood are not experienced the same by all women. Careful rhetorical tools created reproduction as the preeminent goal for some women while penalizing it for others. Abortion rests on constructions like these about what women should do. Beyond the Biblical narrative, efforts to alienate the woman from the child and mobilize particular language in published narratives provide the baseline for later arguments about reproductive access. The following sections detail how these rhetorical constructions foreground reproductive rights conversations.

**Alienation**

Emphasizing motherhood as the pinnacle of womanhood happened through construction and framing over centuries, and examining rhetoric reveals how childbearing is implemented and maintained as supreme. Children are made the ultimate goal in efforts to separate the woman from her body. The woman’s role in creating the baby is elevated (only she can do it) and alienated (any woman can do it). Women suffer an alienation of self, particularly when it comes to reproductive organs.\(^{173}\) The four prongs of Karl Marx’s 1844 theory of alienation find that capitalism alienates workers from the product, the production process, the people they produce alongside, and the “human essence” itself. The worker is related to the product as “alien objects”—the more they put into commodities, the less they can put into themselves, and the more distant they feel from humanity.\(^{174}\)

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“Reproduction” has “product” in the word. Here, the product is a baby. When capitalism constructs the child as a product, it is much harder for the mother to see the child as a whole person and part of a larger shared community. Capital accumulation, as the responsibility of the child (and therefore the woman), is continuously incentivized through an imperative of reproductive control over the body. Although the woman’s responsibility is to produce, she is also less of an individual than of the “raw material” from which to extract the “product.” The woman is separated from the body that produces the child, separating her from the child itself. This alienation fragments the mother and child, with the mother lacking a sense of autonomy and the child becoming a commodity. Despite womanhood’s construction as intertwined with motherhood, the mother and child become distinct entities with mutually exclusive roles. The mother continues to produce the child, and the child continues to produce for the capitalist structure.

Since the role and purpose of the woman is to produce a child, the rhetoric of alienation separates the woman from feeling control over the self, constructing any function that does not contribute to maternity as fundamentally unfortunate. Bodily processes of menstruation and menopause are framed as “failed production” since neither function results in a child. Even though both of these processes are natural, literature and education frame them as the body’s authority structure having gone awry. Since the body should produce a child, the rhetoric of “failure” suggests an involuntary “out of control” reminder of the aging body that does not fill its most inherent role of “providing a safe, warm womb to nurture a man’s sperm.” These functions are stigmatized, blaming the woman for not fulfilling her only duty of contributing to

178 Martin, The Woman in the Body, 45.
179 Martin, The Woman in the Body, 45.
180 Martin, The Woman in the Body, 47.
capitalist accumulation. If the bodily processes result in a baby being born, it is considered a good or service in the interest of capital. The child is simultaneously a desirable working subject and a product to be used and exploited.

**Language**

The language patterns used to construct the child as a product appear in other instances. Framing theory helps us understand that word choice matters for our conception of the world. Constantly framed in particular ways (the helper, the bearer of children, the one ruled by man) for specific reasons (the continued accumulation and production of private capital) affects how women see themselves and their role. “Motherhood,” as the pinnacle for women, acts as a social structure that produces a normative conception of how to act through “experts, ‘rules’, stigma, and shame.” These narratives reverberate across society as an accepted standard sustained through specific language use and word choice.

Investigating framing and rhetoric reveals normative ideas about the women that produce discourses of right and wrong choices, employing subtle messaging to encourage the “right” choice. Feminist waves in the 20th century meant these norms evolved, changing what roles were “acceptable” for women. As women gained more political power, rhetoric became even more necessary for the state to ensure women continued to see maternity as preeminent. Expressions of the “out of control” nature of menstruation and the ability of women to provide “natural care for the young” internalize a norm that reproduction is of paramount importance. Rhetoric ensures the cycle continues.

References to women and female-specific body functions tend to be negative, reinforcing the Biblical framing of women as responsible for suffering. For example, textbook descriptions

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of the uterus create a negative understanding of the female body. The stomach and uterus have similar tasks—both contract and shed/regenerate of lining—but are framed with opposite connotations. As is the trend for women-specific bodily functions, stomachs are positive and uteruses are negative.\textsuperscript{184} Narratives like these further reinforce social norms and patriarchal positionality.

More broadly, general language related to women involves words like warm, soft, good, beautiful, holy, emotional, and subjective, often associated with the intuitive forces that cherish and conserve.\textsuperscript{185} Men, in contrast, are cold and hard, often associated with innovation, quantitative thinking, and “egoistic individualism.”\textsuperscript{186} Although this language is not as simple as a “good” versus a “bad,” it does reproduce essentialist binary thinking and enclose the roles and expectations of gender to fit neatly inside predetermined boxes. The pervasiveness of these frameworks makes gender roles seem crucial to social function, which in turn allows conversations about abortion to seem relevant and permissible.

\textbf{20th Century Implications of the Religious and Capitalist Framings}

Power, through religion, rhetoric, language, and capitalist alienation, creates a baseline ideal of womanhood that standardizes actions, roles, and expectations. Even before abortion became politically relevant in the 1960s and 1970s, women perceived themselves in particular ways, due in large part to the womanhood framings found in the Hebrew Bible, capitalist interest in reproduction, and language meant to stifle autonomy. The definition of womanhood that abortion arguments most concern the “cisgender, middle-class, heterosexual, married, [and the] non-primary-breadwinner,” which does not encompass all women but does provide a baseline for

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{184} Martin, \textit{The Woman in the Body}, 50.
\textsuperscript{185} Martin, \textit{The Woman in the Body}, 21; Frieden, \textit{The Feminine Mystique}, 239.
\textsuperscript{186} Martin, \textit{The Woman in the Body}, 21; Frieden, \textit{The Feminine Mystique}, 239.
\end{flushleft}
constructing the conditions of reproductive justice.\textsuperscript{187} The roles of this “traditional” mother included bearing and rearing children and guaranteeing the home ran smoothly for a comfortable space for men. The changing role of women throughout the 20th century allows for a discussion of framing evolution apart from and alongside contraception and reproductive freedom.

Gendered constructions of responsibility influenced female political presence before the turn of the 20th century, which marked the beginning of adaptations to power and role perception. The first 1914 wave of the American suffragette feminist movement marked a turning point for the desire of many American women to move outside the home, set in motion by global military conflicts. The 1917 Selective Service Act required all men between 21 and 45 to register for the draft, and over four million men left to fight.\textsuperscript{188} Most of “women’s work” before the draft occurred in the home, or “private” sphere, in contrast to the outside “public” sphere where men spent their time. Reproduction, children, and domestic duties in the private sphere appeared (through framing) natural for women. Because the private sphere was divorced from “productive” labor in the public sphere, maternal labor was thus not considered work. The construction of women as “natural” homemakers meant that if they drew attention to how exhausting duties in the home could be, they were then positioned as less-than-ideal workers and seen paradoxically as unfit for “public” work.\textsuperscript{189} These careful manipulations of rhetoric created a primary understanding that no other responsibilities should distract from the governing force of motherhood.

\textsuperscript{187} Margaret F. Gibson, ed., \textit{Queering Motherhood: Narrative and Theoretical Perspectives} (Ontario: Demeter Press, 2014), 6; For poorer women and women of color, this “helping” was in factories and grossly underpaid labor. The varied impacts of capitalist exploitation on women throughout the social strata are often left out of discussions of women’s roles and appear less frequently in writing on how feminism changed throughout the 20th century.

\textsuperscript{188} National Archives Foundation, “Mobilizing for War: The Selective Service Act in World War I,” accessed April 11, 2024, \url{https://www.archivesfoundation.org/documents/mobilizing-war-selective-service-act-world-war/}.

\textsuperscript{189} Lowe, \textit{Reproductive Health and Maternal Sacrifice}, 27.
Wartime changes in the global context marked a mass shift in women’s role outside the home; when men were not available to accumulate capital, women had to contribute labor in the public sphere. Continuing to abide by the role of the “helper,” women transitioned from the home sphere to the public sphere. Taking jobs to support their families, they became primary caregivers and providers. These new responsibilities taught women they could work outside the home, prompting a turning point when the men returned from war.

Betty Frieden’s 1963 *The Feminine Mystique* dissects the mythology and the rhetoric that defined what it could mean to be a woman and a mother in the aftermath of the post-war turning point. She finds that rhetoric emerging from advertising (after men returned) found new ways to keep women in the home. The “feminine mystique” says that the most valuable obligation for women is the fulfillment of their own femininity. The nature of woman, under this narrative, is not inferior to the nature of man but is inherently different. Female nature is sacred, close to the origin of life, utterly suited to the home, and finds satisfaction through sexual passivity, male domination, and maternal nurturing.  

Femininity has a special place in society, and though it cannot (and should not) be understood, women should respect it and not try to be like men. This rhetoric ensured the same systems of capital accumulation had readily available workers. Though they were needed to fill in gaps left by the wars, permanently branching out of their set helper roles would have been detrimental to the fabric of capitalism. The feminine mystique subverts original conceptions of male superiority to sneakily convince women to return to the home.

This construction of femininity sets the nebulous and vague category of the woman as inherently separate from the man. Validating the role of women by proclaiming positive difference, the feminine mystique mobilizes rhetoric to create an understanding of the perfect woman who knows her role is justly located in the sphere of the home. Frieden maintains that

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this mystique is overwhelmingly powerful; invoking and manipulating the woman as a “subordinate helper,” the mystique listens to women who do not want to be inferior, allowing them to be special and unique right back in their place at home. The feminine mystique also indistinctly centers motherhood as “a total way of life.”

Motherhood again became peak fulfillment for women: creating new life was the best way for women to contribute to society. The feminine mystique, as it appeared in media and magazine advertising, generally expressed that there was no fulfillment or future for women other than giving birth.

The mystique framework permanently intertwining the roles of woman and mother limits how women perceive their potential apart from motherhood.

