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# MARGARET SANGER, BIRTH CONTROL, AND THE EUGENICS MOVEMENTS: CHANGES IN HISTORIOGRAPHICAL INTERPRETATIONS

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Each new generation reinterprets historical events to suit the prevailing *zeitgeist*. The accepted facts surrounding the work do not generally vary, but the political and social implications can and do change with the intention of the researcher and author. Depending on the political, social and religious attitudes of individual historians, Margaret Sanger is variously characterized as a courageous feminist heroine, a brazen public nuisance, or calculating social engineer.

Clover F. Gross (2006, 1)

## ABSTRACT

The eugenics movement was embraced by most middle class and professionals during the 1920s. Conflicting interpretations of Sanger, the leader of the birth control movement of the early twentieth century have been published over the past 50 years. Some historians have lauded her as a heroine who pushed through programs to allow women to have control of their own fertility. In opposition, others have discredited her as an evil villain who promoted negative eugenics among immigrant women. As eugenics became vilified in the post-WWII era, so did Sanger, who along with most public health reforms and professionals, were associated with the early 20<sup>th</sup> century eugenics movements. The changing historiography of the eugenics movement is likely an underlying factor in the changing interpretations of Sanger. Shifting, and contested views of Sanger and the eugenics movement are reflective of the times when the works were written along with the religious and other biases of the historian.

## BACKGROUND

In the early twentieth century, eugenics, to improving the human race was promoted. Francis Galton, (1904), the father of eugenics defines it as, “the science which deals with all influences that improve the inborn qualities of a race; also with those that develop them to the utmost advantage.... The aim of eugenics is to bring as many influences as can be reasonably employed, to cause the useful classes in the community to contribute *more* than their proportion to the next generation.” Although Galton, an English country gentleman and the forgotten father of many statistical methods and meteorology, first described eugenics in 1883, it did not become a popular concept until the pre-WWI era and reached its peak in the 1920s.

Eugenics was categorized as positive or negative. *Positive eugenics*, the original philosophy of Galton was the encouragement of reproduction among the intellectually, mentally and physically fit and healthy. It was the eugenic philosophy of Britain. *Negative eugenics* discouraged the reproduction of the physically, mentally and intellectually “unfit” by segregation in institutions or sterilization. It was primarily used by the United States, Nazi Germany and Scandinavian countries (Engs, 2005, 182).

In the United States, the eugenics movement became entwined with many health and social reform movements of the era (Engs 2005, xiii-xvii). It became an underlying theme in public health crusades including the prohibition, sexual purity, birth control, anti-prostitution, pure food and drug, and anti-venereal disease campaigns of the Progressive era. However, “unlike other health movements of this era, such as prohibition and tuberculosis, the eugenics movement never became a crusade of the masses. Eugenics largely remained a matter of concern with the upper middle class, supported by leaders in biology, psychology, criminology, social work, sociology, liberal religion, and medicine” (Engs, 2003, 115). In Germany and in Britain, eugenics became entwined with the public health and social welfare movements aimed at improving their national vitality and health.

### **Early Years, Early Views: 1914-1940**

The birth control movement was entwined with the eugenics movement. Both access to birth control and support for eugenics was embraced by middle class and educated women. Many male eugenicists, however, such as Roswell Johnson, were anti-birth control as they felt that middle class women who were fit should produce many children. However, these middle class women wanted, as did poor women, to control their fertility. Educated and middle-class women were familiar with the rhythm method, condoms and the pessary or diaphragms. In the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century these devices were often smuggled into the United States from Europe as they were illegal.

The birth control movement was an aspect of the “woman” or feminist movement of the early twentieth century. In addition, most leaders of the birth control movement were women (DeVilbiss, 1923, 49). The term *birth control* was coined by Margaret Sanger (1931, 191) in 1914 the founder of the campaign to “cast off the bondage of involuntary parenthood” (Dennett, 1926, 172). Another early leader of the movement was sex education and woman suffrage advocate Mary Ware Dennett. However, Sanger, after clashes with Dennett, in the early 1920s emerged as leader of the movement (Chesler 1992, 233).

