

Was Margaret Sanger a Racist?

By Charles Valenza

Margaret Sanger, as a young public health nurse, witnessed the sickness, death and poverty caused by unwanted pregnancies. She spent the rest of her life trying to alleviate these conditions by bringing birth control to America. This was no small task. During the early 20th century, the idea of making contraceptives generally available was revolutionary.

In recent years, some revisionist biographers have portrayed Sanger as a eugenicist and a racist. This picture has been given wide publicity by critics of reproductive rights, who believe that by discrediting Sanger personally, they can discredit her work and the entire movement she founded. To further confuse matters, misinformation regarding Sanger survives from one account to the next, since secondary sources are often accepted as documented fact.

Sanger and Eugenics

In reconstructing the political and social environment of the years between 1916 (when Margaret Sanger's first birth control clinic was opened in Brooklyn and promptly closed by the police) and the early 1940s, it is important to remember that the ability to control one's fertility was a conspicuous example of the egregious disparity between the "haves" and the "have-nots."

The basic concept of the eugenics movement in the 1920s and the 1930s was that a better breed of humans would be created if the "fit" had more children and the "unfit" had fewer. This concept influenced a broad spectrum of thought, but there was little consensus on the definitions of fit and unfit. While one advocate of eugenics might have described unfit as synonymous with inappropriate (for example, a poor couple's bearing

large numbers of children they could not afford to care for), others distinguished between the fit and unfit on the basis of intellectual, moral and physical attributes. The more bigoted believed the difference was evident in class or ethnic distinctions.

In theory, the eugenics movement was not racist; its message was intended to cross race barriers for the overall betterment of humanity. For example, Kelly Miller, a eugenicist and one of America's leading black writers during this period, was deeply concerned about the low fertility rate of the black intellectual elite.¹ The well-to-do generally supported the idea of eugenics so long as it was interpreted as meaning that the lower classes should have fewer babies; the privileged rarely heeded the call to have more.

During this period, eugenics was a respected movement, and to many, its main principle was an assumed truth. The eugenicists' ideas and opinions had political and economic clout; the Carnegie Institute was a major financial supporter.²

The clout of the eugenics movement contrasted sharply with the powerlessness of the birth control movement. The eugenicists managed to pass compulsory sterilization laws in some 30 states, while Margaret Sanger's efforts to legalize contraceptives continually failed.

The possible effects of birth control (in either bettering or harming the human race) were of great concern to the eugenicists. Most agreed that birth control would be a detriment to the human race and were, therefore, against it. Their reasoning was that the upper classes—the fit—would use it, and their already declining birthrate would plummet, while the unfit would not use it.

As a result, Sanger had to confront the eugenics movement and the possibility of compromise. But, charges that Sanger's motives for promoting birth control were eugenic are unfounded. Her dissent from eugenics was made clear early on, in one of her most important works, *Pivot of Civilization*:

The publications of the Eugenics Laboratory all tend to show that a high rate of fertility is correlated with extreme poverty, recklessness, deficiency and delinquency; similarly, that among the more intelligent, this rate of fertility decreases. But the scientific Eugenists [sic] fail to recognize that this restraint of fecundity is due to a deliberate foresight and is a conscious effort to elevate standards of living for the family and the children of the responsible—and possibly more self-ish—sections of the community. The appeal to enter again into competitive childbearing, for the benefit of the nation or the race, or any other abstraction, will fall on deaf ears.³

Many writers have relied on out-of-context quotations from this work to substantiate their claims that Sanger was a eugenicist. The complete text reveals this idea to be a travesty. Later in the book, Sanger said:

In passing, we should here recognize the difficulties presented by the idea of "fit" and "unfit." Who is to decide this question? The grosser, the more obvious, the undeniably feeble-minded should, indeed, not only be discouraged but prevented from propagating their kind. But among the writings of the representative Eugenists [sic], one cannot ignore the distinct middle-class bias that prevails.⁴

A slogan of Sanger's, "Birth Control: To Create a Race of Thoroughbreds," that is purported to be another expression of her eugenic rhetoric also has its origins in *Pivot of Civilization*. It is actually borrowed from Dr. Edward A. Kempf, whom she quoted:

Society must make life worth the living and the refining for the individual, by conditioning him to love and to seek the love-object in a manner that reflects a constructive effect upon his fellow-men and by giving him suitable opportunities. The virility of the auto-

Charles Valenza is Director of Public Information for Planned Parenthood of New York City. The author would like to thank Jean Swinton of the Abraham Stone Library of the Margaret Sanger Center in New York City and Dorothy Green of the Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, for their invaluable research assistance.

matic apparatus is destroyed by excessive gormandizing or hunger, by excessive wealth or poverty, by excessive work or idleness, by sexual abuse or intolerant prudishness. The noblest and most difficult art of all is the raising of human thoroughbreds.⁵

It is obvious when we look at the entire quotation that what Kempf said and what Sanger meant had little to do with the breeding of human animals; rather, they were arguing for a complete environment that nurtures human excellence.