Beyond status quo maintenance of keeping women in the home, the feminine mystique encouraged accumulation and capitalism. If women were out and about in the workplace, not only were they taking jobs from men, they were not staying home and buying things. Isolated discussions of femininity and the proper role of women omit that the “real business of America is business.” Frieden maintains that corporations figured out women were chief customers and would buy more if “kept in the underused, nameless-yearning, energy-to-get-rid-of state of being housewives.” Marketing for women was all about new products they could buy for the home:

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When “properly manipulated” and relegated to a home space that did not adequately fulfill human creative needs, American housewives could find “the sense of identity, purpose, creativity, the self-realization, even the sexual joy they lack—by the buying of things.” Created before the 1950s, marketing, advertising, and a careful financial backing of rhetoric cemented onto the existing stereotype of the feminine mystique. The money spent by American businesses disseminated persuasive images to flatter the housewife, “diverting her guilt and disguising her growing sense of emptiness.” The fundamental role of women dating back to the Biblical world could then continue in the interest of capital accumulation.

The feminine mystique was a tool of control—women had become too confident, forgetting their place was as the “helper” and the homemaker. Covert propaganda employed narratives of proper femininity to restore the woman’s sense of prestige and self-esteem as an

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196 Frieden, *The Feminine Mystique*, 301.
actual or potential mother.\textsuperscript{198} The glorification of the “woman’s role” is historically situated, seeming proportional to “society’s reluctance to treat women as complete human beings.” Meaningless details built up the importance of the role to conceal its true emptiness and lack of meaningful function.\textsuperscript{199} Traditional categories were unsettled and in flux, and at a potential turning point away from subordination, the feminine mystique tapped into existing capitalist frameworks to create new justifications for the proper role of women.

White woman subordination was, however, different from that of Black women and women of color. The feminine mystique created a framing through which to subjugate women subtly, but Black women were subject to much more overt oppression. Where white women were required to be “nurturing mothers, dutiful housekeepers, and gentle companions to their husbands,” women of color underwent backbreaking field and factory labor.\textsuperscript{200} Before the rise of white woman liberty and suffragette movements in the 1910s, women who worked for wages instead of taking care of children were considered “deviant” and “neglectful.”\textsuperscript{201} Women outside the purview of the feminine mystique were still susceptible to controlling narratives.

The 20th century set ideal and inferior standards for Black women. As capitalist power tried to tamp down white women moving outside the home, they also subordinated Black women through other norms. Black women were to remain submissive and “helpful” to the racially controlling system, not like the Black women who worked independently. The exemplary narrative was of “Mammy,” the Black female house servant who cared for her master’s children. The asexual and maternal “embodiment of the ideal Black woman,” Mammy had no authority or ideology, meant only to supervise while being supervised.\textsuperscript{202} Projected as the standard, Mammy

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\textsuperscript{198} Frieden, \textit{The Feminine Mystique}, 358.
\textsuperscript{199} Frieden, \textit{The Feminine Mystique}, 340.
\textsuperscript{200} Roberts, \textit{Killing the Black Body}, 15.
\textsuperscript{201} Roberts, \textit{Killing the Black Body}, 15.
\end{flushleft}
was in contrast to the degenerate “welfare queen.” The stereotype of the welfare queen was an immoral, neglectful, and promiscuous Black mother on public assistance deliberately having children to get more money from taxpayers. Mammy set an example of a subservient Black woman installed within the white home as an underpaid aide, and the welfare queen was her antithesis: not working, not helping, heedlessly reproducing, and eschewing the responsibilities of societal contribution. Mass media and politicians have shown the narrative of the mythical welfare queen to implant a link between race and welfare, framing Black women as manipulative and constantly siphoning taxpayer money. American social policy has an incentive to subjugate women in the interest of capital, though moderated by race. The so-called “corrupting tendency” of Black motherhood allows racist narratives to keep Black women subservient.

Rhetoric and language play a significant part in understanding how and why women are treated and understood in particular ways. Biblical narratives and capitalist idealism give way to word choice and myths about who and what women should be. These constructions and perceptions of “proper” womanhood and motherhood remove agency from all women. The extensive project of narrative-building creates a foundation upon which states can question bodily autonomy and agency. As severe influences on how behavior is both externally and internally regulated, these preeminent gender roles appear again when a woman does not want to be a mother or when a woman takes action to avoid motherhood. These elements of framing demonstrate the baseline construction of womanhood that allows abortion to become an issue. Deeply intersectional, these frameworks of motherhood affect abortion access. How does this construction of motherhood moderate the framing of abortion? How does it set up an instance of conflict?

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204 Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*, 111.
The Historical: Abortion in Contemporary Social Action

With this rhetoric and intent in mind, we can find that abortion is negotiable because we understand that women have an overwhelming duty to bear children for the continued wealth of the nation. The framing of womanhood and motherhood provides a foothold for arguments about controlling or disallowing body autonomy. Abortion, as an actualization of constraints on bodily agency for women, only became a contestable political issue in the 20th century. Formally defined as the deliberate termination of a human pregnancy, humans have participated in abortive practices for centuries.\textsuperscript{206} The United States saw significant opposition only in the latter half of the 1900s. President Dwight D. Eisenhower said in 1959 that birth control “is not a proper political or government activity or function or responsibility” and “not our business.”\textsuperscript{207} Abortion was then somehow elevated enough to warrant a 1973 Supreme Court decision and then a 2022 reversal.

The 1970s saw the U.S. Republican party transition from a pro-choice majority to a party platform that included an anti-abortion constitutional amendment.\textsuperscript{208} His first year of presidency (1969) saw Richard Nixon expanding family planning initiatives and advising congressional Republicans to be silent about abortion. But by 1972, Nixon was speaking publicly about “his belief in the sanctity of human life—including the sanctity of the yet unborn.”\textsuperscript{209} History professor Daniel K. Williams cites abortion policy as transforming the GOP from a mainline Protestant party into a party composed of conservative Catholics and evangelicals.\textsuperscript{210} 1970s Republican voters were, on average, more “pro-choice” than Democratic voters, but by 2009,

\textsuperscript{207} PBS American Experience, “A Timeline of Contraception,” accessed April 12, 2024, \url{https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/pill-timeline/}.
\textsuperscript{209} Louis Kriesberg, \textit{Fighting Better}, 147-148.
\textsuperscript{210} Williams, “GOP Abortion Strategy,” 514.
only 26% of Republicans identified as pro-choice.\textsuperscript{211} Abortion changed the tenor and stance of the party with lasting effects into the next century. The following section follows the abortion conversation throughout the 20th-century United States. Particular constructions of womanhood allow abortion relevance, but it took concerted political efforts to make abortion a concern. Efforts to increase reproductive agency succeeded an increase in political power and the 1920 right to vote for white women. Access to abortion, contraception, and other elements of women’s reproductive lives did not feature prominently in the executive, judicial, or legislative sphere in the United States until the 20th century.

### Pre-1960s: Contraceptive Development

Reproductive agency often conjures access to abortion, but its early foundations intertwine with different methods of contraception. Even apart from abortion, early feminist movements used birth control as emblematic of reproductive liberty and a sign of increased control over their bodies.\textsuperscript{212} Abortion procedures came into public contention around the 1960s on the heels of earlier decade conversations about contraception. The first half of the 20th century (and the end of the 19th century) saw contraception as illegal in theory but not necessarily in practice. Before the development of the birth control pill in the 1950s, the theoretically-illegal-birth-control methods were physical implements like condoms, sponges, and diaphragms. These methods were criminalized as “obscene material” under the 1873 anti-obscenity Comstock Law, making it illegal to disseminate them across state lines.\textsuperscript{213} Some individual state laws (notably Connecticut) used Comstock for further restrictions, barring not

\textsuperscript{211} Williams, “GOP Abortion Strategy,” 513.  
\textsuperscript{212} Roberts, \textit{Killing the Black Body}, 56.  
\textsuperscript{213} PBS American Experience, “A Timeline of Contraception.”
only the advertising and dissemination of contraceptives but also their use and related medical advice.\textsuperscript{214}

Though technically illegal, birth control was used away from public discussion and scrutiny. Since reproduction fell within the private sphere, it was not a primary focus of attention for the state and legal arena. But as early suffragettes wanted to increase political power, efforts were made to expand access to reproductive services. Planned Parenthood’s creation in 1916 came alongside those early feminists and funder Katherine McCormick’s husband’s schizophrenia diagnosis. Driven by a fear that the disease was hereditary, McCormick vowed not to have children and funded her new commitment to contraception.\textsuperscript{215} The initial goal of Planned Parenthood was to provide instruction and access to birth control and methods of contraception for medical reasons. As was the repertoire of the first wave of feminism, these services were for white women. Clinics opened around the country in the 1930s to provide birth control access, though official segregation meant the clinics were only for white women.\textsuperscript{216} Continued state interest in Black babies for labor meant that the agency of reproductive liberty was not universal.

Prominent birth control supporters like Margaret Sanger, Katherine McCormick, and John Rock sought to increase access to contraceptives to increase agency and political power for white women. Various frame constructions convinced the white public of its usefulness and garnered support. Where the origins of birth control were radical and about agency, rhetoric after World War I veered towards a tool to regulate poor women, immigrants, and Black Americans.\textsuperscript{217} Initial framing emphasized women’s right to sexual gratification, which cost support from the women’s movements that emphasized chastity and maternal virtue. Contraceptives were then

\textsuperscript{214} Sarah Igo, \textit{The Known Citizen: A History of Privacy in Modern America} (Harvard University Press, 2018), 147.
\textsuperscript{215} PBS American Experience, “A Timeline of Contraception.”
\textsuperscript{216} Roberts, \textit{Killing the Black Body}, 77.
advocated for through a eugenics frame to make the framing more applicable to a broader audience, giving the movement both the authority of reputable science and the mission of serving the nation’s interests. Not only did birth control support freedom and health for women, “it was also an essential element of America’s quest for racial betterment.”\textsuperscript{218} This eugenic framing became crucial for spreading the gospel of contraceptives to American women. The strength of multiple frames meant birth control and reproductive agency were becoming increasingly acceptable.