Many health and social reformers were against the birth control movement including eugenics supporters, such as Paul Popenoe (1926, 145, 148) who thought the crusade was run by “sob sisters” and proposed that the “Birth Control cult should be repudiated by all responsible people.” He also believed that “fit” middle-class women should produce more children, and not fewer, as proposed by Sanger.

In the early twentieth-century, educated and well-to-do women were able to obtain contraception. However, in order to make birth control available for poor women, it would be

necessary to repeal the 1873 Comstock Law, which prohibited sexuality information from being sent through the mail. Contraception information was considered pornography along with information on sexually transmitted diseases. Lydia DeVilbiss, MD, an early birth control researcher remarks that many physicians "under the cloak of professional secrecy" prescribe "therapeutic contraceptives for their patients. But few... have the opportunity or the courage to prescribe for the poor, miserable wretches they so often meet in the free dispensaries and in the wards of charity hospitals" and to do so would cause them to lose their hospital privileges or risk arrest (1923, 165-166).

De Vilbiss summarizes the beginnings of the birth control movement. "On October 16, 1916 Margaret Sanger, a trained nurse... opened a clinic in a crowded section of Brooklyn. The story of this clinic, the arrest of Mrs. Sanger and her sister, Ethel Byrne, also a trained nurse, their days in prison, their trials and finally their release will always remain one of the most thrilling chapters in the history of the long struggle for human freedom" (DeVilbiss 1923, 169). Sanger had previously been indicted for discussing birth control in her newsletter *Women Rebel* in 1914 and also for a birth control pamphlet *Family Limitations*. These charges were later dropped.

The birth control movement was ignored by most public health and social reformers in the pre-World War I years as Sanger, a socialist, was considered a radical and physicians were sometimes ignorant about contraceptive methods. Contraception was generally not taught in medical schools of the era. During the 1920s, agitation for birth control was in full swing and Sanger changed tactics. She forged relationships with the medical profession and courted the middle class and played down her socialist leanings. (Chesler 1992, 216, 277-281; Spiro 2009, 193)

In 1921, Sanger organized the American Birth Control League, an educational and lobbying organization, and the first American Birth Control Conferences in New York City. De Vilbiss, the chair of the conference, instructed physicians on various contraceptive devices. Some had been imported from Europe which had more enlightened views on fertility control. At the last session of the conference, the Catholic diocese, which believed contraception was an immoral act of murder, arranged to have the police shut down Sanger's presentation and arrest her. The news media publicized the arrest and over 1500 participants attended the rescheduled presentation and gave Sanger even more publicity to promote the cause of birth control (Kennedy1970, 94-99).

Sanger, in 1923, established the Birth Control Clinical Research Bureau, a contraceptive and research clinic which was run as a private practice (Chesler 1992, 273-277). She organized the Sixth International Neo-Malthusian and Birth Control Conference in New York in 1925 and her research physician, Hanna Stone, gave preliminary results of birth control methods. At the conference, Roswell Johnson, a eugenics proponent, proposed a resolution urging larger families by "persons whose progeny gives promise of being a decided value to the community." Sanger, however, retorted that the birth control movement was "urging smaller families ...[and] offers an instrument of liberation to overburdened humanity" (Sanger quoted in Popenoe 1926, 149)

Mary Ware Dennett established the National Birth Control League to repeal the Comstock law in 1915. She advocated a "clean repeal" of the law rather than a "doctors only" bill advocated by

Sanger that would give exclusive rights to physicians to disseminate birth control. (Dennett, 1926, 94-96, 219-220). When Dennett's initial efforts for repeal failed, she stepped down as a birth control leader. After her sex education pamphlet, *The Sex Side of Life*, was banned Dennett continued to campaign for repeal of the repressive statutes that prevented not only sexuality, but also, information about sexually transmitted diseases and their prevention. In 1930, the courts finally overthrew the ban on mailing sex education material due to her efforts (Chesler 1992, 143-145; Chen 1996).

A few religious groups were against birth control. The Roman Catholic Church was against both birth control and eugenic sterilization. Charles P. Bruehl (1928), writing from a Catholic perspective, in *Birth Control and Eugenics* details the objections to these practices on moral and religious grounds. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints ("Mormons") and some fundamentalist Protestant groups were also opposed to birth control on religious grounds. The LDS church considered it acceptable for certain medical or "inherited" conditions (Bush 1976, 20-22; Bush 1992, 168).

