

Sanger, Birth Control, and the Eugenics Movement

Margaret Sanger, born Margaret Louise Higgins, was born in September 1879 in central New York to a working-class Irish Catholic family. She was the sixth of eleven children, though her mother died at a young age from tuberculosis. Margaret was able to attend college and nursing school with the help of her older siblings but blamed her mother's frequent pregnancies for her untimely death. In 1902, she married William Sanger, an architect with similar radical political inclinations as herself and, by 1910, had settled with him and their three children in New York City.

Though her anarchist/socialist political activities and strikes kept her busy, Margaret Sanger worked as a nurse focusing on sexual and women's health issues. Working primarily in the Lower East Side with women suffering from frequent childbirth, abortion, and miscarriage, and influenced by her friend Emma Goldman, Sanger came to see family planning and sex education as methods by which working-class women could address the economic hardships caused by unwanted pregnancies.

Passed in 1873, the Comstock laws and similar legislation in twenty-four states prohibited the transport of "obscene, lewd, and/or lascivious" material by the U.S. Postal Service, which included contraceptives and information about abortion. Sanger was indicted in violation of these laws in August 1914 for publishing a feminist monthly newsletter, *The Woman Rebel*, which advocated the use of contraception for 'family limitation.' She paid her bail but instead of appearing in criminal court for breaking federal law, sailed to England using the name "Bertha Watson." She left behind, however, 100,000 copies of a detailed pamphlet on the use of several contraceptive methods which she ordered her friends to distribute.

She returned just over a year later to face her charges and raise support for her issues but when her only daughter, Peggy, died suddenly at five years old, charges against Sanger were dropped due to public pressure on government officials. Perhaps frustrated by the opportunity lost to bring media and public attention to her trial, she launched a public speaking tour and was arrested in several cities. She toured and traveled for two more years.

As she traveled, she discovered that the most effective method of contraception was a diaphragm, which unfortunately needed to be fitted by medical professionals. In response she returned to New York City in 1916 and opened the first birth control clinic in Brooklyn. It was raided and closed only nine days later, and Sanger and her staff were arrested, convicted, and jailed. Publicity from the proceedings attracted significant public attention, and supporters with money and legal expertise paved the way for Sanger to eventually open a legal women's health clinic, employing female doctors and social workers, in 1923.

This clinic paved the way for increased medical attention to be paid to the issues of birth control and education, so Sanger founded the American Birth Control League to drum up mainstream public support for the cause.

Even before she decided to court the mainstream, she began calling for the use of birth control to reduce disease and physical defects, and (less often) the sterilization of the mentally-ill. As she

campaigned for increasingly widespread support, the liberals wing of the American eugenics movement was a clear target because of members' interest in population control and family planning for the "less fit" populations, which were identified based on class or race. Some discrepancy still exists as to whether she endorsed the more conservative ideas of eugenicists—"breeding" by "more fit" stocks of people or the euthanization of "defectives"—though she did not believe that poverty or violent tendencies were the results of genetic predisposition. Sanger did participate in eugenics clubs and activities from her earliest days in New York and many fellow eugenicists played supporting roles throughout her career. Other eugenicists disapproved of contraceptives, fearing that the "less fit" members of society would use the methods improperly and that middle-and upper-class white people would selfishly limit their reproduction such to cause a "racial suicide."

The eugenics movement was initially catalyzed in the late 1870s by the idea that crime, poverty, and disease were genetically inherited and therefore that a rapidly reproducing "underclass" was responsible for modern public difficulties. Five years after Margaret Sanger opened her first legal birth control clinic, the eugenics movement in the United States reached its peak of power in the Supreme Court case *Buck v. Bell* (1927), when it was decided that 21-year-old Carrie Buck would be sterilized, having been raised in foster care, raped and impregnated, and considered part of a "shiftless, ignorant and worthless class." The words of the majority opinion were written by Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr, who, along with fellow majority voter Chief Justice William Howard Taft, was among the leadership of the National Unitarian Conference at that time.

Throughout their history, Unitarians and Universalists have sought to incorporate scientific thinking into their religious understandings of the world and their call to improve it:

*These actions of state-enforce sterilizations violated basic human rights and specifically targeted the poor and disabled. While we acknowledge the misguided use of science then, we must also remember that it was an attempt to solve society's problems of crime, poverty, and disease with the hope of creating a better world. Even today we ponder how science might help or hinder our hopes of having healthy children as we confront issues of cloning and "designer babies."*¹

Many Unitarians and Universalists participated in the eugenics movement of the early 1900s, including Rev. Jenkin Lloyd Jones, Clarence Russell Skinner, and David Starr Jordan. Universalists were one of the first religions to promote the use of birth control, though they did so in the interest of "the welfare of the race." The Rev. John Haynes Holmes, who worked with Margaret Sanger, encouraged only those marriages that would result in the birth of children who would genetically improve society. Sanger, though she kept company with many Unitarians and has been rumored herself to be among their numbers, never publicly identified as such.

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By the late 1920s and early 1930s, Sanger's movement had turned its attention to advocacy for federal exceptions to the Comstock Laws for physicians, and from the feminist, sex-positive attitudes of Sanger herself to more mainstream American values. She retired in 1942 to Tucson, Arizona as a mere honorific to her cause, though she remerged briefly in 1952 to help organize the international branch of Planned

¹ Harris, Mark. *Elite: Uncovering Classism in Unitarian Universalist History*. Boston: Skinner House Books, 2011. Page 87

Parenthood Federation, an organization created by the merger of other groups founded by Sanger decades earlier.

She continued to organize funding for the research and development of the birth control pill, which made its appearance in the American markets in 1960. Enormously popular almost instantly, the “pill” also revived suspicion and criticism from African American communities for Sanger’s continued involvement in the eugenics movement.

The marketing of oral contraceptives faced its own legislative battle, which was addressed first by the landmark Supreme Court decision, *Griswold v. Connecticut*, (1965), which by allowing contraceptives for married straight couples, paved the way for contraceptive use by single people (*Eisenstadt v. Baird*, 1972) and a woman’s right to privacy for an abortion (*Roe v. Wade*, 1973). Just a few months after the *Griswold* case was settled, in September 1966 at the age of 86, Margaret Sanger died.

In 2004, Planned Parenthood published a [Fact Sheet](#) acknowledging Sanger’s “objectionable and outmoded” views, while also disputing numerous published statements that “distort or misquote” Sanger. In July, 2020, Planned Parenthood of Greater New York (PPGNY) announced it would remove Sanger’s name from their Manhattan Health Center, in recognition that her advocacy for reproductive health included a racist legacy: “It’s not complicated. She championed birth control and she supported racist ideas. Both of those things are true,” said Merle McGee, chief equity and engagement officer at PPGNY, in a statement emailed to CNN. “This is about saying while we value the work that Margaret Sanger did, we recognize that in the process she caused harm. So we don’t want to commemorate ‘our heroes’ in a way that doesn’t reflect their actions fully, especially since women of color continue to be shamed for accessing health services and for supporting our organization.”

Consider:

- Why might women of color (especially Black women) be wary of reproductive activism?
- When we talk about reproductive rights, we often use language of “choice.” Who gets to have reproductive choice in this country? How do a person’s different identities (race, class, gender, etc.) impact their rights and access to reproductive services?
- Are there modern forms of the eugenics or the population control movement? Is your faith tradition involved?