

Birth control leader Margaret Sanger: Darwinist, racist and eugenicist

Jerry Bergman

Margaret Sanger was the founder of Planned Parenthood, the leading organization advocating abortion in the United States today. Darwinism had a profound influence on her thinking, including her conversion to, and active support of, eugenics. She was specifically concerned with reducing the population of the 'less fit', including 'inferior races' such as 'Negroes'. One major result of her lifelong work was to support the sexual revolution that has radically changed our society.

Margaret Sanger (14 Sept. 1879–6 Sept. 1966) was the most prominent leader of the modern birth control and 'free love' movements.¹ Sanger's mother was a devout Irish Catholic; her father, Michael Higgins, was an unstable man unable to provide adequately for his large family. Although a skilled stonemason and tombstone carver, Mr Higgins was unable to properly care for his family because he alienated many of his customers with his radical politics.² He drank heavily when he had the money while his 11 children 'suffered bitterly from cold, privation, and hunger.'³ He was so anti-Christian that when Margaret was baptized at St. Mary's Catholic church on March 23, 1893, the event 'had to be kept secret, as her father would have been furious.'⁴

Sanger left her unhappy home as a teen, never to return—except briefly to study nursing at a co-educational boarding school called 'Claverack College'.⁵ She was reportedly a poor student, skipped classes and neglected her part-time job. She dropped out of school and, after a brief stay at home to help care for her dying mother, moved in with her older sister and worked as a first grade teacher. She taught the children of immigrants but left after only two terms. This unhappy experience may have contributed to her later enthusiastic embrace of eugenics.

About this time she married William Sanger, an architect and painter, in 1902 and soon had three children. Her husband tried everything within his power to please his wife, but she turned out to be very difficult to satisfy. Margaret was also a distracted mother who did not like caring for children, including her own.⁶ She detested domestic life and grossly neglected her children to the point that neighbours had to step in to care for them.⁷ The letters her children wrote to their mother vividly reveal this neglect.

Margaret Sanger's second husband, oil magnate and founder of the 3-in-1 Oil Company James Noah H. Slee, was also very wealthy.⁸ She wrote to her secretary, 'I don't want to marry anyone, particularly a stodgy churchgoer ... Yet ... how often am I going to meet a man with nine million dollars?'⁹ In the first issue of her journal titled *The Woman Rebel*, she wrote that marriage is 'a degenerate institution' and that modesty is an 'obscene prudery'.

Following her father's footsteps, Sanger became involved in radical politics. When she was formally

introduced to Marxism, anarchism, secular humanism, free love and Darwinism, she found her passion in life. Sanger used her husbands' wealth to support her activities. Her sexual passion, though, resulted in free-love behaviour that neither of her two husbands could cope with.¹⁰

Sanger's writings

Sanger wrote extensively, leaving ample documentation of her life. She founded *Birth Control Review*, published from 1917 until the early 1940s, and was either an editor or contributor to this publication during most of its existence. Sanger's relationship with eugenicists was clearly expressed in the pages of *Birth Control Review* from its inception. Eugenics also 'soon became a constant, even a dominant, theme at birth-control conferences'.¹¹

Sanger believed she was 'working in accord with the universal law of evolution'.¹² She maintained that the brains of Australian Aborigines were only one step more evolved than chimpanzees and just under blacks, Jews and Italians.¹³ When arguing for eugenics, Sanger quoted Darwin as an authority when discussing 'natural checks' of the population, such as war, which helped to reduce the population.¹⁴ Her magazine even argued for 'state-sponsored sterilization programs', forcibly sterilizing the 'less capable'.¹⁵ She won many academics and scientists to her cause, including Harvard University sociologists E. M. East, University of Michigan President Clarence C. Little and Johns Hopkins psychiatrist Alfred Meyer.¹⁶

Sanger also made her eugenic views clear in her many publications, such as *The Pivot of Civilization* and *Woman Rebel*, stressing that birth control was not only 'important with respect to controlling the numbers of unfit in the population', but was the 'only viable means to improve the human race'.¹⁷ For example, she wrote: 'Birth control itself ... is nothing more or less than the facilitation of the process of weeding out the unfit, of preventing the birth of defectives or of those who will become defectives.'¹⁸ She boldly proclaimed that birth control was the only viable way to improve the human race.¹⁹ And while in her later years Sanger redefined what she meant by the unfit, 'she increasingly saw feeble-mindedness, the bogey of all hereditarians, as antecedent to poverty and social organization in the genesis of social problems.'²⁰



1916 photograph of Sanger and two of her children, Grant and Stuart. Sanger did not like caring for her children and grossly neglected them. (From Sanger⁶³).