By the late-1920s, birth control became more acceptable to physicians. In 1925, psychiatrist Adolf Meyer published a book based upon the 1923 birth control conference organized by Sanger. It was a "symposium dealing with the subject from a number of angles." His contributors included notable academics and university presidents who supported both birth control and eugenics.

By the mid-1930s, birth control leagues had emerged in many states and in 1942 became the Planned Parenthood Federation of America. It was not until 1936, after the Comstock laws were overturned, that birth control devices could be sent through the mail. However, many states continued to outlaw birth control clinics until the late 1960s (Chesler 1992, 372-373).

Along with most public health and social welfare professionals of the 1920s, Sanger embraced eugenics. Sanger contended that, "an American race, containing the best of all racial elements could give to the world a vision and a leadership beyond our present imagination" (1921, 46). However, this would not happen until immigrants were no longer "herded into slums to become diseased, to become social burdens... We have huddled them together like rabbits to multiply their numbers and their misery".... Out of these conditions come "the feeble minded and other defectives." (1921, 37, 40).

Although birth control was unacceptable to some health professionals of the era, eugenic sterilization was championed by many public health and social reformers. One of the few professionals against eugenics was anthropologist Franz Boas. Physician Harry Sharp, who worked in an Indiana State Reformatory, began eugenic sterilizations surgery in 1899. He convinced the Indiana state legislature that sterilization of criminals, "feeble minded," rapists, the "insane," homosexuals and others thought unfit would be a tax-saving measure. The first eugenic sterilization law was passed in Indiana in 1907. Between 1907 and 1931, 36 states enacted these laws (Laughlin, 1922, 1-4; Engs, 2005, 55). Most of these state laws were repealed in the late twentieth century.

## HISTORIOGRAPHY

### **A Feminist Heroine and Relative Silence on Eugenics: 1940s-1960s**

By World War II, birth control had become accepted in most areas of the country and Sanger was seen as the heroic founder of the movement. Main line Protestant and Jewish middle-class women, in particular, embraced the birth control movement and devices such as the diaphragm to plan their families.

No scholarly works were published about Sanger and the birth control movement in the 1940-1960 period, other than Peter Fryer's (1956) *The Birth Controllers*. Fryer focuses upon the UK, but presents a short biography of Sanger and her part as the movement's major leader in the United States. He casts her in a favorable light. Sanger had published two autobiographies in the 1930s and a few popular press biographies were published in the 1960s, two as young-adult literature, that regarded Sanger as a heroine.

Eugenics was not considered a topic worth academic scholarship as it had become synonymous with the Nazi regime and genocide. Scholars ignored the topic until historian Mark H. Haller published *Eugenics: Hereditarian Attitudes in American Thought* (1963). This classic work is a broad based interpretation of the mid-19th century hereditarian and early 20th-century eugenics movements. Donald K. Pickens soon followed Haller with *Eugenics and the Progressives* (1968). Pickens linked the eugenic movement with other Progressive Era reforms to regulate human behavior considered detrimental to the health and economy of the nation. He contends that Margaret Sanger and the birth control movement sought to restore and strengthen the basic family unit. Pickens (p. 84-85) argues that Sanger felt the problems of an increasing urban society could be solved by birth control and eugenic sterilization.

Barry Mehler (1988, 7), in his dissertation, notes that although little had been written on eugenics during the 1940s and 50s, since then "there has been a virtual explosion of interest in eugenics in the United States and Europe." He attributes this to sperm banks, genetic testing and other new technologies or what some later called the "new eugenics."

### **Shift in Interpretations of Eugenics and Sanger: 1970s-1980s**

A dramatic change in the interpretation of Sanger and the birth control movement was seen beginning in the 1970s due to two factors. First-of-all, in the post-war era of 1940s-1950s, eugenics become linked with the extermination of almost 20 million individuals in Europe under Nazi Germany and the sterilization of thousands of ethnic Germans. It should be noted that eugenic sterilization was opposed by the German government until the Nazi regime. Eugenics in Germany up to that point had been a public health campaign to improve the health and vitality of the nation through fitness, nutrition, and disease prevention (Engs, 2005,95). Euthanasia as a eugenic concept was generally unacceptable to eugenicists. However, the term *eugenics* became synonymous with Nazi atrocities and the Holocaust in popular culture.