**1960s: *Griswold* and Privacy**

Frames of freedom and national interests helped change the conversation around contraception by the time the FDA approved the birth control pill in 1960.\textsuperscript{219} The first sixty years of the 20th century saw growing political power for white women and increased bodily autonomy. The same decades saw intentional actions by the state to regulate Black women and women of color. Growing movements towards racial equality amid the 1964 Civil Rights Act meant the state had a new interest in curbing “undesirable” population growth. Reproduction was encouraged when Black babies would grow up to add to a free labor force through slavery and increase profit. But when Black babies might grow up to have equal access to civil rights and labor, reproduction was no longer desirable for the state. Though the direct outcome was different, the theme of regulating Black women’s childbearing to achieve social objectives was the same.\textsuperscript{220} Birth control advocates marketed the pill to Southern officials with the promise that it could help reduce the number of Black people on public relief.\textsuperscript{221} Different frames for the same topic could serve different direct purposes.

\textsuperscript{218} Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*, 72.
\textsuperscript{219} PBS American Experience, “A Timeline of Contraception.”
\textsuperscript{220} Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*, 56.
\textsuperscript{221} Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*, 77.
Interests of white women alongside interests of the state meant there was an uptick in support for birth control and contraceptive access. As popular conversation moved in favor of birth control, Catholic Pope Paul VI created a Papal Commission to figure out how many in the Church supported the use of the birth control pill and if Church doctrine should change from opposing all forms of artificial birth control. Ahead of that 1964 Commission, both religious leaders and lay people supported the approval of the pill for Catholics. When it came to religious opinions about contraceptives, evangelicals were overwhelmingly indifferent to the “Catholic issue.” But as Catholics started to support artificial contraception, the tide began to shift toward legalization.

Estelle Griswold, the executive director of the Planned Parenthood League of Connecticut, and C. Lee Buxton, the chair of Yale Medical School’s Obstetrics Department, noticed the growing access and support for contraceptives amid continued legal restrictions. By 1961, middle-class white women had managed to secure relatively easy access to contraceptives for a generation. Opening a clinic to offer contraceptive counseling to married women, Griswold and Buxton hoped to challenge the restrictive Connective state law banning contraceptives. Shut down almost immediately, Griswold’s lawsuit to protect the clinic made it to the Supreme Court.

The eventual decision in *Griswold v. Connecticut* (1965) aligned with the movement toward reproductive liberty and rested on a Supreme Court movement toward a right to privacy. Until the 1960s, the concept of “privacy” was not codified by law, taken primarily as an assumed
bundle of protection for people and their property. The *Griswold* decision said that a “right to privacy” can be inferred from the Bill of Rights, preventing states from restricting contraceptive use by married couples. The combination of Fifth Amendment protections against self-incrimination, Fourteenth Amendment Due Process, and Ninth Amendment enumerated rights led the Court to an argument about a relationship “lying within the zone of privacy created by several fundamental constitutional guarantees.”

The two dissenters on the Griswold decision agreed that the Connecticut law was “uncommonly silly” but took issue with the inference of a Constitutional right to privacy. Reproductive freedom was not commonly associated with privacy, so while using the new doctrine resolved the issue on paper, elevating privacy to constitutional rights status meant it was legally contestable. The privacy doctrine then meant governments could choose nonintervention in the private sphere, a decision denounced by feminists for its permission of women’s subordination rather than women’s autonomy.

Defining privacy as protectable raised further questions over what privacy was, what could be considered private, and what control the state had over said privacy. Creating a neutral “hands-off” approach while affirming the existence of a “right to privacy” did not address the harms of policing intimate life. The case conceptualized a discernable line between private and public, which was dangerous because it could not account for every possible iteration of what was considered private. Historian Sarah Igo writes that the attempt to create tangible borders to

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226 Igo, *The Known Citizen*, 144.
227 *Griswold v. Connecticut*, 381 U.S. 479 (1965)
228 Due process says that no person should be deprived of life, liberty, or property without due process of law; *Griswold v. Connecticut*, 381 U.S. 479 (1965); This privacy decision had a little bit of precedent—*NAACP v. Alabama* ruled in favor of political privacy and *Mapp v. Ohio* decreed the privacy of the home.
229 *Griswold v. Connecticut*, 381 U.S. 479 (1965)
230 Igo, *The Known Citizen*, 158.
232 Igo, *The Known Citizen*, 158.
233 Igo, *The Known Citizen*, 181.
privacy made the rhetoric seem boundless, as if “the Court’s attempt to define the claim only made its contours blurrier.” Naming a right to privacy affected how the public understood the control women could claim over their bodies and the home sphere. The framing of a “right” changed what was acceptable and opened space for questions about what else the state could regulate.

Between *Griswold* in 1965 and *Roe v. Wade* in 1973, the interpretation and urgency of reproductive rights in the United States changed significantly. As the *Griswold* decision unfolded, political parties were generally unconcerned with contraception. Politicians and citizens alike approached abortion much more as a health and medical concern than a social or political one. In the classical spirit of limited government and individual liberty, the Republican Party favored letting the home be the home. As in the party’s tradition of support for middle-class morality and Protestant values, the 1960s GOP had a “moderately progressive stance” on women’s rights and birth control and was the first major party to endorse the Equal Rights Amendment. Even though abortion was technically illegal, the popular understanding was that the decision to have an abortion was a “difficult private matter.” Planned Parenthood had the support of prominent Republicans like Senator Prescott Bush and his son George H.W. Bush. California’s 1967 bill to legalize abortion was signed into law by future President Ronald Reagan. The Republican platform to a right to privacy independent of government control meant that it was not evident that Republicans would have a stance on abortion.

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The timeline of the Griswold decision also aligned with public opinion polls indicating a majority of Americans supported the legalization of “therapeutic” abortion. The conversation began to change in the transition into the 1970s, beginning in part with Pope Paul VI’s 1968 rejection of the birth control pill against the recommendations of the Papal Commission. The language and framing of privacy affected how Americans thought about abortion and contraception. The Feminine Mystique was published during the Griswold case and aligned with the broader sentiment of white woman reproductive liberty as they recognized manipulation into staying at home. As white women reconceptualized their “role” alongside new possibilities for reproductive freedom, state control over reproductive decisions for women of color reduced the capacity for collective liberation. Framings of “privacy,” however nebulous, did not include all women and fell short of what was needed to cement bodily autonomy in the eyes of the white public. Griswold’s timeline and decision framework adjacent to state interests in reproductive control (as tempered by general perceptions of women) helped lay conditions for a political takeover.

1970s: Nixon, Roe, and Evangelical Attention

When Nixon launched his 1972 reelection campaign, GOP strategists sought ways to secure critical demographics to win the election. Their theory, developed over the course of two years, was to implement a “Catholic strategy” to improve electoral prospects with a religion that had traditionally voted Democrat. Since the Pope had just rejected both contraception and abortion, Catholics aligned with the Supreme Pontiff may vote Republican. If the party added a “temporary political ploy” of an anti-abortion stance, it could serve dual purposes of securing some Catholic support and also deflecting attention from other narratives under fire in the

239 Williams, “GOP Abortion Strategy,” 515.
240 PBS American Experience, “A Timeline of Contraception.”
241 Williams, “GOP Abortion Strategy,” 517.
coming election, like Republican opposition to racial integration. The resistance of White, conservative, southern Republicans to desegregate their schools was not how the party wanted to present itself going into Nixon’s second term. Opposition to abortion became a “convenient diversion” to distract from their motivation to defend racial segregation in evangelical institutions. Abortion could be a more profitable frame through which to win support.

Nixon initially resisted the idea of an anti-abortion “Catholic strategy.” His first term had already defied some Catholic values in expanding government family planning, declaring that “no American woman should be denied access to family planning services because of her economic condition,” so he was worried that the plan would not work and that shifting to the right on abortion would alienate traditional Republican supporters. However, news articles about the Democratic presidential nominee after his Massachusetts primary win decreed George McGovern’s popularity as dependent on public ignorance of his positions. One opponent in the primary told the press, “The people don’t know McGovern is for amnesty, abortion and legalization of pot... Once middle America—Catholic Middle America, in particular—find this out, he’s dead.”

Taking a right-wing position on abortion ahead of this race meant Nixon had a chance of securing this demographic of voters, even if previous policies and standpoints reflected different ideologies. Williams quotes the Washington Star’s June 1972 analysis: “The President, a Quaker, has been courting [Catholics] as if making his first communion were the most important thing in

243 Glenza, “Historical accident.”
245 Williams, “GOP Abortion Strategy,” 518.
246 Williams, “GOP Abortion Strategy,” 517.
his life.” Using political plays with “rhetorical ammunition” to frame the election in opposition to a “radical” opponent proved successful. The 1972 electoral map was sweeping:

Though the landslide was not due entirely to Nixon’s Catholic strategy, his efforts to build a conservative Catholic base were the first of its kind for Republicans (and ultimately successful). The election timeline and the status of contraceptive acceptability meant that even though the Roe decision approached a legal landscape primed for it, there were already disturbances in social, political, and religious conversations about abortion. The Roe decision, released only two months after Nixon’s reelection, arrived when the “Catholic strategy” had won and there were more relevant executive crises (for example, the Watergate scandal). Roe v. Wade (1973) dealt

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251 Williams, “GOP Abortion Strategy,” 523.
with a Texas law that declared abortion a felony “except by a doctor’s orders to save a woman’s life.” The precedent set when the Court ruled that the state may not regulate plaintiff Jane Roe’s (or anyone’s) right to choose abortion prompted severe backlash.

