

THE TRUTH

about
MARGARET SANGER



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by Alana Varley

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Care Net
44180 Riverside Parkway, Suite 200, Lansdowne, VA 20176
Phone: 703-554-8734 | Fax: 703-554-8735
Email: info@care-net.org

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I. DUMB PEOPLE SHOULDN'T BE PARENTS

*“**Racism** and **ableism** do not have a place at Planned Parenthood and sure as [expletive] don’t represent the organization’s commitment to equality.” [*The History of 100 Years of Women’s Health Care At Planned Parenthood*](#)*

*“**propaganda** that Margaret Sanger was only interested in birth control so that she could limit the black race....” [*Faye Wattleton*](#), former President of Planned Parenthood*

Even in the midst of controversy about what Margaret Sanger believed about eugenics and race, Planned Parenthood continues to support Sanger with no qualifiers. They even mention the “**propaganda** that Margaret Sanger was only interested in birth control so that she could limit the black race....” Yet they fail to answer these accusations, to evaluate their merits and shortcomings.

In the following six posts, I will evaluate the merit of Planned Parenthood’s insistence that charges of racism and ableism against Margaret Sanger is pro-life propaganda by examining Sanger’s writings. If you have questions, or want to get more context, Sanger’s [*The Pivot of Civilization*](#) is easily accessible on Project Gutenberg. I encourage you to check it out!

Margaret Higgins Sanger had ten siblings; Margaret’s mother died from her eighteen pregnancies.¹ This experience would set the tone for Margaret’s future career. Her work as a social worker and a nurse coupled with her mother’s experiences with pregnancies convinced her of the importance of birth control, and she became a loud, outspoken birth control advocate.² Her pamphlets, such as “Family Limitation,” “What Every Girl Should Know,” and “What Every Mother Should Know,” informed women of birth control information and sometimes landed her in jail for violating birth control information distribution laws such as the Comstock laws. She gave speeches, put together conferences, created clinics, and founded organizations in her efforts to change the way that society viewed birth control. In her efforts, she was a “successful revolutionary.”³

Eugenicists refer to people who do not deserve to have children or, worse, do not deserve to live as “unfit.” Margaret Sanger had her own definition “unfit,” which encompassed a wide number and a wide variety of people. Sanger kept records of “the nationality, heredity, religion,

¹Alfred Rehwinkel, *Planned Parenthood and Birth Control in the Light of Christian Ethics* (Saint Louis, Missouri: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), 32.

²Rehwinkel, 33.

³Wardell, Dorothy. 1980. "Margaret Sanger: Birth Control's Successful Revolutionary." *American Journal Of Public Health* 70, no. 7: 736. Academic Search Premier, EBSCOhost (accessed March 24, 2017), 736.

occupation, and trade union affiliation of patients at the clinic”; it is possible that she considered all of these factors to be important in determining whether an individual was fit or not.⁴ Sanger’s definition for “unfit” included racial, physical, and socioeconomic qualifications, but she focused primarily on the mentally unfit.⁵ “We want, most of all, genius,” she said.⁶

Unintelligent

Throughout her book, *The Pivot of Civilization*, Margaret Sanger wrote that the “feeble-minded” should not have children or should be sterilized. She elaborated on the term feeble-minded on page 250, encompassing several kinds of mental problems in her definition. “Mental defect and feeble-mindedness,” she wrote, “are conceived essentially as retardation, arrest of development, differing in degree so that the victim is either an imbecile, feeble-minded or a moron, according to the relative point at which the mental development ceases.”⁷ Almost anyone with a low level of intelligence or a mental handicap would fall under Sanger’s broad definition.

Sanger also understood her definition of feeble-minded, and consequently unfit, to be broadly constructed. Sanger wrote that about 10% of the U.S. population fell under her definition of “unfit.” She had a firm faith in science, and believed that it could determine who was mentally fit and who was not.⁸ She cited the Mental Survey of the State of Oregon, which put 10% of Oregon’s population in the category of “feeble-minded.”⁹ Sanger believed that this 10% standard not only applied to Oregon, but to the entire nation.¹⁰ Her belief was founded on a compositional fallacy. But for Sanger, “men, women, and children who never should have been born” comprised 10% of the United States population.¹¹

Race

As a eugenicist, Sanger even made eugenic distinctions based on race, though she often tried to avoid the issue.¹² She wrote of “racial mistakes.”¹³ She expressed concern at the high birth rate of foreigners, just as she expressed concern at the high birth rate of the unfit and feeble-

⁴David Kennedy, *Birth Control in America: The Career of Margaret Sanger* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971), 200.

⁵Kennedy, 115.

⁶Sanger, *The Pivot of Civilization*, 235.

⁷*Ibid.*, 250.

⁸*Ibid.*, 250.