Secondly, during the 1960s, the concept of *racism* came to the forefront of public opinion with the Civil Rights Movement. Sanger, along with all others who embraced eugenics began to be seen by some writers as racist and evil. Some historians, for example, Kenneth Ludmerer (1972b,

2-3) in *Genetics and American Society*, viewed eugenics as both a science and a “sanctuary for bigots and racists.” He was one of the first authors to use the term *scientific racism* (1972a, 5) for those who believed scientific evidence supported “Nordic superiority.” However, he notes that a general belief in inferior and superior genetic traits was accepted by many professionals at the turn of the last century. It was the foundation of the early eugenics movement and influenced public policy such as immigration restriction. Only those who accepted Nordic superiority could be classified as racists by today's standards and there is no evidence that Sanger held these beliefs based upon primary sources. Ludmerer cautions that eugenic supporters “must be judged by the standards of their own period rather than by those of the present.”

Carl J. Bajema (1976, 5-6) soon followed with an edited series of essays in *Eugenics Then and Now*. In his editor's comments, he suggests that attribution of racism to eugenics was because "confusion has and still exists as to the precise meaning of ‘eugenics.’” He also argues that reformers such as Margaret Sanger, like other neo-Malthusians, were concerned with instituting social programs designed to regulate the size of human populations by bringing about a more widespread use of birth control (p. 52).

Birth control advocates and health professionals associated with the eugenics movement of the 1920s-30s became increasingly demonized or demoted as to their historical importance based upon current perceptions that they were eugenicists and racists. This was particularly true of Margaret Sanger. David M. Kennedy (1970) wrote a critical interpretation of Sanger in *Birth Control in America: The Career of Margaret Sanger*. He claims “her contrary disposition sometimes hobbled more than it helped her movement...and the praise Margaret Sanger received often seemed out of proportion to her achievement” (p. 275). He minimizes her importance to the birth control movement and suggests she was responsible for slowing down the dispersal of contraceptive information (p. 211). Kennedy discusses her integration of eugenics with birth control. He does note that when Sanger used the term “unfit” she was not referring to “races or religions” but to those with serious mental and physical disabilities.

Linda Gordon (1974) in *The Moral Property of Women* contends that birth control politics and the movement was a fundamental part of the feminist movement for emancipation and that birth control was primarily an issue of politics, not of technology. Gordon focuses on class and gender issues. Like Kennedy, Gordon is critical of Sanger's aggressive tactics and suggests she became a pawn of the conservative elite. She discusses Sanger's support of eugenics which was a constant theme at her 1920s birth control conferences.

James Reed's (1978) *From Private Vice to Public Virtue* traces the birth control movements through its leaders. He is positive toward Sanger and contends she felt “that birth control was the essential first step in any rational plan for freeing women or breeding a better race” and took help wherever she could get it including middle-class eugenics supporters (p. 131). One of these, Physician Robert Dickinson, worked to get the medical profession to accept sex and contraception research. Reed touches on nativist influences of the era, concerns of “differential fertility” (poor Catholic Eastern and Southern Europeans had many children while native-born middle-class Americans from northern and western Europe had few). He also discusses eugenics as it related to birth control. Madeline Gray's (1979) *Margaret Sanger*, based upon Sanger's papers, looks at Sanger's private life more than the birth control movement.

In the 1980s, eugenics was increasingly interpreted as a pseudoscience by many historians. For example, David Smith's (1985) *Minds Made Feeble* examines Goddard's research of the Kallikak family and discusses the faulty research methods used in that study based upon pseudoscience. Daniel Kevles' (1985) *In the Name of Eugenics* discusses Charles Davenport's concern about the unfit passing on defective traits. He details the American sterilization laws, influence of eugenics on immigration, and the ambivalent reactions to birth control by eugenicists.