She also opposed charity because it allowed the less fit to survive and propagate more unfit children.²¹ The influence of Darwin on Sanger's racism ideas is obvious from her writings. For example she wrote,

'The lower down in the scale of human development we go the less sexual control we find. It is said the aboriginal Australian, the lowest known species of the human family, just a step higher than the chimpanzee in brain development, has so little sexual control that police authority alone prevents him from obtaining sexual satisfaction on the streets. According to one writer, the rapist has just enough brain development to raise him above the animal, but like the animal, when in heat, knows no law except nature, which impels him to procreate, whatever the result.'²²

Her conversion to eugenics

Early in her career, Sanger became a follower of Thomas Malthus, the same man that inspired Darwin. Malthus's disciples—then called Malthusians and Neo-Malthusians—taught that 'if Western civilization were to survive, the physically unfit, the materially poor, the spiritually diseased, the racially inferior, and the mentally incompetent had to

somehow be suppressed and isolated—or perhaps even eliminated.'²³

As Sanger stressed in a talk given at the Fifth International Neo-Malthusian and Birth Control Conference, the end goal of her movement was to produce a superior race: 'To-day the average reliance of civilization is based upon iron and steel, bricks and mortar, and we must change this to the construction and evolution of humanity itself'²⁴.

To do this she advocated euthanasia, segregation in work camps, sterilization and abortion.²⁵ She was very successful in achieving this goal—more than half of the American states launched programs that sterilized their 'unfit ... with Virginia, California, and Kansas leading the way'.²⁵ Sanger was also very influenced by Havelock Ellis,

'... the influential sociologist, "sexologist," and eugenicist. Ellis's position on eugenics is summed up by his own statement that appeared in the "Havelock Ellis Number" of *Birth Control Review* February 1919 issue: "We desire no parents who are not both competent and willing parents. Only such parents are fit to father and mother a future race worthy to rule the world."²⁶

Ellis frequently published articles in *Birth Control Review*, and Ellis had major influence on Sanger's ideas. Chesler wrote that Ellis, who 'always considered himself both a eugenicist and a socialist', converted Sanger to his views. Furthermore,

'Ellis made his most important contribution to the eugenics doctrine ... when he assigned women to act as its chief enforcers. Women are critical agents of civilization's progress ... because ... they alone have the power to produce and nurture ... fitter babies. ... Increased sex expression and wider use of birth control were thus significant tools in the eugenic program, and accordingly, he condemned eugenicists who refused to endorse birth control.'²⁷

Sanger wrote that her concern was not just that feeble-mindedness leads to criminality but

'... there is sufficient evidence to lead us to believe that the so-called "borderline cases" are a greater menace than the out-and-out "defective delinquents" who can be supervised, controlled and prevented from procreating their kind. ... the mental defective who is glib and plausible, bright looking and attractive, but with a mental vision of seven, eight or nine years, may not merely lower the whole level of intelligence in a school or in a society, but may be encouraged by church and state to increase and multiply until he dominates ... an entire community. The presence in the public schools of the mentally defective children of men and women who should never have been parents is a problem that is becoming more and more difficult.'²⁸

As early as 1917 Sanger was openly giving ‘public support to the eugenics movement’ and to ‘race betterment’ programs.²⁹ The eugenicists on her board believed that ‘birth control would eliminate disease and deformity as well as empty the jails and orphanages’.⁸ Sanger ‘supported sterilization for the incarcerated and considered birth control a necessary component of racial improvement’.³⁰ Her eugenics crusade, although toned down later in her life, was to consume her until she died in 1966.⁵ According to Roche, Sanger’s end goal was the same as Hitler’s: to ‘create a race of thoroughbreds’, a pure and superior race and her journal even ‘eerily’ foretold the ‘horrors of the Nazi “final solution”’.³¹