⁹*Ibid.*, 206.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 206.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 206.

¹²Kennedy, 117.

¹³Sanger, *The Pivot of Civilization*, 260.

minded.¹⁴ “Do these [foreign] elements give promise of a better stock?” she asked rhetorically.¹⁵ She referred to Caucasian Americans as “pure white native stock.”¹⁶ In the next sentence, she made the assumption that African Americans were at least partially responsible for the high rate of illiteracy in the South.¹⁷ In a letter to Albert Lasker, she [wrote](#), “I think it is magnificent that we are in on the ground floor, helping Negroes to control their birth rate.”

Poor

Orthodox eugenicists viewed the poor as inherently lacking in intelligence or character.¹⁸ As an orthodox eugenicist, Margaret Sanger did, too. In her promotion of eugenics, she was willing to discriminate not simply by mental capacity, but by socioeconomic class. She equated the unskilled laborers with the unintelligent, which she had already labelled unfit.¹⁹ In so doing, she added unskilled laborers to her classification of those individuals who should not have children.

Sick

Sanger’s understanding of the unfit included physical disease. In an interview with Mike Wallace, Margaret Sanger said that she believed that disease was a good reason for a couple to choose not to have children.²⁰ Her definition encompassed venereal, mental, and physical disease. “We must free our bodies from disease and predisposition to disease,” she wrote. “We must perfect these bodies and make them fine instruments of the mind and the spirit.”²¹

Ellen Chesler challenged many of these understandings in her book about Sanger, *Woman of Valor*. Chesler tried to argue that, because Sanger dismissed the idea of a cradle competition between the fit and the unfit, Sanger was not racist.²² This argument is invalid for two reasons: the cradle competition was a competition between classes, not races; and Sanger fought against the cradle competition because she felt that preventing the unfit from having more children—through birth control, sterilization, and child labor laws—was more important than encouraging the wealthy to have more children. “The lack of balance between the birth-rate of the ‘unfit’

¹⁴Sanger, *Woman and the New Race*, 34.

¹⁵*Ibid.* 33.

¹⁶*Ibid.* 38.

¹⁷Sanger, *Woman and the New Race*, 38.

¹⁸Ellen Chesler, *Woman of Valor: Margaret Sanger and the Birth Control Movement in America* (New York: Simon and Schuster Paperbacks, 2007), 484.

¹⁹Sanger, *The Pivot of Civilization*, 252.

²⁰Mike Wallace and Margaret Sanger, “The Mike Wallace Interview Guest: Margaret Sanger,” Harry Ransom Center. Accessed March 14, 2017 from http://www.hrc.utexas.edu/multimedia/video/2008/wallace/sanger_margaret_t.html.

²¹Sanger, *The Pivot of Civilization*, 259.

²²Chesler, 484.

and ‘fit’...can never be rectified by a cradle competition between the two classes,” she wrote.²³ For Sanger, the issue of a cradle competition was not one of race, but of practicality. Sanger did not believe that encouraging the wealthy and intelligent to have more children than the poor and unintelligent was the most effective means of improving society. She instead advocated for the “elimination of the feeble-minded,” which she evidently felt was more practical and important than the proliferation of the upper classes.²⁴

Chesler wrote that Margaret Sanger did not consider poverty in a eugenic light, and instead saw poverty as who had access to resources and who did not. Chesler wrote, “She framed poverty as a matter of differential access to resources, including birth control, not as the immutable consequence of low inherent ability or intelligence or character, which is the view that orthodox eugenics embraced.”²⁵ However, Sanger herself made a tight connection between the unintelligent and the poor. “Those of the lowest grade in intelligence are born of unskilled laborers,” she wrote.²⁶ Thus by suggesting that the poor are inherently unintelligent, Sanger admitted her orthodox eugenics. She did not simply adopt the modern trend; she wholeheartedly embraced eugenics.

Planned Parenthood now serves the very people Margaret Sanger considered to be “unfit,” limiting the number of children they have just as Margaret Sanger hoped to limit their families. They limit the families of the poor, the very families Sanger considered unintelligent. In their recent video, [*The History of 100 Years of Women’s Health Care At Planned Parenthood*](#), the narrator says, “The organization remained committed to serving low income immigrant women.” It goes on: “Today, approximately 1 in 5 women in the U.S. visit Planned Parenthood, and **¾ of those women are low income.**”

Planned Parenthood [says](#) that Margaret Sanger was not a racist because she opened up centers in African American communities. However, if she was seeking to limit the African American race, that is exactly what she would do. And that’s what Planned Parenthood does today: “79 percent of Planned Parenthood’s surgical abortion facilities are located within a two-mile radius, or walking distance of, a black or Hispanic neighborhood”²⁷ Margaret Sanger had a “[Negro Project](#)”; Planned Parenthood has “Planned Parenthood Black Community” (@PPBlackComm).