*Roe* used similar legal foundations as *Griswold*. The decision found that the “right to privacy” the Court had found in the Fifth, Ninth, and Fourteenth Amendments was broad enough to encompass whether or not to terminate a pregnancy. Officially, “A person may choose to have an abortion until a fetus becomes viable, based on the right to privacy contained in the Due Process Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment.” The decision had massive implications for public sentiment. The Supreme Court has concentrated rhetorical power to shape public understanding, significantly influencing the tenor of the conversation:

Public commentary on *Roe*, for example, quickly adopted its language and lead, cementing the view that abortion, once considered a public health matter or issue of medical privacy, turned fundamentally on individual women’s autonomy and ‘choice.’ Much of the criticism of the Court’s privacy rulings from *Griswold* onward has centered on the impoverishment of discourses of reproductive freedom, the way abortion in particular became locked to ‘privacy’ and ‘choice’ rather than gender or economic equality, becoming entangled in a bitter, single-issue politics.

Framing the case as an individual “right to privacy” proved consequential for legal scholars and public thought alike. Legalizing abortion while moving it away from a medical sphere into a contestable “choice” sphere managed to demobilize advocates of abortion rights while mobilizing opponents.

The convergence of Nixon’s “Catholic strategy,” the *Roe* decision, and the changes in the self-perceived roles of women happened at the same time as prominent evangelical leaders

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253 The decision also implicated the First and Fourth Amendments in the “right to privacy,” using cases *Stanley v. Georgia, Terry v. Ohio, Katz v. United States*, and *Boyd v. United States*; Igo, *The Known Citizen*, 93.
254 *Roe v. Wade*, 410 U.S. 113 (1973)
255 Igo, *The Known Citizen*, 159.
already seeking to mobilize a religious right. While politicians had other concerns, religious activists after Roe galvanized a national pro-life movement at the grassroots level, spurred by Catholic and evangelical communities experiencing deep anger about the ruling. Conservative evangelical activists like Paul Weyrich and Jerry Falwell used abortion fervor to mobilize everyday voters, creating a New Right religious movement opposed to feminism and reproductive access that gained steam at the 1976 Republican National Convention. The framing timeline tapped into, solidified, and consolidated a conservative base that tried to make opposing access to abortion seem central to identity and agenda.

Political strategists and conservative activists had made abortion a source of everyday attention and concern. Effects of the framing decisions would appear later—when Gerald Ford assumed the presidency in 1974, his platform was to rescind Roe and return decisions about abortions to the states. He quickly found that evangelical efforts to galvanize a New Right were successful: right-to-life activists were no longer satisfied to return to the pre-Roe status quo. The frame had resonated, the movement had grown, the political ploy was no longer temporary, and going back was impossible. When the time came for the 1976 election, Democratic candidate Jimmy Carter assumed a pro-choice stance with a party platform endorsing Roe. The Democrat adoption of abortion in response to Republican rejection gave a final push in alienating Carter from a “traditionally Democratic Catholic constituency.” Abortion had caused Catholics to move away from the more culturally liberal party to align themselves with the party claiming itself “pro-life.”

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258 Williams, “GOP Abortion Strategy,” 525.
260 Kriesberg, Fighting Better, 146.
262 Williams, “GOP Abortion Strategy,” 528.
The 1976 Democratic platform’s acceptance of *Roe* became a rallying cry for social conservatives to build a religious coalition in the GOP that made opposition to abortion a central theme. Televangelists like Jerry Falwell spoke publicly on the sins of rising abortion rates and concerns about sexual promiscuity, weaving anti-gay and anti-abortion strands into a “perversely labeled pro-family agenda.” Attacks on abortion access for white women connected to the demand for a return to traditional patriarchal gender roles with the woman in the home having babies. The state’s “pro-family” scheme, however, was only trying to convince white women to have babies. The 1970s saw programs to coerce poor Black women into sterilization, regulating their reproduction through government-paid doctors. Outspoken anti-promiscuity “principles” were not separate from the Jezebel myth of hyperfertility, understandings of which led to the government paying doctors to do elective hysterectomies on poor Black and Puerto Rican women.

Over one decade, abortion transitioned from a medical issue that no one talked about to a single-issue political issue that shaped conservative identities. By the close of the 1970s, abortion occupied a different manipulated rhetorical space. While abortion was not the only cause for the partisan identity shift, taking a conservative stance on abortion suggested other conservative agendas could find a home, moving the whole party to the right. The combination of factors that elevated abortion to an extensive issue points to how reframing commonly accepted social constructions can grow and warp a conflict. Republican political strategists did not know how their careful engineering would hit long-understood framings of womanhood and motherhood,

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263 Williams, “GOP Abortion Strategy,” 513.
264 Williams, “GOP Abortion Strategy,” 533; Silliman et al., *Undivided Rights*, 32.
267 Williams, “GOP Abortion Strategy,” 534.
nor how the timing with efforts from other interest groups could reshape the party and create lasting political turmoil.

**Conclusion: Why Abortion?**

Under *Roe v. Wade*’s protection, abortion was legal in the United States for nearly fifty years. For every year following the first anniversary of the case, anti-abortion activists took to Washington, D.C., for the annual “March for Life” to protest abortion legality. Support for the pro-life movement became a necessary prerequisite for Republican party presidential nominees, and as of 2011, a majority of church-attending Catholics voted Republican in presidential elections.268 President Donald Trump, “pro-choice” before his political career, adopted a vehement anti-choice stance by the time and throughout his tenure in office.269 The abortion conflict reached a new escalation in early 2022 when the Supreme Court, granted a radical conservative majority by President Trump’s appointees, ruled 5-4 to overturn *Roe v. Wade*.270 *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization* overruled *Roe* precedent, calling the 1973 ruling “faulty historical analysis.” The justices concluded that the Constitution does not confer a right to abortion and the authority to regulate should belong to the state.271

*Dobbs* was a monumental blow for abortion rights activists and a tremendous victory for anti-abortion crusaders. Understanding how women are perceived and received, how mothers become exemplars, how reproductive liberty arguments came about, and how a codified “right to privacy” changed legal connotations reveal how influential framing is in the making of conflicts. Microcosms of framing through Biblical standards, narrative language, privacy, and liberty

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269 Kriesberg, *Fighting Better*, 149.
allowed elements of framing and rhetoric to come together writ large to create the space for abortion to become a concern.

Simultaneous framings of abortion as a “human rights campaign” (akin to capital punishment) opened more space for abortion access to become a “social justice issue.” When bodily autonomy became a quest to promote justice and equal access to reproductive services, social justice framing took over to move abortion into a liberal zone of interest. Abortion, in 2024, is considered a social justice issue. In some ways, abortion is a perfect social justice issue. The arguments about individual liberty and binaries fit well into the framework, though they also fit well into the shortcomings. This attention to framing construction shows the extent of factors that make a social justice framework ultimately inefficient for actually transforming the conversation about abortion. Abortion is much more than the liberal conception of a social justice issue premised on inequitable distribution of resources. The complications of long-standing beliefs, religious attention, political turmoil, and intentional elevation work together to make abortion a social conflict. Examining abortion provides us with a case study to understand where social justice can legitimately fall short and why reframing into domestic social conflict is so necessary.

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272 Williams, “GOP Abortion Strategy,” 516.
Chapter 3: Reframing Toward Conflict

Social construct theory tells us that social movements are contextually understood—a context dependent on our lived experience and background. Framing theory tells us that our conceptualization of movements is open to interpretation based on different contexts, making them contestable and negotiable. This reframing can solidify beliefs and meanings, mobilize constituents, and change the potential outcomes and possibilities for solutions. Although reframing can be individual, its applications can also be broad—from classrooms to mass media to social media and blogs.

The frame of liberal social justice applied to social movements around the United States is ineffective in constructing problems as conducive to change. Though social justice and conflict do not need to be one or the other, not having a layer of conflict limits actionable possibilities. Social justice frames encompass dozens of political movements for greater equality and abide by a specific repertoire of contention. Discussions of abortion access in the United States as a “social justice” issue means the actual dimensions and solutions for the problem inherently fall short. The reliance on injustice and emphasis on individual liberty does not thoroughly consider the layers of factors that have elevated abortion to a political issue, removing elements of harm, power, and sources of injustice.

Dissection of its foundations reveals that abortion is not intrinsically about injustice. The conditions that make abortion contestable (the intertwining of built-up conceptions about the role of women and their bodies, capitalist modes of productivity, political and rhetorical constructions of difference, racialized understandings of who has the right to bodily control, etc.) reveal the complicated layers that implicate systems of harm and control. The limited definition of liberal social justice as inspired by individual injustice does not fully encompass where abortion
in/access comes from and where it may go. The following section will problematize the current framing of abortion and make a case for reshifting into conflict. Abortion, here, is a vehicle to talk about the consequences of the binary liberal conception of social justice for social movements. Making the case for conflict hopes to provide a broader vision to map onto other conflicts. The case study displays how social justice frameworks are ineffective in a case study and why social conflicts offer different possibilities (like an opening into new literature and scholarship). A more complicated understanding of abortion can reinspire new solutions for abortion access and for other social justice movements.

**The Current Framing of Abortion**

Abortion is constructed and framed as a liberal social justice issue from unequal barriers to agency for women and their bodies. Abortion, however, also involves outside actors, actions, and incompatible beliefs—state actors get in the way of reproductive services through physical legislation, harm, and rhetorical control. Peace and Conflict Studies scholarship has called abortion a conflict, but the term has not made it fully into public consciousness. Between controlling understandings of women, the created supremacy of motherhood, careful political plays, and evangelical desires for power, the characteristics of the abortion conflict place it into a tenuous landscape. Dissecting the clashing values that abortion rests on provides a new framework for understanding abortion as a conflict.

Abortion is but one example of how the U.S. context frames conflict as “social justice issues.” Abortion is also a victim of framing within the scope of the issue itself. Understood medically, abortion is a procedure to remove fetal tissue from a uterus. Understood politically, abortion is a human rights concern for everyday citizens, religious leaders, and elected officials.

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273 Silliman et al., *Undivided Rights*, 12.
alike. Conversations about abortion most often rely on a binary conception of “pro-life” (opposition to abortion to protect the life of the fetus) or “pro-choice” (advocating legal abortion to respect the bodily autonomy of women). The following sections will dissect how each of the binaries is limiting in its own way. The political elevation and framing of abortion as an issue of social control creates significant contests and space for intractable dissent.