Racism and birth control clinics

Margaret Sanger opened her first birth control clinic in 1916 in the impoverished Brownsville section of Brooklyn to help control the problem of ‘over breeding’. The two-room storefront clinic was a great contrast to Margaret’s plush Greenwich Village home, but

‘... since the clientele she wished to attract—“immigrant Southern Europeans, Slavs, Latins, and Jews”—could only be found “in the coarser neighborhoods and tenements,” she was forced to venture out of her comfortable confines.’³²

As her organization grew, Sanger set up more clinics in the communities of other ‘dysgenic races’—such as Blacks and Hispanics. Sanger turned her attention to ‘Negroes’ in 1929 and opened another clinic in Harlem in 1930. Sanger, ‘in alliance with eugenicists, and through

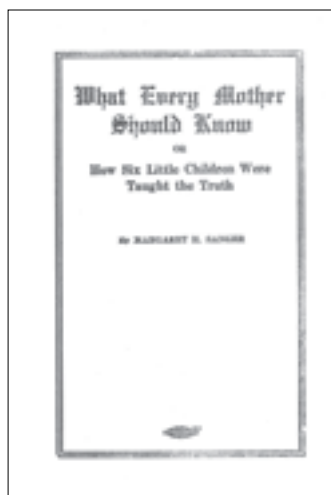
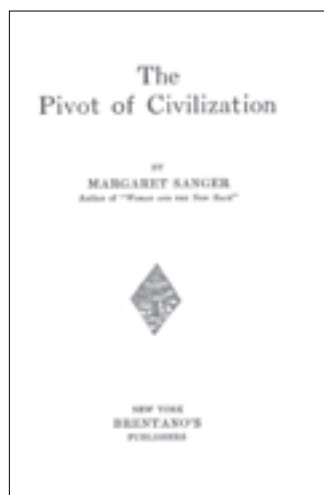
initiatives such as the Negro Project ... exploited black stereotypes in order to reduce the fertility of African Americans.’³³ The all-white staff and the sign identifying the clinic as a ‘research bureau’ raised the suspicions of the black community. They feared that the clinic’s actual goal was to ‘experiment on and sterilize black people’.³⁴ Their fears were not unfounded: Sanger once addressed the women’s branch of the Klu Klux Klan in Silver Lake, New Jersey, and received a ‘dozen invitations to speak to similar groups’.³⁵ Flynn claims that she was on good terms with other racist organizations.³⁶

Sanger believed the ‘Negro district’ was the ‘headquarters for the criminal element’ and concluded that, as the title of a book by a member of her board proclaimed, *The Rising Tide of Color Against White World Supremacy*, was a rise that had to be stemmed.³³ To deal with the problem of resistance among the black population, Sanger recruited black doctors, nurses, ministers and social workers ‘in order to gain black patients’ trust’ in order ‘to limit or even erase the black presence in America’.³⁷

Her Birth Control League board was ‘made up almost exclusively of sociologists and eugenicists’, insuring that her eugenic goals were implemented.³⁸ Margaret and the Malthusian Eugenicists she worked with did not discriminate narrowly, but targeted every ‘non-Aryan’ ethnic group, whether red, black, yellow or white. They placed clinics wherever they judged ‘feeble-minded, syphilitic, irresponsible, and defective’ persons ‘bred unhindered’.³² Since, by their estimation, as many as 70% of the population fell into this ‘undesirable’ category, Margaret and her cohorts had their work cut out for them. Much of the early

grass-roots work in her movement was done by ‘radicals’, mostly socialists and communists.³⁹ Birth control colleague, Mrs. Besant, told a court:

‘I have no doubt that if natural checks were allowed to operate right through the human as they do in the animal world, a better result would follow. Among the brutes, the weaker are driven to the wall, the diseased fall out in the race of life. The old brutes, when feeble or sickly, are killed. If men insisted that those who were sickly should be allowed to die without help of medicine or science,



Left, the cover of one of Sanger’s openly eugenic books. First published in 1922, it became one of the ‘text books’ of the movement for years and is still in print. Centre, one volume of papers presented at the International Neo-Malthusian and Birth Control Conference and published in 1926. The papers published in these proceedings make it clear that Sanger and many of her closest followers were foremost concerned with applying Darwinism to produce a superior race and improve the lot of humankind by eugenics. Right, the cover of one of the many books that Sanger wrote to teach sex-education to young people. This book was written to instruct mothers to teach ‘sex education’ to their young children. It was published in New York by Max N. Maisel, 1916. This set of books openly advocated immoral behaviour such as sex outside of marriage.