²³Sanger, *The Pivot of Civilization*, 187.

²⁴Sanger, *The Pivot of Civilization*, 187.

²⁵Chesler, 484.

²⁶Sanger, *The Pivot of Civilization*, 252.

²⁷<http://thefederalist.com/2016/02/18/yes-planned-parenthood-targets-and-hurts-poor-black-women/>

II. "UNINTELLIGENT" PEOPLE ARE A DRAIN ON SOCIETY

“The only people that were with her were poor women on the Lower East Side who were having more children than they could afford and they were desperate to figure out a way not to.” [Alex Sanger](#), Grandson of Margaret Sanger

Margaret Sanger’s writings are evidence of her clear support of the eugenic movement. “Our great problem is...to remodel the race so that it may equal the progress we now see making in the externals of life,” she wrote.²⁸ In a discussion of three of the most popular theories for improving society at the time, philanthropy, Marxian Socialism, and eugenics, Sanger concluded that eugenics would prove the most effective.²⁹ She defined eugenics as “the study of agencies under social control that may improve or impair the racial qualities of future generations, either mentally or physically.”³⁰ By promoting eugenics, she sought to improve future generations by promoting birth control, encouraging government involvement in promoting eugenics, and even advocating for compulsory sterilization of unfit individuals. “The Next Step—Race Betterment,” she would say in her speeches and promotions.³¹

As a eugenicist, Margaret Sanger incorporated eugenic jargon into her writings and speeches. She used words such as “fit,” “unfit,” “breeding,” and “feeble-minded” to discuss eugenics and eugenic ideals.

Sanger’s complaint against the unfit was as broad as her definition for unfit. She believed that the unfit harmed society in a myriad of ways. “All our problems are the result of overbreeding among the working class,” she wrote.³² She elaborated: “We do not object to feeble-mindedness simply because it leads to immorality and criminality; nor can we approve of it when it expresses itself in docility, submissiveness and obedience. We object because both are burdens and dangers to the community.”³³ Thus submissiveness and docility in unintelligent individuals were as offensive to Sanger as criminality and immorality. According to Sanger, the unintelligent harmed society simply by existing.

One of Sanger’s eugenic complaints against the unfit was that they were a financial drain on society. She raised concerns about tax dollars spent on the mentally and physically unwell. In one article of *The Birth Control Review* were the following words: “Every year millions of dollars are collected in taxes and spent on the maintenance of the defective, the feeble-minded, the insane, and the criminals.”³⁴ Sanger praised

²⁸Margaret Sanger, *The Pivot of Civilization In Historical Perspective* (Seattle: Inkling Books, 2001), 259.

²⁹Sanger, *The Pivot of Civilization*, 232.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 232

³¹Murphree, Vanessa, and Karla K. Gower. 2008. “Mission Accomplished: Margaret Sanger and The National Committee on Federal Legislation for Birth Control, 1929-1937.” *American Journalism* 25, no. 2: 7-32. Literary Reference Center, EBSCOhost (accessed March 24, 2017), 15.

³²Kennedy, 112.

³³Sanger, *The Pivot of Civilization*, 204.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 169.

the work of the Oregon State legislature when she quoted the U.S. Surgeon General H. Cumming: “The work in Oregon constitutes the first state-wide survey which even begins to disclose the enormous drain on the state, caused by mental defects.”³⁵ By stirring up concerns about taxpayer dollars, she hoped to encourage eugenicists to do something about the issue of the mentally unwell.

Had Sanger simply opposed the government support of unfit individuals, her argument may simply have been a political one. However, she opposed the private financial support of the “feeble-minded” as well. In her article “Is Race Suicide Probable?” Sanger wrote of taxpayer dollars and charity money that went towards the mentally sick. “We are spending, billions, literally billions, keeping alive thousands who never, in all human compassion, should have been brought into this world.”³⁶ To her, this money was not money designated by the government and private individuals to help others, but rather it was “overhead” expenses.³⁷ Thus, her argument was a eugenic argument, and not simply a discussion of where taxpayer dollars should go.

Sanger believed that the mentally unwell were not only a financial drain on the government and private charities, but also a threat to the effectiveness of the American public school system. Sanger foresaw an unintelligent, dull future for America, if it would not accept and implement the principles of eugenics. She felt that school teachers and schools were forced to make school easier for the unintelligent, consequently holding back those individuals who had greater intellectual capacity and could tackle more rigorous coursework. “The presence in the public schools of the mentally defective children of men and women who should never have been parents...is one of the chief reasons for lower educational standards.”³⁸ These lower educational standards prevented taxpayers from getting their money’s worth out of the American public school system.³⁹ What was more important to Sanger was that lower educational standards held back the more intelligent students, and prevented the American population from rushing on towards a brighter, more intelligent future.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 206.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 176.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 176.