“Pro-Life”

Interchanged at times with “anti-abortion,” “pro-life” refers to people or groups who believe that life begins at the moment of conception, all life is valuable, and abortion should be illegal to respect the sanctity of life. The contemporary “pro-life” movement dates to around the 1960s, increasing in intensity after *Roe v. Wade* in 1973. Abortion and birth control were formally illegal throughout the public thalidomide scandal and the German measles epidemic that wrought thousands of cases of infant death and fetal deformity. The outcry over these cases, combined with increasing feminist rhetoric of bodily autonomy, brought contraceptives and abortion more into everyday conversation. The first responses opposing abortion were primarily Catholics following the social teaching of the life and dignity of the human person and instruction from Pope Paul VI after his 1964 Papal Commission.

After *Roe*, other religious and evangelical groups joined the anti-abortion fervor, creating a frame that centered on the fetus apart from the mother (made possible through earlier

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276 Thalidomide, a sleeping pill, was marketed to women as a remedy for morning sickness without ever having been tested on pregnant women. It caused severe birth defects across Europe but the FDA refused to allow it in the United States. A rubella epidemic in the 1960s caused thousands of stillbirths and an estimated 20,000 babies born with congenital rubella syndrome (CRS).

277 French, “The Great Hypocrisy of the Pro-Life Movement.”

278 *Humanae Vitae* (1968) rejected the recommendations of the Papal Commission on birth control and reaffirmed that abortion is forbidden.
alienation). "Pro-life" rhetoric shifted away from an approach that defended the fetus in the name of the sanctity of all human life to an approach that named itself civil rights for the fetus. The movement tried to link their campaign to human rights (or social justice) issues as a vehicle to make the fetus a victim and the activist a revolutionary. "Pro-life" then aligned itself with the language of individual rights and family values. Some religious groups tried to shift the language back to defending human life, with Cardinal Joseph Bernardin popularizing the term “consistent life ethic” in a 1983 sermon. The consistent life ethic maintains that human life is always valuable (from “womb to tomb”) and one must be “pro-life” across the board: “When human life is considered ‘cheap’ or easily expendable in one area, eventually nothing is held as sacred and all lives are in jeopardy.” The consistent life ethic, however, is not always highlighted in the rhetoric of the most passionate anti-abortion activists. While the framing pre- and post-Roe continued to be about fetal rights, the change in the foundation from abortion as one detractor of the sanctity of human life to abortion as the primary concern prompted high levels of criticism.

Most of the critiques of the “pro-life” movement are about the post-Roe singular focus on criminalizing abortion despite the word choice of general “life.” Some use “anti-abortion” framing to keep the focus on the disputed policy of choosing to have an abortion without government regulation. For example, Planned Parenthood’s website derides the movement, writing that “the only life many of them are concerned with is the life of the fertilized egg, embryo, or fetus” and that pro-life advocates are much less concerned about the lives and welfare

279 Holland, “Abolishing Abortion.”
280 “Some activists said legal abortion was worse than the Jewish Holocaust.”
281 Holland, “Abolishing Abortion.”
282 Holland, “Abolishing Abortion.”
284 Kriesberg, Fighting Better, 148.
of children post-birth. They go so far as to say, “Many people who call themselves ‘pro-life’ support capital punishment (AKA the death penalty) and oppose child welfare legislation.”

While overly generalizing about individuals, the states with the most restrictive abortion laws and heaviest “pronatalist position” are often the same states that fail to provide adequate healthcare, housing, food, or education for their poor residents. These states seem more focused on the fetus in utero than the child’s life after birth.

The “pro-life” movement weaves its anti-abortion rhetoric into existing constructed social narratives of women, touching on their roles, identities, and decisions. The vision of ideal white patriarchal gender roles develops all women as potential mothers with a primary responsibility to bear children. The focus on the sanctity of fetal life at every cost echoes themes of the sacrificial nature of motherhood. The life of the fetus, even when it cannot support itself outside the mother, receives equal respect to the woman living in society. Women have a set duty, and abortion precludes that duty. As reminiscent of racialized trends for motherhood, “pro-life” is also primarily for white babies, not babies of color. Black women are often excluded from anti-choice rhetoric from historical precedent that “waves of primarily white (male) protesters were not seeking to save their babies.”

The focus on abortion (and only abortion) is then unconcerned with other reproductive control measures like forced sterilization, contraceptive pressures, and the lack of support for mothers (particularly low-income women) once they have

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285 “Pro-life” groups disagree with this definition. Kirstie Piper from Focus on the Family dubs Planned Parenthood a “titan of the abortion industry” and maintains that pro-life is “a thriving community of those who meet political issues with the mindset that all human life is valuable” not limited to abortion (https://www.focusonthefamily.com/pro-life/abortion/pro-life-pro-choice/).


287 Peters, Trust Women, 66.


289 Pam Lowe, Reproductive Health and Maternal Sacrifice.

290 Silliman et al., Undivided Rights, 34.
given birth. Each of these critiques falls within the “pro-life” binary of abortion as murder but raises real-world concerns about the limitations of the framing and how its advocates perceive conflict. The dominant understandings of “pro-life” malign abortion at the surface level, and proponents orient themselves accordingly.

“Pro-Choice”

“Pro-choice,” under the binary construct, could ostensibly be framed to mean anyone who is “for” abortion, though the specific language of choice presents it more as an option. The official definition of “pro-choice” is advocacy for legalized abortion. Although abortion activists alongside feminist movements advocated legal abortion in the 1960s, the current “pro-choice” movement is generally understood to be formed in direct opposition and as a result of anti-abortion mobilization in the wake of Roe v. Wade (1973).291 “Pro-choice” emphasizes bodily freedom from state control and moves away from the moral and ontological arguments to say more broadly that women should have the right to choose whether or not they have a baby. Critiques of “pro-choice” movements have different groundings than critiques of “pro-life,” though examinations of both suggest the qualifier is limiting. Where “life” is taken to mean one kind of life, “choice” indicates that the decision to have a baby or an abortion is an equal option for everyone. Endorsing liberty and freedom, the rhetoric of “choice” is reductive: the question is not really whether populations “choose” their life conditions but how racial and class factors necessitate bodily choices.292

Constructions of womanhood and motherhood in the United States are constantly racialized and depend on the vision of the white, middle-class nuclear family. “Choice,” for white women in the post-Roe era meant continued protections to decide for themselves whether

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or not to have an abortion. The mainstream “pro-choice” movement does not always recognize the nuances of choice, emphasizing a “legal right to choose” that creates a winnable strategy to defend (but not secure) legal abortion. Securing access is less volatile for cis, white, middle-class women in relative positions of social power. The “winnable strategy” that relies on choice has varied and limited reach for women of color and poor women.

Choice inherently only appeals to those with options. Black women’s reproductive lives often do not experience the same kind of choice as those of white women. Beyond lesser forms of pressure that make decisions involuntary, government sterilization efforts throughout the 20th century did not offer Black women a real option:

A woman who has no money to feed her children faces greater pressure to accept a financial bonus to use Norplant than does an affluent woman. We can easily recognize that the poor woman’s decision is less voluntary and that the government’s financial enticement wields a strong influence over her judgment.

Norplant, a birth control implant, was one of the technologies introduced in the 1990s, embraced instantly by elected officials to curb the birthrate of poor Black women. Legislators offered financial benefits to receive these implants, which may not be “coercive” in every case but does exploit economic desperation to get poor women to make a decision they may not make otherwise.

“Choice” rests in a neoliberal tradition that locates individual rights at the center, treating individual body autonomy as central to liberty and freedom. However, choice is never solely individual—“the state regulates populations, disciplines individual bodies, and exercises control

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293 Silliman et al., *Undivided Rights*, 36.
298 Silliman et al., *Undivided Rights*, 12.
Choice appears differently for those different identities: women who do not want children and have limited access to contraception do not get a “choice,” nor do women who do want children and experience severe economic insecurity such that they are not in a position to support a child. When “choice” is presented as individual, it precludes options for more institutional support. After Roe, the language of personal privacy rights made it possible to be both pro-choice and accept restrictions like bans on public abortion funds. National abortion-rights groups have opposed sterilization regulations because they deprive women of “freedom of choice,” despite those tactics being actively used to control the population of “less desirable” groups of people. “Choice” allows liberals to frame abortion access as freedom from government interference with an embedded private decision instead of as a claim to make public resources available.

Allowing abortion to remain a “choice” blurs pervasive barriers to being truly able to make a decision. Similar to the “If Hillary were president we’d be at brunch right now” poster, hegemonic white feminism in the neoliberal state cares primarily about issues that affect them—racism may not, poverty often does not, transphobia and homophobia do not, but abortion does. The pro-choice movement remained relatively complacent about abortion denial for poor women in pre-Dobbs Supreme Court decisions, and it was abortion access for wealthy women that triggered action. The construction of liberal “social justice” as a “choice” allows this to be the case without confronting these concerns at their core.

299 Silliman et al., Undivided Rights, 12.
300 Silliman et al., Undivided Rights, 12.
301 Silliman et al., Undivided Rights, 37.
302 Silliman et al., Undivided Rights, 19.
303 Roberts, Killing the Black Body, 296.
304 Rhue, “All the Best Signs From the 2019 Women’s March.”
305 Roberts, Killing the Black Body, 301-302.
Limitations of the Binary Framing

Aside from the concerns within the binary (Whose life are we “pro”? Who gets to make a “choice”?), the binary framing itself has concerning limitations. Movements under liberal social justice frameworks tend to use binaries: pro-life/pro-choice, privileged/oppressed, left/right, supportive/suppressive, part of the solution/part of the problem, intersectional/racist, woke/problematic.\footnote{Sam Killerman, “Replacing One Binary with Another,” It’s Pronounced Metrosexual, accessed April 16, 2024, https://www.itspronouncedmetrosexual.com/2019/03/binary-thinking/} Inherently constrained, these binaries present two options without nuance. When the binary says you can be one of two things, there is less space for third solutions that bridge the two or find gaps in the dualist logic. Binaries divide and group people—since you have to be one or the other and the two are oppositional, you must constantly align with one and disagree with the “other,” lest you fall out of social order. Division and singularity make the role of the neoliberal state easier because they disperse dissent.