Other historians refuted the interpretations that the eugenics movement was primarily a racist, pseudoscience or a negative movement. Barbara Ross (1985) in an essay claims it is historically incorrect to use "today's enlightened view" to label an earlier generation of eugenic leaders racists. Nicole Hahn Rafter (1988) reviews the studies of "dysgenic" families in *White Trash* and notes that these studies focused on Southern lower-class white families and not minorities. James Crow in a 1988 book review essay "Eugenics: Must it be a Dirty Word?" criticizes Kevles and Ludmerer for misinterpreting eugenics, focusing on the "bad side of eugenics" and minimizing its "more lofty aims" including healthy children wanted by parents (p.12).

### **1990s: Conflicting Interpretations and Less Objectivity**

Conflicting interpretations of the eugenics movement increased. For example, Steven Selden (1999) in *Inheriting Shame* describes the links between eugenics and education and argues that the movement was racist and mostly led by racists. On the other hand, Annette K. Vance Dorey's (1999) *Better Baby Contests* investigates the role of women in the eugenics movement. She describes competitive baby contests where babies were judged "scientifically." The contests encouraged mothers to improve the health of their children so their babies would be prizewinners at local and state agricultural fairs. This would improve the overall health of the nation. Diane Paul's (1995) *Controlling Human Heredity* examines the eugenic movement in the context of massive changes due to urbanization, industrialization and immigration which created fear and a demand for social order.

Sanger's association with eugenics led to increasing divergent interpretations of her work and accomplishments. Several works by historians in the 1990s refuted the accusations of publications produced in the 1970s and 80s concerning Sanger. Many works concerning Sanger and eugenics were now written by women who were increasingly found in academic circles as the result of the feminist movement of the previous decades. On the other hand, as Sanger and Planned Parenthood, which emerged out of Sanger's birth control organization, were viewed as abortion providers, she and the clinics came under attack by the Christian right and was further demonized.

Ellen Chesler's (1992) *Woman of Valor* is a classic and comprehensive biography of Margaret Sanger and the birth control movement based upon a wide variety of archival material. Chesler lauds Sanger as a feminist and leader and argues that Sanger's "primary interest was to redress economic and gender inequality and to promote healthier and happier families" (p. 216). Like other public health and social welfare professionals of the day, Chesler notes that Sanger embraced eugenics as a way of improving the health and fitness of the nation.



In *Birth Control Policies in the United States, 1916-1945*, Carole McCann (1994) views Sanger as a product of her age who sought to blend the science of eugenics with birth control. McCann discusses black community leaders' acceptance of birth control who, in coalition with Sanger worked to establish a birth control clinic in Harlem. The black community welcomed her and did not perceive her as a racist out to eliminate the "Negro race." McCann also notes that the term *Sangerism* "meant the use of contraceptives by women to control their fertility. Among opponents the same word referred to the "villainous practice of contraception which they derided" (p. 5).

Constance M. Chen's (1996) "*The Sex Side of Life*" is the first full-length biography of birth control crusader Mary Ware Dennett. Chen traces Dennett's personal and political struggles, involvement in feminist causes, and her conflict with Sanger for control of the birth control movement. Chen eulogizes Dennett and paints a negative picture of Sanger.

### **Conflicting Interpretations and Focus on Specific Topics: 2000-2014**

In terms of eugenics many works published during the first decade of the twenty-first century. focused on more specific topics. For example, Christine Rosen's *Preaching Eugenics* (2004), is a study of the American clergy's involvement in the eugenics movement in 1926. Noted clergy were concerned about impoverished and unskilled immigrants moving into the urban areas and the resulting social problems. Therefore, they adopted eugenics as a method of social reform inspired by the Progressive Movement. For many religious leaders, eugenic ideals were based on "compassion, empathy and social responsibility" (p. 23). Wendy Kline (2002), *Building a Better Race* discusses both positive and negative eugenics and aspects of the movement that involved the role of women in society. Alexandra Minna Stern (2005) in *Eugenic Nation* focuses on the eugenic sterilization laws in California. Paul Lombardo (2008) in *Three Generations, No Imbeciles* details the 1927 Supreme Court case *Buck v. Bell*, which allowed states to perform involuntary eugenic sterilization surgery to prevent "feebleminded and socially inadequate" people from bearing children.