³⁸*Ibid.*, 205.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 205.

III. SEX AMONG THE “DEFECTIVE AND DISEASED” IS “IRRESPONSIBLE SWARMING AND SPAWNING.”

*“Margaret Sanger had an imagination that women truly could be liberated from sexual oppression and enforced reproduction. She had a notion that in so doing women could achieve the **power of their humanity**,” [Faye Wattleton](#), former President of Planned Parenthood*

As a true eugenicist, Sanger believed that some lives were worth sacrificing. She believed that, if the physically deformed were allowed to reproduce, they would bring down the human race and prevent it from achieving its potential. “Every single case of inherited defect, every malformed child, every congenitally tainted human being brought into this world is of infinite importance to that poor individual,” she wrote, implying that she understood that birth defects made life difficult and that she had compassion on those who suffered from them. But with the rest of the sentence, she sacrificed compassion on the altar of the eugenic development of the human race: “but it is of scarcely less importance to the rest of us and to all of our children who must pay in one way or another for these biological and racial mistakes.”⁴⁰ To her, a child struggling with a birth defect was not a child in need of aid, but a threat to get rid of.

Margaret Sanger even placed a low dollar value on the value of a human life. She calculated that, in New York, about thirty-four million dollars were being channeled through the government and private charities to the poor and mentally challenged, about sixty-five thousand people.⁴¹ She lamented that so much money went to so few individuals. “Our eyes should be opened to the terrific cost to the community of this dead weight of human waste,” she wrote.⁴² The cost per person, however, was only five hundred twenty-three dollars. To Sanger, human life was not even worth that much.

Sanger also believed that some lives were not worth living. She wrote, “In truth, unfortunate babies who depart during their first twelve months are more fortunate in many respects than those who survive to undergo punishment for their parents’ cruel ignorance and complacent fecundity.”⁴³ To her, some individuals did not deserve to live. One Birth Control Review article, edited by Sanger, was titled “Unprofitable Children: Are These Bodies Fit Temples for Immortal Souls?”⁴⁴ She even believed that some seemingly worthless lives should be ended, and not merely

⁴⁰Sanger, *The Pivot of Civilization*, 260.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 215.

⁴²*Ibid.*, 215.

⁴³*Ibid.*, 195.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 169.

prevented. In her article “Is Race Suicide Probable?” she quoted Luther Burbank: “All over the country today we have enormous insane asylums where we nourish the unfit and criminal instead of exterminating them.”⁴⁵ Instead of criticizing Burbank for his harsh views, she praised him. “American civilization is deeply indebted [to Burbank],” she wrote.⁴⁶

She compared the physically unfit to low-life animals and suggested that they were somehow in a different classification than other human beings. In the middle of a discussion about hereditary and physical qualifications for parenthood, Sanger wrote of individuals “reproduc[ing] their kind.”⁴⁷ In a different section of *The Pivot of Civilization*, she again referred to the unfit “propagating their kind.”⁴⁸ By using the word “kind,” Sanger suggested that some people were somehow less human than other people. The use of the word implies Genesis 1:25: “God made the wild animals according to their kinds, the livestock according to their kinds, and all the creatures that move along the ground according to their kinds” (NIV). By using the word “kind,” Sanger implied that the poor and unintelligent belonged to a different classification or even a different species. To her, the unfit were somehow less human. Those born to delinquent parents had “no chance in the world to be a human being.”⁴⁹

She compared the lives of some people to those of animals typically regarded as disgusting or unwanted. To her, different races were synonymous with different “strains,” just as one might discover new strains of bacteria.⁵⁰ To her, they were not fully human, but only “human material.”⁵¹

In one instance, she compared poor women to rats: “The women slink in and out of their homes like rats from holes,” she wrote.⁵² She compared the sexual relations of poor people with the reproduction of snails, frogs, and other slimy creatures.⁵³ To her, sex among the “defective and diseased” was no more than “reckless and irresponsible swarming and spawning.”⁵⁴ If people were lowly animals, eugenics was “the rational breeding of human beings,” as Sanger quoted Galton.⁵⁵ In her writings, she continued to use the word “breeding” to refer to the reproduction

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 176.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 176.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 204.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 234.

⁴⁹Mike Wallace and Margaret Sanger, “The Mike Wallace Interview Guest: Margaret Sanger,” Harry Ransom Center. Accessed March 14, 2017 from http://www.hrc.utexas.edu/multimedia/video/2008/wallace/sanger_margaret_t.html.

⁵⁰Margaret Sanger, *Woman and the New Race* (New York: Truth Publishing Company, 1921), 34. Accessed January 26, 2017 from <https://archive.org/details/womanandnewrace01sanggoog>.

⁵¹Sanger, *Woman and the New Race*, 37.