Contradiction appears quickly in the pro-life/pro-choice binary, which hinges on mismatched foundations and assumptions that preclude disagreement. Making the positions seem oppositionally zero-sum suggests that one cannot believe both things. “Pro-life” advocates the legal personhood of a fetus and the moral obligation of motherhood. “Pro-choice” foregrounds bodily autonomy and the protection of a legal right to choose. The arguments of unborn personhood and bodily autonomy are different, removing space for more nuanced understandings that one could individually morally oppose abortion while advocating a woman’s right to choose. Dividing pro-choice and pro-life suggests that abortion must be a single-minded issue and proposes that respecting the sanctity of human life does not involve making decisions.

The loudest voices and platforms of the movements on either side of the binary (“pro-life” and “pro-choice”) leave out significant experiences of women who do not fit the
hegemonic ideal of the white, middle-class woman. “Life” and “choice” are not the same for all women: Emily Martin asks, “Whose baby, whose life, whose birth, whose timing, and who has the power to decide?”\textsuperscript{307} Not only does “choice” leave out state control of Black women’s reproductive decisions, but it also obscures the “national interest” sterilization arguments championed by eugenicists that resulted in non-consensual reproductive interference.\textsuperscript{308} Although anti-abortion philosophies seem to argue an opposite stance than these population control philosophies, they each restrict “choice” for women. Both approaches attempt to control women without starting with the interests/rights of women or letting them control their bodies.\textsuperscript{309}

The framing of liberal social justice accepts how binaries remain solidly in the state and prioritize individual liberty. The pro-choice framework that advocates reproductive liberty is well-aligned with social justice frameworks because both see freedom as an ultimate form of social good. The now-singular focus of reproductive liberty on abortion access rests on liberal ideas of individual autonomy and freedom from state interference.\textsuperscript{310} This focus limits substantive attention to the root causes of abortion: When “reproductive rights” is synonymous with “the right to an abortion,” policies that encourage safe sex, for example, are less important than access to abortion.\textsuperscript{311}

Similar to how social justice frameworks emphasize the supremacy of personal liberty in social distribution, both mechanisms protect from direct abuses of government power but do not change the structures that create those abuses.\textsuperscript{312} Correspondingly, the individual is protected from all state interference even when positive state action could protect rights and access,

\textsuperscript{307} Martin, \textit{The Woman in the Body}, 148.  
\textsuperscript{308} Roberts, \textit{Killing the Black Body}, 6.  
\textsuperscript{309} Roberts, \textit{Killing the Black Body}, 302.  
\textsuperscript{310} Roberts, \textit{Killing the Black Body}, 6.  
\textsuperscript{311} Roberts, \textit{Killing the Black Body}, 301.  
\textsuperscript{312} Roberts, \textit{Killing the Black Body}, 294.
preventing any policy that impinges on personal freedom.\textsuperscript{313} Liberalism allows reproductive liberty to nullify barriers to procreative options for the affluent while allowing coercive government programs to target the poor.\textsuperscript{314} The liberal social justice and reproductive rights framing accept binaries, fundamentally leaving out perspectives and circumstances for many people.

The binary thinking on its own excludes experiences from thousands of women. But when examined in context, the binary still does not ring true. Many individuals in the United States do not align alongside the rigid (and artificial) pro-life/pro-choice differentiation, falling within a large gray area.\textsuperscript{315} Tricia Bruce’s 2020 study about abortion understanding had seven conclusions:

1. Americans do not talk much about abortion in their everyday lives.
2. Survey statistics vastly oversimplify abortion attitudes.
3. Position labels (like pro-life/pro-choice) are imprecise substitutes for actual views about abortion.
4. Discussions about abortion concern as much what happens before and after as it does abortion itself.
5. Americans consider a “good life” as much as they do “life.”\textsuperscript{316}
6. The average American does not just see abortion as political but intimately personal.
7. Americans do not “want” abortion.\textsuperscript{317}

Binary framing excludes and is untrue. Simplifying right/wrong, good/bad, and black/white removes nuance and access to creative ways to think through and resolve conflicts. Abortion is but one example of how the liberal framing of social justice dilutes movements and creates

\textsuperscript{314} Poverty has also been considered a “social justice issue” of our time; Roberts, \textit{Killing the Black Body}, 297.
\textsuperscript{315} Lederach, \textit{The Moral Imagination}, 35.
\textsuperscript{316} Pro-choice advocates tend to argue that the pro-life movement only cares about the child in utero, but Bruce’s study finds that the quality of the child’s life after birth is considered in abortion conversations.
\textsuperscript{317} Almost no one is “pro-abortion.”; Bruce, \textit{How Americans Understand Abortion}, 52-54.
binaries that preempt conflict transformation mechanisms. A framing that acknowledges more complexity can better encompass abortion. Reframing abortion out of “social justice” and into “social conflict” does not mean social justice becomes obsolete but creates space for alternatives. When we address these concerns as conflicts, we open avenues for new mechanisms of finding and tackling the roots of injustice.

**Introduction to Peace and Conflict Studies**

Dominant narratives suppose conflict is negative: in the dictionary, conflict is a “competitive or opposing action of incompatibles” or an “antagonistic state or action (as of divergent ideas, interests, or persons).” The word choice of opposition or antagonism suggests hostility and extreme difference. Examples in the news agree as they mention interstate violence and war instruments. Not every public definition supposes that conflict is inherently damaging. An online search for “conflict resolution” produces blogs that assert conflict should not be seen as detrimental. Blogs like these provide strategies from the interpersonal to the workplace to the state, including mechanisms like raising the issue early, being assertive, managing your emotions, showing empathy, practicing active listening, and acknowledging criticism. Not just helpful in the workplace, these techniques also come to mind when thinking about conflict in everyday life. Scholarship of Peace and Conflict Studies narrows in to provide further definitions and theories.

The core of the discipline definition does not vary much from the dictionary—conflict is widely accepted as a natural part of human relationships as it concerns “an incompatibility of goals or values between two or more parties in a relationship, combined with attempts to control

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318 Merriam-Webster, “conflict.”
each other.” The word choice for conflict by the discipline, however, emphasizes that conflict is neither good nor bad on its own. For Peace and Conflict Studies, conflict is an inevitable and normal part of building relationships and can be a constructive tool for growth.

The most relevant Peace and Conflict Studies literature for reframing social justice issues claims that most conflicts arise over differences in interests or values. While many involve multiple or even other types of matter, value and interest conflicts specifically highlight incompatibility in preferences, principles, or practices. Value conflicts tend to be marked by each side seeing a rightness or moral goodness in their perspective, which can sometimes be directly at odds. These conflicts tend to interlock with other conflicts and are inextricable from power relations. They also appear at different levels, appearing when they concern incompatible goals or priorities between individual people (interpersonal), responsibilities (role), groups within a system (intergroup), groups outside a system (multi-party), and states (international).

Conflict literature defines power as the ability of one person or group to make another party act through actual or threatened sanctions, sometimes against party resistance. Power conflicts are inspired when opposing sides wish to maximize their influence (potentially over particular values or beliefs) and manifest when it becomes clear that one party cannot be stronger without the other being weaker. Competition rouses conflict, as can perceived scarcity. While not a requisite for conflicts, many do involve some combination of direct, structural, or cultural violence.

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323 Louis Kriesberg, Constructive Conflicts, 16.
Academic inquiry into conflict also thinks about resolution and transformation. One foundational work in the canon of conflict transformation and peacebuilding is John Paul Lederach’s concept of the “moral imagination.” Though revolving around individual practice, the moral imagination suggests that opportunities for constructive change emerge from turning points created by artistic processes involving the “art and soul of social change.” Components of the moral imagination include the capacity to envision relationships with “enemies,” the ability to sustain paradoxical curiosity outside binaries, the pursuit of creativity, and the acceptance of the risk of the unknown. For Lederach, moral imagination is necessary because it allows the open-mindedness beyond dominant power frameworks needed to reach the core of a problem. Strategies like the moral imagination argue that acknowledging violence is the first step to producing constructive responses that can rattle structures of harm. While this theory does rely on personal efforts through pretty flowery language, it does emphasize that firmly addressing conflict requires being ready for it. The moral imagination is not available without naming and defining the conflict. Acknowledging and contextualizing conflict can supply the tools for action toward peace.

While a very simplified introduction to Peace and Conflict Studies theory, an overview of the field presents far-reaching possibilities of what the discipline can do to reframe thoughts and actions about human relationships. The disciplinary compilation of historical resources, parameters of conflict, and schemata for resolution creates a reservoir of possibilities for

Direct violence, physical or psychological harm, is how violence is most often talked about. Johan Galtung’s scholarship defines structural violence (harm built into the social structure) and cultural violence (harm normalized in behavior) to flesh out where violence actually manifests for individuals and groups.

331 Lederach, The Moral Imagination, 5.
transformation. If looked for, scholarly material about conflicts worldwide can help reshape the conflict landscape in the United States. Exploring techniques and methods of Peace and Conflict Studies can uncover what a reframing toward conflict can do for social justice issues. This final section does not try to “solve” an abortion conflict but will discuss some of the ways scholarship in the field can help challenge existing assumptions about the right way forward.

The Potential of Conflict Approaches (and Abortion)

Specific definitions and types can tighten and reframe some of the broad conflict terminology. For example, “social conflict” specifies parameters and conditions for conflicts similar to social justice issues. Still encompassing the theoretical dimensions of conflict with power, values, and interests, social conflicts are relationships in which “two or more persons or groups manifest the belief that they have incompatible objectives.”

“Two or more” encompasses those involved who view the others as adversaries. “Persons or groups” encompasses individuals or organizations that can claim to represent larger collectivities. “Manifest” means that members of at least one of the parties try to change the other party’s behavior to help their goal. Belief in “incompatible objectives” means that the parties think (whether or not it is true) that another party “thwarts some of their goals.”