Margaret Sanger around 1938 (From Sanger³⁵). All authorized published photographs, including this one, were staged in an attempt to show Mrs Sanger as a conservative, serious, middle class and very respectable lady.

if those who are weak were put upon one side and crushed, if those who were old and useless were killed, if those who were not capable of providing food for themselves were allowed to starve, if all this were done, the struggle for existence among men would be as real as it is among brutes and would doubtless result in the production of a higher race of men.⁴⁰

Sanger eventually recognized that this solution to the problems of crime, poverty and other social problems would never happen, at least in America. She then proposed a realistic solution that would prevent bringing the ‘weak, the helpless and the unwanted children into the world. We can refuse to overcrowd families, nations and the earth.’⁴¹ The solution was positive eugenics by encouraging selective population control, and a means of achieving this more realistic goal was birth control.

Sanger’s war against the Church

Many churches opposed Sanger because she championed ‘sex without consequences’, eugenics, abortion and concentration camps for the unfit—all practices that Christianity has historically opposed.⁴² She stressed that she was against especially the Catholic Church because they opposed ‘science’, evolution, eugenics and race improvement.⁴³ Sanger sought out allegiances with eugenicists to help blunt the opposition to her from the religious community.⁴⁴ The church’s view that the

handicapped, diseased and deformed were all equals in the eyes of God ‘struck Sanger as anathema to the dictates of the Brave New World’ that she wanted to create.⁴⁵ She even argued that persons ‘whose religious scruples prevent their exercising control over their numbers’ were ‘irresponsible and reckless’ and that the ‘procreation of this group should be stopped’.⁴⁶

Sanger ‘attributed insanity, epilepsy, criminality, prostitution, pauperism, mental defectiveness’, and ‘everything from child labor to world war’, to ‘unchecked breeding’.⁴⁷ The church taught these were sins that could be overcome and had many success stories to support this claim—and followed up on these successes with activities like Catholic charities. Until Hitler was defeated, Sanger did little to support positive eugenics (ie: encouraging the fit to have large families), which may have been supported by the church, but rather until later in her career advocated negative eugenics, the prevention of procreation of the unfit by law and sterilization.

Exporting eugenics and sterilization

Sanger also worked hard to spread her eugenic ideas about ‘human weeds’ to the rest of the world. Trombley claimed that eugenics, sterilization and birth control projects on a large scale were an Anglo-American export.⁴⁸ He notes that Sanger’s birth control movement was the most powerful in the world, and in England its head offices were based at the London Eugenics Society. Sanger’s movement became a ‘truly international organization with the bulk of its multi-million annual budget coming from the United States.’⁴⁹ Most of the money came from taxes; the rest was donated by large corporations such as General Motors.

Sanger’s movement had an impact in many nations, including India, Singapore, Japan, China, Korea and much of Europe. Her programs involving sterilization of the unfit were adopted by Sweden, Norway, Finland, Denmark and, most infamously, by Nazi Germany.⁵⁰ Planned Parenthood today boasts three-quarters of a billion dollars in annual revenue, most paid for by taxpayers, and is active throughout the world.⁵¹

Her role as an icon

Margaret Sanger is still widely admired for her work in the birth control movement. She was listed as one of the most influential persons of the twentieth century by *Time-Life*⁵² and was given many honours during her lifetime including an Honorary Doctorate of Law by Smith College.⁵³ Paul and Anne Ehrlich wrote that

‘America’s heroine in the family planning movement was Margaret Sanger, a nurse. ... Sanger and others who joined her rapidly growing birth control movement (then known as the Birth Control League) led the fight for ... legal changes and for support from medical, educational, health, and religious organizations.’⁵⁴