⁵²Sanger, *The Pivot of Civilization*, 215.

⁵³*Ibid.*, 231.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, 231.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, 232.

of human beings which she felt were somehow less human or less than human.⁵⁶ Margaret Sanger did not view all human life as sacred, but instead viewed some lives as valuable and others as worthless as that of a squid or mollusk.

⁵⁶David Kennedy, *Birth Control in America: The Career of Margaret Sanger* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971), 112.

IV. BIRTH CONTROL A EUGENIC SOLUTION

*“Through her persistence and grit and getting arrested again and again, **she changed society’s view about birth control**—made it, not just respectable, but a necessary part of the social and familial fabric of this country.” [Alex Sanger](#), Grandson of Margaret*

Margaret Sanger offered up birth control as a means of advancing eugenics. “[E]ugenics without birth control seemed to me to be a house built upon the sands,” she wrote.⁵⁷ She adopted the flowery language of other eugenicists to describe how birth control would help the eugenic movement: “[Birth Control] awakens the vision of mankind moving and changing, of humanity growing and developing, coming to fruition, of a race creative, flowering into beautiful expression through talent and genius.”⁵⁸

Thus she wove eugenic propaganda into her birth control propaganda in an attempt to encourage eugenicists to join her cause. In less flowery prose, Sanger described directly and succinctly the theoretical impact of birth control on the eugenics movement: “Birth control...is nothing more or less than the facilitation of the process of weeding out the unfit, or preventing the birth of defectives or of those who will become defectives.”⁵⁹ Her determination to combine the two movements was not only theoretical, but practical. In her efforts, she put together what she called a “scientific population conference,” or a conference on eugenics, in Geneva.⁶⁰

Sanger’s attempt to combine the birth control movement with the eugenics movement achieved some small successes. When she began to promote eugenics, “former critics came to accept birth control as a weapon in the fight against the high birthrates of the ‘deficient.’”⁶¹ Some eugenicists believed, as Sanger did, that birth control could help lower birthrates among the unfit. “Birth control can be and should be made a potent adjunct to eugenics, however far from being so it may be now,” wrote Samuel J. Holmes in his review of Sanger’s “The Pivot of Civilization.”⁶² Other eugenicists suggested that Sanger combine The Birth Control Review with a journal on eugenics.⁶³

Even outsiders saw eugenics and birth control as working towards similar goals. The following appeared in the Coast Artillery Journal: “Mrs. Sanger is wholly convinced as to the urgent need of Birth Control, especially as to its greater promise than the program of the eugenicists for the

⁵⁷Margaret Sanger, *Margaret Sanger* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co. Inc), 374. Accessed January 26, 2017 from <https://lifedynamics.com/library/#birth-control-review>.

⁵⁸Sanger, *The Pivot of Civilization*, 184-185.

⁵⁹Kennedy, 115.

⁶⁰Sanger, *My Fight for Birth Control*, 285.

⁶¹Jean Baker, *Margaret Sanger: A Life of Passion* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2011), 222.

⁶²Sanger, *The Pivot of Civilization*, 170.

⁶³Baker, 222.

improvement of the race."⁶⁴ The author suggested that birth control may prove even more effective than eugenic theories in making the human race stronger and healthier.

Although many eugenicists were convinced to support Sanger's birth control movement, ultimately, the combination of the eugenics movement and the birth control movement was not successful.⁶⁵ The combination of the two movements faced roadblocks: for example, Sir Bernard Mallet disallowed the mention of birth control at the eugenic conference Sanger herself had put together.⁶⁶ Sanger's own understanding of the best eugenic practices alienated fellow eugenicists.

Sanger wrote that "Any social progress...must purge itself of sentimentalism and pass through the crucible of science. We are willing to submit Birth Control to this test."⁶⁷ In the realm of sentimentalism, Margaret Sanger proved that she could successfully weave eugenics and birth control together. Submitted to the crucible of science, however, birth control failed the test. Many scholars doubted that unfit mothers would adopt a eugenic worldview and limit their families themselves through birth control.⁶⁸ They were right: the poor did not stop having children, even when given access to birth control and birth control information.⁶⁹

Thus, birth control did not successfully limit the reproduction of the "unfit" as Sanger hoped it would. Evidence that birth control was unsuccessful as a eugenic tool caused some eugenicists to abandon Sanger's birth control movement, thus depriving Sanger of some of the followers she had fought for.⁷⁰ Sanger herself acknowledged her defeat: "For it is always the least desirable parents who are the last to curtail their fecundity," she wrote.⁷¹ In a more snarky passage, she wrote, "The very word 'proletarian,' as Hardy points out, means 'producer of children.'"⁷² It was the middle class, and not the lower class, that used birth control the most.

⁶⁴Sanger, *The Pivot of Civilization*, 177.