Social conflicts are natural parts of social life and need not be destructive. As theories about collective action frames suggest, social conflicts often have “contested social constructions” where adversaries disagree about who the opponents are and what they are fighting about. Social conflicts are always framed, characterized by those involved in ways

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333 Social conflicts are not really about interpersonal relationships so much as slightly larger groups—theoretically the definition includes interpersonal conflict, but social justice often involves groups so that makes most sense.
335 Snow et al., “The Framing Perspective on Social Movements,” 395.
that justify their goals and means of struggle. The theory also incorporates an outlook: Louis Kriesberg writes that it is always conceivable for someone to do something that helps at least a little to transform the conflict for the better. These step-by-step circumstances create clear criteria and guidelines for conceptualizing social conflicts. Keeping conflict specific moves it out of a vague, nebulous zone and sets a defined limit as a problem. Even though social conflict continues to be a theory, the detail of the definition makes the framework necessary for later actions for transformation.

We can rethink some of the foundations of “social justice issues” with this social conflict frame and definition. Human Rights Careers’ list of “15 Social Justice Issues We Must Address,” mentions:

1. the gender pay gap
2. income inequality
3. climate change
4. food insecurity
5. the refugee crisis
6. universal healthcare
7. poverty
8. gender-based violence
9. state violence
10. threats to trans community
11. eroding democracy
12. political extremism
13. cybersecurity threats
14. reproductive rights
15. racism

Each of the “social justice issues” on this list involves two or more actors, conduct that affects behaviors, and incompatible objectives. Each is in some way related to power and violence and bound up with other issues and identities. Some have to do with values, and many have to do with interests.

The construction of the issue of reproductive rights already lends itself to social conflict framing. The Human Rights Careers website also mentions that reproductive rights are linked “to

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336 Louis Kriesberg, Constructive Conflicts, 4.
337 Louis Kriesberg, Constructive Conflicts, 6.
other social justice issues” like gender equality, healthcare, poverty, LGBTQ+ rights, and more. They note the “right” to abortion and laws standing in the way both worldwide and in the United States. They mention *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization* and conclude that “in an even more concerning move, some states are already targeting birth control.”

Linkages to other movements, value clashes over abortion access, and the manifestation of the clash through other targets are all encompassed in the social conflict definition—every one of these “social justice issues” (and abortion) can be reframed as a social conflict.

As abortion rests on narratives of motherhood, political strategy, and the concentrated efforts of right-wing evangelical groups, it becomes much more than a question of individual distribution. When conversations are limited to individuals receiving an equitable amount, it obscures the roots and barriers to access to reproductive healthcare. Liberal social justice’s reliance on distribution means does not encompass this multitude of factors at play.

While social conflicts can provide an applicable set of guidelines for the potential of reframing, another central tenet of Peace and Conflict is how conflicts are dynamic and can evolve over time. Unresolved social conflicts run the risk of escalation into intractable conflicts, which are intense, protracted, waged destructively, and resistant to transformative attempts. Intractable conflicts take a long time to form, but coalescing factors can intensify them. Conflicts can become intractable if members from each side change how they construct themselves and the other, if their grievances change in character or demand, if their goals contradict each other to seem “zero-sum” without avenues for compromise, and if one or both sides believe that the other side will yield only to force (and they can inflict such force). Intractable conflicts often rely on

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339 Human Rights Careers, “15 Social Justice Issues We Must Address.”
340 Human Rights Careers, “15 Social Justice Issues We Must Address.”
identities or values perceived as inherently oppositional, making it seem impossible to have a clear outcome. Some intractable conflicts are constructed to concern right/wrong or good/evil to the point where some will fight for what they know is right even if they know they cannot win.\footnote{Heidi Burgess and Guy M. Burgess, “What Are Intractable Conflicts?,” Beyond Intractability, last modified February 11, 2017, \url{https://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/meaning_intractability}.}

Abortion in the United States is not, by most definitions, an intractable conflict. However, just because it has not yet escalated should not limit seeking theories to make transformation possible. The extensive impacts of intractable conflicts mean there is significant literature about methods and tactics of resolution. \textit{Grasping the Nettle}, a compendium analysis of cases of intractable conflict, sets forth definitions and nine international case studies of intractable conflicts and the techniques used to transform them. Scholarship like this outlines what conflicts can be, what they can become, and what can change.

One of the methods highlighted throughout the collection is the power of mediation. Mediation, widely regarded as “the most common form of peaceful intervention in international conflicts,” has been studied and applied in intractable conflicts.\footnote{Jacob Bercovitch, “Mediation in the Most Resistant Cases,” in \textit{Grasping the Nettle: Analyzing Cases of Intractable Conflicts}, eds. Chester A. Crocker, Fen Osler Hampson, and Pamela Aall (Washington: United States Institute of Peace, 2005), 106.} Because mediation is “low-risk, low visibility, low-cost, and voluntary,” it can be a direct but low-stress approach to peacemaking in situations where tensions and passions otherwise run high.\footnote{Jacob Bercovitch, “Mediation in the Most Resistant Cases,” 119.} Mediation as a tool has documented themes and successes in the form of peace accords and more substantial negotiations. For example, the mediating services by third-party U.S. Senator George Mitchell proved invaluable in facilitating the Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland in 1998.\footnote{Kriesberg, “Nature, Dynamics, and Phases of Intractability,” 92.} Other examples of mediation in social conflict include a study comparing mediation with adjudication, which found that mediative techniques produce higher user satisfaction and
compliance and “more compromise decisions and fewer all-or-nothing decision.” Social conflict scholarship identifies a dozen roles for third parties that can facilitate bargaining and contribute to mediation.

The United States plays a mediator in international conflicts, but mediation techniques have also appeared domestically. Collective labor disputes in the United States often mandate mediation but it still appears as a tactic even when not mandated. Third-party mediators from the independent Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service monitor negotiations and narrow differences between groups. Mediation has variations in technique and application but is highly successful in workplace and labor conflicts. Mediation and third-party sourcing have made a difference as social conflict resolution mechanisms. When abortion is considered only a social justice issue, tactics like mediation are less readily available. Social justice issues, as individual injustices within a state structure, do not have third-party mediators. Although the strategies are available without a designated third party and under the umbrella of social justice, the intention changes. When specifically applied as a conflict transformation method, mediation has a different power than when not properly named.

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348 Wagner-Pacifici and Hall, “Resolution of Social Conflict,” 188.
351 Accessing third-party mediators is hard when the issue is so intersectional that there are almost no internal third-parties. If I had more time (and a larger scope), I think there is a case for how the United States sees itself as a bringer of democracy and a global superpower so national “America first” consciousness would resist having a third-party come in.
352 Not to toot my own horn, but “good mediation strategy” includes reframing issues and creating (or identifying) new options for parties who are stuck in a rut; Chester A. Crocker, Fen Osler Hampson, and Pamela Aall, “Conclusion: From Intractable to Tractable,” in *Grasping the Nettle: Analyzing Cases of Intractable Conflicts*, eds. Chester A. Crocker, Fen Osler Hampson, and Pamela Aall (Washington: United States Institute of Peace, 2005), 384.
Tactics emerge from Peace and Conflict Studies literature for addressing intractable and social conflicts. These repertoires differ from the tools available to social justice movements in practice and the imagination. Responses to “social justice issues” often involve individual actions like one-day protests, lobbying, and letter-writing. Beyond mediation, conflict resolution methods can emerge as “withdrawals by one or both parties, compromises, surrenders, laying down of arms, peace treaties, armistices, constitutions, trials, amnesties, pardons, purges, international covenants, apologies, laws, topic changes in arguments, and reparations (among others).”

Georg Simmels’ foundational work in Peace and Conflict Studies recognizes five patterns in ending conflicts: disappearance of the object of conflict, victory for one of the parties, compromise, conciliation, and irreconcilability. These tactics have particular social histories, foundational assumptions, and operation techniques that provide blueprints for future application.

Conflict resolution changes depending on the factors contributing to the specific event, but site-specific studies and examples provide theoretical outlines from which future conflicts can learn. For example, investigations into ethnically divided societies (like Northern Ireland) that experience extreme othering and polarization have produced scholarship about managing conflicts. Theories like territorial self-governance and applications of democracy types think through the layers contributing to these divisions and then ideas for moving beyond. Disciplinary techniques like prefigurative politics (practicing and embodying liberation mindsets on large scales) have been successful in global movements.

356 Such movements include the Peace People in Northern Ireland, the Zapatistas in Mexico, the Landless Workers’ Movement in Brazil, and the Rojava movement in Syria; YouthxYouth, “Prefigurative Politics in Practice: Examples
Interdisciplinary scholarship adjacent to the field can also recommend other mechanisms. Social psychology studies of cognitive dissonance and the differences between sympathy and empathy create a more expansive definition of the “other,” breaking down an “us/them” binary. Organizational theory about leadership de-escalation and how to mobilize dissent helps movements define and practice effective communication strategies. De-escalation techniques that involve reciprocity and communal ties allow an exploration of commonalities and mutual liberation. While not every journal article and book chapter with strategies for settling conflict may be relevant, understanding that conflict can be waged constructively instead of destructively cognitively affects perspectives.

When re-constructed as social conflicts, social justice issues can fit within parameters that can help change a nebulous, looming problem into something definable. Taking direct hold of the issue allows for different attention to the problem. Applying conflict approaches to abortion moves it away from binary thinking, creates scaffolding for the problem, and introduces new methods (like mediation) to start thinking through transformation. Conflict transformation in the United States first involves naming the conflicts. Being able to name and scaffold a conflict can make it manageable, lest it continue to grow into something much trickier to tackle. The way we talk about our lives matters—when we name conflict instead of liberal “social justice issues,” we can reimagine the potential outcomes. “Social conflict” as a collective action frame could mobilize those who already care about injustice and refocus their attention toward transformation through existing scholarship and new possibilities for change.