John Glad's (2011) *Jewish Eugenics* details Jewish eugenics supporters. He notes that "given the massive assault on the eugenics movement as a supposedly 'anti-Semitic ideology of genocide... historical veracity requires that the distorted image produced over the last four decades be rectified" (p.9). Glad documents the many Jews including physicians, Reform rabbis, and other professionals who took leadership roles and supported the movement in the United States and abroad. Chávez-García's (2012) *States of Delinquency* focuses on eugenic sterilization of poor youth in California.

As an example of the acceptance of eugenics and the eugenics movement as an academic topic worthy of study, Ruth Clifford Engs (2005), *The Eugenics Movement*, published the first encyclopedia on the movement. It includes information about organizations, conferences, personalities, theories, and publications involved with the movement, primarily in the United States, and secondarily, in Great Britain and Germany.

As works concerning eugenics became more specific, so did the historical interpretations of Margaret Sanger. They continued to offer diverse and conflicting interpretations. *Although*

*usually based upon the same archival material, the authors often derived dramatically different conclusions likely reflecting their own biases.*

Melissa Doak and Rachel Brugger (2000), in *How Did the Debate between Margaret Sanger and Mary Ware Dennett Shape the Movement to Legalize Birth Control, 1915-1924?*, examine Dennett and Sanger and their differing approaches to birth control. Based upon numerous primary sources, the authors point out the intense rivalry that developed between the women. Kathleen A. Tobin (2001) in *American Religious Debate over Birth Control, 1907-1937* details the official response of religious leaders to birth control. She argues that Sanger played on religious prejudices of the day by singling out the Catholic Church although conservative Protestant groups were also opposed to birth control (p.211). Sanger was raised by a devout Catholic mother but rebelled against the Church as an adult. Tobin briefly discusses the interlinking of the eugenics and birth control movements.

In 2001, Vern L. Bullough's edited *Encyclopedia of Birth Control* examines the struggle for control over reproduction and controversies surrounding these issues from a historical, biological, and social perspective. The encyclopedia champions women's rights and lauds birth control leaders including Margaret Sanger and makes no pretense of being neutral.

In contrast, Angela Franks (2005) in *Margaret Sanger's Eugenic Legacy*, from a Catholic perspective, presents a hostile view of Sanger and Planned Parenthood, which emerged out of Sanger's birth control organization. She also criticizes previous historiographies concerning Sanger, eugenics, and the birth control movement. Franks contends that Sanger was a lifetime eugenicist who wanted to restrict the "unfit" from having children, but not a racist, because she did not consider members of other races "unfit" on account of their race.

Johanna Schoen's (2006), *Choice and Coercion*, focuses on the struggles women have experienced over the decades to obtain control over their own fertility. She mentions both Sanger and DeVilbiss and their roles in the birth control movements. Schoen focuses on eugenic sterilization and other reproductive issues in North Carolina and how they fit into public health and welfare programs in the state.

Patricia Walsh Coates' (2008) *Margaret Sanger and the Origin of the Birth Control Movement, 1910-1930*, focuses on the feminist aspect of the movement pertaining to sexual autonomy and reproductive freedom for women. She points out that Sanger did not consider women free until they had control over their reproduction. Coates contends that Sanger's position on eugenics is complex—Sanger agreed that the biologically "unfit" should not procreate although she was against forced sterilization and disagreed with eugenicists who promoted fertility among the "fit" (pp. 112-113, 236). Coates traces the European influences which shaped Sanger on birth control as a way to achieve both sexual equality and satisfaction.

Jean H. Baker's (2011) *Margaret Sanger: A Life of Passion* is a sympathetic biography that refutes charges that Sanger was an elitist, racist or Nazi supporter. Baker discusses the contested portraits of Sanger by various historians and others over the last fifty years. She points out Sanger's significant work as a sex educator through her writings and lectures and her involvement with eugenics as a "female cause." Baker argues that Sanger deserves to be

reinstated to her important place in feminist history and as a leader for women's reproductive rights.

In summary, shifting, conflicting and contested interpretations of Margaret Sanger and the eugenics movement are found. As eugenics was increasingly demonized in the late twentieth- and early twenty-first centuries, so was Sanger. These appear to be reflective of the times when the historical interpretations were written and in some cases possible bias of the historian.

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