⁶⁵Kennedy, 75.

⁶⁶Sanger, *My Fight for Birth Control*, 285.

⁶⁷Sanger, *The Pivot of Civilization*, 187.

⁶⁸Chesler, 475.

⁶⁹Kennedy, 124.

⁷⁰Kennedy, 120.

⁷¹Sanger, *The Pivot of Civilization*, 174.

⁷²Sanger, *Woman and the New Race*, 141.

V. FOUNDER OF PLANNED PARENTHOOD LIKED STERILIZATION, HATED PREGNANCY CENTERS

*“The whole underpinning of what my grandmother stood for was that everyone should have access to family planning, the **right to decide** whether and when to have a child.” [Alex Sanger](#), Grandson of Margaret Sanger*

Sanger’s promotion of eugenics did not end with birth control; she believed that the government should promote eugenics through various programs and even through sterilization. “The United States government has recently inaugurated a policy of restricting immigration from foreign countries...it should likewise recognize the wisdom of voluntary restriction in the production of children,” she wrote.⁷³ In her writings, Sanger suggested several government programs which would contribute to the eugenics movement. In one narrative, Sanger suggested that the government institute a program in which individuals would be forced to “apply” for children before being allowed to procreate.⁷⁴

Sanger’s writings encouraged those government programs which would promote eugenics. Child labor laws were one example. She observed that, when child labor laws were put into place, women in lower classes had less children, because children were no longer cheap. When their children could no longer make money, they became burdensome. Prohibiting child labor, then, would incentivize the poor to have less children, and the upper class might even edge ahead in the cradle competition. “The enforcement of the child labor laws,” Sanger wrote, “...are therefore an urgent necessity...to prevent the recruiting of our next generation from the least intelligent and most unskilled classes in the community.”⁷⁵

Sanger discouraged those government programs which she felt would hurt the eugenics movement. She wrote of the *Sheppard-Towner Act* of 1921, which was designed to provide medical assistance to poor pregnant mothers, “The new government program would facilitate the function of maternity among the very classes in which the absolute necessity is to discourage it.”⁷⁶ By encouraging government programs which would help the eugenics movement and discouraging those which would retard it, Sanger admitted her interest in government pressure and involvement in eugenics.

She hoped to limit the number of mothers who exhibited “parental irresponsibility” by encouraging those mothers not to have children.⁷⁷ In her book, “The Pivot of Civilization,” she recorded several examples of women who unsuccessfully parented their children out of

⁷³Sanger, *The Pivot of Civilization*, 197.

⁷⁴Kennedy, 117.

⁷⁵Sanger, *The Pivot of Civilization*, 199.

⁷⁶*Ibid.*, 216.

⁷⁷*Ibid.*, 190.

ignorance of proper parenting methods.⁷⁸ These mothers were unfit, not because they were unintelligent or of a different ethnic group, but because they lacked the knowledge necessary to parent correctly. For Sanger, the consequences of “irresponsible and chance parenthood” were “feeble-mindedness, crime, and syphilis.”⁷⁹ Thus Sanger’s definition of unfit was broad and encompassed even mothers who would not otherwise have qualified as unfit.

As a eugenicist, Margaret Sanger went so far as to advocate for the sterilization of the unfit. “Moreover, when we realize that each feeble-minded person is a potential source of an endless progeny of defect, we prefer the policy of immediate sterilization, of making sure that parenthood is absolutely prohibited to the feeble-minded,” Sanger wrote.⁸⁰ She explained in her writings that the “laissez-faire” approach was a good theory, but that it had not worked to discourage the feeble-minded from having children.⁸¹ “The grosser, the more obvious, the undeniably feeble-minded should, indeed, not only be discouraged but prevented from propagating their kind,” she wrote.⁸² *Buck v. Bell*, the Supreme Court case which determined that involuntary sterilization of the unfit was an acceptable use of the police powers, gave Mrs. Sanger the platform she needed to directly advocate for sterilization.⁸³

Margaret Sanger would have hated Care Net. Even as she wrote to encourage government programs which would promote eugenics, Sanger wrote against “maternity centers” and charity programs. She viewed maternity centers as useless because, instead of teaching poor women how to prevent pregnancy, they simply facilitated, and thus encouraged, pregnancy and childbirth. “The poor woman is taught how to have her seventh child, when what she wants to know is how to avoid bringing into the world her eighth,” Sanger wrote of maternity centers.⁸⁴ By painting maternity centers as cruel and unfeeling, and by promoting government involvement as positive and helpful, Sanger betrayed her preference for more forceful eugenic practices.