Gloria Steinem wrote a laudatory chapter on Sanger in the *Time* volume listing the 100 most important Americans. Steinem falsely implied Sanger opposed eugenics and what it stood for and lionized her as a heroine of the women's movement.⁵⁵

Rewriting history

Although Sanger's involvement in eugenics and radical politics is well documented, many people today are attempting to whitewash her past eugenics involvement. Her 'hagiographers, and her most devoted followers in the abortion rights movement, deny and gloss over the eugenicist nature of her program.'⁵⁰ Reasons for rewriting (or ignoring) history include the fear that 'exposing birth control's political history to hostile lawmakers and anti-choice lobbyists' could affect their political goals.⁵⁶ Other persons hid her past because they were concerned about tarnishing her 'perceived labors on behalf of gender equity, self-determination, and redress of economic and personal privation'.⁵⁶ Even many reprints of Sanger's writings select sections that give a very distorted picture of her beliefs and goals.⁵⁷

Today Planned Parenthood stresses 'family planning', but the fact is 'Sanger sold birth control as the crypto-eugenicist Marie Stopes had, as offering "freedom from fear" ... which in aggregate would contribute to the wider social good. The reasoning was straightforwardly eugenic.'⁴⁹ To the end of her life she supported eugenics. In one of her last speeches she 'attacked welfare programs for not eliminating the "feeble minded and unfit" and proposed "incentive sterilization"', a program to bribe the 'unfit' to be sterilized.⁵⁸

Reasons for her enormous success

A major reason for Sanger's success was that she met a genuine need of the poor, many of whom had large families they could not adequately support. America, at that time, was changing from an agricultural to an industrial society. Large families could be supported on farms that needed the low-cost labour provided by many children, but large families could not be properly supported by most factory work. This motivated a drive to limit family size, a need that Sanger exploited to further her eugenic goals. The problem is 'Sanger's zeal blinded her to the reality that her actions occasionally worked against her desired purposes.'⁵⁹

It was only after World War II and the horrors of the Holocaust that Sanger abandoned her dream of producing a socialist, perfected eugenic society. She then played down her eugenic and socialist ideals and increasingly stressed the goals now advocated by Planned Parenthood. In Trombley's words, 'after the Nazi atrocities' she clothed her movement in the words that Planned Parenthood advocates use today because the 'Nazi's eugenics became a word to strike fear in the hearts of ordinary people. Thus eugenics

re-emerged from the doldrums of the post-Nazi period to exert an influence on a much larger scale than had ever been previously imagined.'⁶⁰ Partly because of her past association with known racists and a history of several decades of racist and eugenic rhetoric, the name of the American Birth Control League was changed to Planned Parenthood during World War II.¹¹ Unfortunately, despite the name change, the racism of her movement lingered.⁴³

Summary

Sanger was openly influenced by Darwinists and various radicals in her highly successful campaign against Judeo-Christian morality and in support of eugenics. She worked hard to produce a socialist state based on eugenics, and her movement thrived because it partly fulfilled a real need in the early 1900s. Her movement played a major role in loosening sexual morality, contributing to the current high rate of illegitimacy and sexual immorality. Her goals for society may not have worked in her own life: Flynn claims Sanger died an alcoholic addicted to painkillers, a bitter woman feeling both abandoned and alone, a victim of her youthful, selfish hedonism.⁶¹ She lived and died by her credo published in the *Woman Rebel*, namely 'The Right to be Lazy. The Right to be an Unmarried Mother. The Right to Destroy. The Right to Create. The Right to Live and the Right to Love.'⁶²

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Jerry Bergman has nine academic degrees including two Ph.Ds. His major areas of study for his graduate work were in biology, chemistry, psychology, and evaluation and research. He graduated from Wayne State University in Detroit, Medical University of Ohio in Toledo, University of Toledo and Bowling Green State University. A prolific writer, Dr Bergman has taught biology, chemistry and biochemistry at Northwest State in Archbold, Ohio for over 20 years. He is now an adjunct associate professor at Medical University of Ohio.