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358 Kriesberg, *Fighting Better*, 180
361 Benford and Snow, “Framing Processes and Social Movements,” 614.
Conflict Framing Possibilities and Conclusions

Since its conception as a research discipline in 1959, Peace and Conflict Studies has created scholarship about armed conflict and civil violence worldwide. Studies of instances of conflict and how community members have taken steps towards resolution gave way to theoretical frameworks for what generally works in conflict transformation. The outline of the field and frameworks of social and intractable conflicts are but two examples of the vast resources available. Once applied, literature on the resolution of social conflict emphasizes moments of transition, collaboration, and speech acts as factors contributing to changes in the tenor of conflict. A barrier appears to the full use of this literature when there is no consideration of conflict. Peace and Conflict Studies does not seem as readily available when conflict is not named. Some scholars have included abortion in their analysis of contemporary conflicts, but hesitating to make the connection widely explicit allows abortion to remain a social justice issue in the common vernacular.

Conflict reframing is not a perfect approach—a social conflict framework may not address every serious flaw of the liberal social justice framework, but that is not the entire point. “Social justice” and “social conflict” can be held in conversation. Social justice repertoires of marches and lobbying remain consequential nonviolent protest and persuasion methods, but using them as conflict transformation tools can change the stakes. The methods matter, but how we think about the methods also matters. Thinking about issues like abortion as a social justice issue makes it easier to fall into binaries, cling to hyper-individual actions, and see freedom and liberty as the ultimate solutions for instances of harm and violence. Thinking about abortion as a conflict rests on a nonbinary approach to reality and extends new concepts of

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where, why, and how a conflict comes about. Core theories like the moral imagination change the prerequisites for approaching contentious and deeply-rooted conflicts like abortion access.

Analyzing abortion through PCS scholarship reveals how destructive its methods and meanings are: reliance on heteropatriarchal narratives of the role of women, capitalist marketing that creates “acceptable” domination, political pundits that play with access to bodily autonomy, and ingrained racist and white supremacist notions of liberty contribute to a destructively-waged conflict. When questioned, most Americans voice varied and unsure attitudes about abortion and its legality. The narratives and foundations of abortion access in the United States are both violent and untrue. When abortion can be considered a conflict—and one that could be waged constructively—there is a different opportunity to consider where tension creates an opening for productive policies. Conflict waged constructively can provide the potential to actually understand why women have abortions and develop effective policies for safety and agency.\(^{364}\)

While this approach relies on good faith efforts of the state that may not always be realistic, it is, at the very least, another option. Looking past the pro-life/pro-choice binary reveals commonalities often inaccessible through a liberal social justice framework that relies on individual liberty. It is not enough to wait until the conflict becomes intractable and more violent—naming conflict creates space to see beyond and work on tangible policies like family planning, increased childcare, or financial safety nets.\(^{365}\)

If we name conflict, social movements can adopt the messaging of nonviolent resistance, learn from civil resistance in other countries, and see new connections to different movements. If we name conflict, the repository of actions widens from marches and letter-writing to other acceptable nonviolent interventions or noncooperation. If we name conflict, media outlets can

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\(^{364}\) Kriesberg, *Fighting Better*, 150.

draw further comparisons to historical and contemporary instances of resistance and publish
different acceptable actions. Recognizing conflict can change the paradigm of what feels
acceptable for resolving contention within our relationships and our movements.
**Conclusion: Peace, Conflict, and Our Words**

I have no pretenses of “solving” the conflict of abortion access in the United States. The multitude of layers affecting the conflict would require many multifaceted approaches and significant effort to provide space and groundwork for transformation. It is certainly outside the scope of an undergraduate thesis—or even academic work altogether, though that is a different issue—to create a singular understanding of what to do about abortion.

This project tried to understand how abortion became salient in social and political awareness alongside an investigation of its frame as a “social justice issue.” Examining the factors that contribute to issue framing helps reveal the power of meaning construction. Social constructionism tells us that our context and social conventions mediate what we understand as truth. Meaning is not inherent, constructed based on many factors and sometimes open to new interpretations. As an offshoot of social constructionism, framing theory says that we create scaffolding to identify and place events and how they matter for our lives. Social movement frames can help clarify constructed meanings and mobilize action. The most effective movement frames appeal to everyday experiences instead of abstract concepts.

Social problems in the United States are currently framed as “social justice issues.” Spanning territory from political division, class disparity, climate disasters, racial trauma and hatred, and attacks on gender nonconformity and bodily autonomy, “social justice” is the avenue through which to pursue collective change. “Social justice” lacks a singular definition but appears most often as a form of distributive justice beyond the material, stressing that unjust social institutions should be reformed or abolished. Social justice issues are situations where justice is missing. The paradox of social justice is that justice rests on what the dominant system conceives as just, affecting how social justice issues are addressed and allocated.
This research has found that the social justice frame overwhelmingly falls short. Distributive social justice within the neoliberal state highlights individual liberty and understands society as a mechanism to ensure personal rights and benefits. When social justice highlights liberty, it prioritizes individual actions over collective strength, allowing private restitution for government abuses without changing the abusive structure. Social justice approaches are racialized and tempered to meet the needs of global capital. Social justice repertoires of contention (the tools used by movements) are hyper-individual and focus on consumptive measures that do not disrupt everyday life and allow for a continued focus on personal awareness and rights. Using social justice in a context that prioritizes individual action can dilute the meaning: when everything is a human rights issue you should care about, fewer issues and actions stand out.

As an issue that intersects with many kinds of injustice and is mediated based on race, class, gender identity, politics, location, and more, a case study of abortion provides a fascinating microcosm of how complicated “social justice issues” in the United States are. These issues are protracted and emotional and hard to disentangle. They resist our attempts to try and rein them in. Abortion access in the United States has been constructed as a “social justice issue” through the intersection of political beliefs of bodily autonomy and rights of the state, religious beliefs of the sanctity of life, and baseline discussions of morality. As I grew up alongside Catholics advocating social teachings of solidarity and preferential options for the poor, I was shocked at how abortion seemed to be such a single issue for voters. Abortion is a medical procedure done by one in every three women, and I wanted to understand how it could become such a big deal.

Tracing a constructed logic of motherhood, the language used for it, the timeline of 20th-century feminism, and the racialized effects of these logics, I found that abortion became
negotiable because women are understood to have an overwhelming duty to bear children for the continued wealth of the nation. Researching birth control and the elevation of abortion from a routine medical procedure to an embroiled political debate revealed that the abortion “issue” came out of a combination of legal justifications for a “right to privacy,” state interests in controlling Black women’s reproduction, a “temporary political ploy” of the Republican party to get Nixon re-elected, and New Right evangelical activists seeking to mobilize a base. Understanding how women have been made to see motherhood as imperative provides a piece of the puzzle for how influential framing is in constructing conflicts.

My ultimate argument is that the “social justice” reliance on injustice and individual liberty does not thoroughly consider the layers of factors that have elevated abortion to a political issue, removing elements of harm, power, and sources of injustice. Dissection of its foundations reveals that abortion is not intrinsically about injustice. The conditions that make abortion contestable reveal complicated layers that implicate systems of harm and control.

Using the framing of a social conflict, a relationship in which “two or more persons or groups manifest the belief that they have incompatible objectives,” we can see new criteria and approaches for how to deal with abortion. Reframing into a conflict takes direct hold of the narrative and allows for different attention to the issue. Conflict transformation in the United States first involves naming there being a conflict. Our actions change when we redefine what is possible.

Thinking about issues like abortion as a social justice issue makes it easier to fall into binaries, cling to hyper-individual actions, and see freedom and liberty as the ultimate solutions for instances of harm and violence. Thinking about abortion as a conflict rests on a nonbinary approach to reality and extends new concepts of where, why, and how a conflict comes about.
Abortion as a conflict (especially with the potential of being a constructive conflict) makes it easier to see space for transformation. Abortion could be reframed as a conflict and then be destructive, but I would argue that incorporating new language would still allow for something different. Language can keep us complacent but it can also mobilize us.

This work on framing theory comes alongside protest framing and language used to promote particular ideologies and agendas. The United States is seeing the pronounced power of language, rhetoric, and framing on protest movements in the context of the ongoing genocide in Palestine. A January 2024 article in the Intercept investigated how charged and emotional language about civilian killings appeared much more for Israeli than Palestinian deaths:

The term “slaughter” was used by editors and reporters to describe the killing of Israelis versus Palestinians 60 to 1, and “massacre” was used to describe the killing of Israelis versus Palestinians 125 to 2. “Horrific” was used to describe the killing of Israelis versus Palestinians 36 to 4.

This media language skews the narrative, affecting how consumers perceive and feel the magnitude of war. Despite an April 2024 death toll of at least 34,000 Palestinians in Gaza, Western news media does not invoke word choice that connotes the extent of the destruction.

Appearing alongside how the definition of antisemitism has been expanded to include criticism of Israel’s policies and practices, the language and public framing severely affect the tenor of public support (in multiple directions). How we—from Peace and Conflict scholars to media outlets to everyday citizens—name conflict really does affect what we think and do about conflict. I hope this work opens up more places to talk about conflict. Conflict is not bad, and it

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can help us. I hope future scholarship (my own or that of others) can expand these conversations into new applications. How we portray and communicate events and conflicts affects every aspect of the response.

Naming and recognizing conflict can change what we can do. We do not live in a post-racial, post-class, or post-conflict world, and pretending otherwise puts us at a severe disadvantage when it comes to interacting, learning, and growing from and with each other. It is overwhelmingly important to recognize the shortcomings. There is no path forward if we do not. I hope this work sufficiently makes a case for moving mindsets away from social justice and toward conflict. Naming helps us take hold of fear and move toward change. To revise the PeaceBuilding Pledge:

I am a PeaceBuilder. I pledge
to talk to others with respect,
to treat people with care,
and to make peace,
not break peace,
to recognize that broken peace can be conflict,
to amend peace,
to contend with conflict,
to respect peace,
to respect conflict,
and to build peace
at home, at school, and in my community
each day.
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