Maternity centers were not the only charities Sanger criticized. In her book, *The Pivot of Civilization*, Sanger dedicated an entire chapter to the ineffectiveness of modern charities. By providing money and resources to the poor, charities allowed the lower classes to have and provide for more children, according to Sanger. “The most serious charge that can be brought against modern ‘benevolence,’” she wrote, “is that it encourages the perpetuation of defectives, delinquents, and dependents.”⁸⁵ In the instance of eugenics, Sanger preferred government involvement to local charity. This preference betrayed her preference for force over voluntary participation in the matter of preventing childbearing among the poor.

⁷⁸*Ibid.*, 190.

⁷⁹*Ibid.*, 191.

⁸⁰Sanger, *The Pivot of Civilization*, 207.

⁸¹*Ibid.*, 207.

⁸²*Ibid.*, 234.

⁸³Baker, 222.

⁸⁴Sanger, *The Pivot of Civilization*, 218.

⁸⁵*Ibid.*, 218.

VI. MORE EUGENIC THAN FELLOW EUGENICISTS

“Virtually everyone was against her. The government declared what she was doing was criminal. Virtually every man was against her. Every religious organization was against her. The press was against her. The doctors were against her. The only people that were with her were poor women on the Lower East Side who were having more children than they could afford and they were desperate to figure out a way not to.” [Alex Sanger](#), Grandson of Margaret Sanger

Although many historians agree that Margaret Sanger promoted eugenics, some disagree as to the extent to which she promoted it. Some historians, such as Ellen Chesler, author of *Woman of Valor*, would argue that Sanger simply flirted with eugenics because it was popular at the time. In so doing, Sanger wished to increase the popularity of her own movement. Chesler wrote, “Sanger had little choice but to engage with eugenic discourse in the 1920s, since...eugenics then enjoyed a degree of respectability that birth control did not.”⁸⁶ However, Chesler failed to follow this statement with proof that this was the case. Chesler’s stance is the same as Planned Parenthood’s: “Margaret...also aligned herself with Eugenicists. Ugh. It doesn’t seem to make sense. But way back in the early 20th century, eugenics was an immensely popular social movement, one with the kind of widespread legitimacy Margaret craved for her own birth control campaign,” [The History of 100 Years of Women’s Health Care At Planned Parenthood](#).

Like Chesler, Vanessa Murphree, author of “Mission Accomplished,” believed that Margaret Sanger adopted a eugenic stance because it was popular and socially accepted at the time.⁸⁷ Other historians, such as George Grant, author of *Killer Angel*, believe that Margaret Sanger wholeheartedly embraced the eugenics movement because she firmly believed in eugenic principles. “She was a true believer [in eugenics]—not simply someone who assimilated the jargon of the times, as Planned Parenthood officials would have us believe,” wrote Grant.⁸⁸

Margaret Sanger was so involved in the eugenic movement that she advanced their cause, even when doing so did not advance her own. According to Kennedy, “She solicited their scholarly papers for her conferences; she asked them to testify in Congressional hearings.”⁸⁹ She not only supported eugenicists and what they stood for, she gathered them together to talk about eugenics and eugenic methods. Margaret Sanger was the “main organizer” of the First World Population Conference in Geneva.⁹⁰ Though she kept a low profile in her involvement in this event, she

⁸⁶Ellen Chesler, *Woman of Valor: Margaret Sanger and the Birth Control Movement in America* (New York: Simon and Schuster Paperbacks, 2007), 484.

⁸⁷Murphree, 13.

⁸⁸George Grant, *Killer Angel: A Biography of Planned Parenthood’s Margaret Sanger* (Franklin, Tennessee: Standfast Books and Press, Inc, 2014), 50.

⁸⁹Baker, 222.

⁹⁰*Ibid.*, 224.

was largely responsible for this “scientific population conference,” as she called it.⁹¹ By gathering together fellow eugenicists to talk about eugenics and to advance the cause, she was admitting how personally wrapped up she was in the movement.

As a eugenicist, Margaret Sanger had many eugenicist friends whom she influenced and by whom she was influenced. History books on Margaret Sanger often include a list of Sanger’s eugenicist friends for reference. Sanger associated with “Eugene Debs, Theodore Schroeder, Alexander Berkman, John Reed, Emma Goldman, and Henrietta Rodman.”⁹² Grant wrote that “Virtually all of her Socialist friends, lovers, and comrades were committed eugenicists from the followers of Lenin in Revolutionary Socialism, like H.G. Wells, George Bernard Shaw, and Julius Hammer, to the followers of Hitler in National Socialism, like Ernest Rudin, Leon Whitney, and Harry Laughlin.”⁹³ Her professional associations mirrored her private and social ones: “Virtually all of [the American Birth Control League’s] board members were eugenicists.”⁹⁴ She asked Henry Fairchild, the head of the American Eugenics Society, to be on her clinic’s advisory board.⁹⁵ She sought eugenicists out, she was not simply influenced by them.

Margaret Sanger’s most notable eugenicist friend was, perhaps, Havelock Ellis. Ellis was “an important mentor of Sanger’s.”⁹⁶ As her friend and lover, Ellis taught Sanger about eugenics and the goals eugenicists strove for.⁹⁷ He wrote the preface to her book, *Woman and the New Race*.⁹⁸ “Her mentor and lover, Havelock Ellis, was the beloved disciple of Francis Galton...who first systemized and popularized eugenic thought.”⁹⁹ Sanger referenced Galton himself in “The Pivot of Civilization,” and included his more biased definition of eugenics—“the rational breeding of human beings”—alongside her own.

It is true that Margaret Sanger advocated eugenics in part to get more followers.¹⁰⁰ However, although Sanger wished to broaden her support base by incorporating eugenicist propaganda into her own, the way in which she advocated eugenics alienated some eugenicists, demonstrating that broadening her support base was not her sole purpose in adopting a eugenic worldview.

Instead of promoting childbearing in the upper classes, as some eugenicists did, Sanger wished to limit the number of children in the lower classes.¹⁰¹ “[A]s long as civilized communities encourage unrestrained fecundity in the ‘normal’ members of the population...and penalize every

⁹¹ Sanger, *My Fight for Birth Control*, 284.

⁹² Kennedy, 9.

⁹³ Grant, 49.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁹⁵ Baker, 222.

⁹⁶ Chesler, 483.

⁹⁷ Kennedy, 31.

⁹⁸ Sanger, *Woman and the New Race*, VII.

⁹⁹ Grant, 49.

¹⁰⁰ Chesler, 477.

¹⁰¹ Sanger, *The Pivot of Civilization*, 9.

attempt to introduce the principle of discrimination and responsibility in parenthood, they will be faced with the ever-increasing problem of feeble-mindedness,” Sanger wrote.¹⁰² In her time, she believed that “the most urgent problem today is how to limit and discourage the over-fertility of the mentally and physically defective.”¹⁰³ This tendency to promote birth control and sterilization while downplaying and even criticizing the cradle competition pushed potential followers away.

Sanger further alienated fellow eugenicists by criticizing them, thus demonstrating that her adoption of eugenics was not a clever plan to get more followers, but the development of her own personal worldview. She did not hesitate to criticize those eugenicists who promoted the cradle competition and failed to acknowledge birth control and sterilization. “[T]hey are ignoring the exigent problem of the elimination of the feeble-minded,” Sanger wrote.¹⁰⁴ Had she adopted eugenics simply to get more followers, she would not have adopted a position that was controversial, but would instead have adopted the most inclusive version of that worldview. Therefore, the eugenics Sanger advocated for was an integral part of her own worldview, and not simply a plan to get more followers or an unconscious adoption of the latest fad.

Sanger was aware that some critics criticized her disregard for the value of a human life. But instead of asserting that she did value human life, Sanger answered those criticisms with a logical fallacy by criticizing her critics. She did not respond on the basis of their argument itself. She wrote that her critics valued human life when it came to eugenics, but disregarded it in the instance of war.¹⁰⁵ By attacking her accusers instead of answering their concerns about eugenics, Sanger was “poisoning the well.” Her argument was a logical fallacy, and was consequently ineffective.

Today, Planned Parenthood considers their founder, Margaret Sanger, a hero. It is concerning that Planned Parenthood continues to support Sanger with no qualifiers. It would be possible to celebrate Sanger’s victories while acknowledging her shortcomings, but Planned Parenthood chooses not to. On their site, Faye Wattleton [praises](#) Sanger: “I am also very deeply humbled... to join the table at which Margaret Sanger’s place has resided for the past 30 years,” she says. To Faye, Margaret Sanger was “called at a time in history...” In another video on Planned Parenthood’s site, Alex Sanger, grandson of Margaret Sanger gushes, “It was an extraordinary accomplishment, what she did.” Finally, in *The History of 100 Years of Women’s Health Care At Planned Parenthood*, the narrator says, “While there’s no question that Margaret left behind a conflicting legacy, it’s also true that she was a champion of progress.” This last quote, while more nuanced than the others, only acknowledges how Sanger was perceived by the world, and not how she was perceived by Planned Parenthood itself.

If you have questions, or want to get more context, Sanger’s [The Pivot of Civilization](#) is easily accessible on Project Gutenberg. Whether you agree with my analysis or not, I encourage you to check it out!

¹⁰²Kennedy, 116.

¹⁰³Sanger, *The Pivot of Civilization*, 187.

¹⁰⁴Sanger, *The Pivot of Civilization*, 202.

¹⁰⁵*Ibid.*, 217.



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44180 RIVERSIDE PARKWAY, SUITE 200
LANSLOWNE, VA 20176
703-554-8734 | CARE-NET.ORG