A further argument for labeling Sanger a eugenicist is made by citing articles from the *Birth Control Review*, which she edited. The supposition is that since Sanger published eugenicists' views, she was herself one. The *Review*, however, covered a wide range of opinions and research. As historian James Reed points out, the main criterion for being accepted was an ability to add prestige to the birth control cause.⁶ Eugenicists were published in the *Review* because they conferred respectability.

The issue of the *Birth Control Review* most often cited to make the case that Sanger was a eugenicist is the April 1933 edition, entitled "Sterilization Number." This is a misuse of the edition, however. First, though most of the issue was about compulsory sterilization, the opposing point of view was also published ("Why I Oppose Compulsory Sterilization," by Leon F. Whitney). Second, Margaret Sanger had ended her involvement with the *Review* in June 1929—four years prior to this issue's publication.⁷

David M. Kennedy, author of *Birth Control in America*, does Sanger a grave injustice in an otherwise well-written and objective account by falsely attributing to her a quotation that is connected with her still. Kennedy says that Sanger "first acknowledged the place of birth control in the eugenicists' program when she announced in 1919: 'More children from the fit, less from the unfit—that is the chief issue of birth control.'"⁸

This quotation should be attributed to the editors of *American Medicine*.⁹ They made this statement in an editorial on Sanger's article "Why Not Birth Control Clinics in America?" The items were published next to each other in the May 1919 issue of the *Birth Control Review*. Furthermore, the editorial did not go unrebutted by Sanger, who responded as editor of the *Review*:

Margaret Sanger has not advocated larger families for the rich. Rather, she has emphasized the necessity of leaving the decision as to the number of children and the time of their arrival to the mother, whether she be rich or poor.

Mrs. Sanger made her position in this matter plain in an article entitled "Birth Control and Racial Betterment" in the February (1919) issue of the *Birth Control Review*. In that article she said: "We hold that the world is already overpopulated. Eugenists [sic] imply or insist that a woman's first duty is to the state; we contend that her duty to herself is her first duty to the state.

"We maintain that a woman possessing an adequate knowledge of her reproductive functions is the best judge of time and conditions under which her child should be brought into the world. We maintain that it is her right, regardless of all other considerations, to determine whether she shall bear children or not, and how many children she shall bear if she chooses to become a mother."¹⁰

Sanger did believe that people with severe mental retardation (at the time referred to as feeble-minded) should not bear children. She defined borderline cases as those with a mental age of around eight.¹¹ She believed people with severe retardation were a social burden and a danger and that they lowered the overall intelligence of the human race by continuing to reproduce. She also supported the idea that unrestrained childbearing in large families increased the possibility of raising children of lower intelligence.¹² These were the only areas in which Sanger was in agreement with eugenic thought.

In late 1939, when the Birth Control Federation of America (soon to be renamed the Planned Parenthood Federation of America) was preparing a fundraising pamphlet, Sanger was livid about a paragraph calling for more babies from the fit. By way of explanation, Kenneth Rose of the Federation wrote to Sanger, "You may be somewhat troubled by the emphasis given [to] more babies by those who should have them, but from a fundraising point of view, this is to us important, and everybody has been willing to have this included. . . ."¹³

Responding by letter from her retirement home in Tucson, Sanger expressed her opinion of such eugenic rhetoric:

I do not think that the . . . birth control movement will gain one financial supporter thru that paragraph; certainly not any supporter who thinks beyond his nose. For us to start that kind of sentiment is just going to put the weapons in the hands of our opponents, and soon the whole birth control movement will be sliding backward or into the Hitler and Stalin and Mussolini phobia.¹⁴

Sanger and Racism

Linda Gordon, author of *Woman's Body, Woman's Right*, has argued that Margaret Sanger's interest in providing contraceptives to black Americans was motivated by racism. Subsequently, many other writers have made the same charge, citing Gordon's research and rationale.

Gordon's claims center on the "Negro Project," officially proposed by Sanger in 1938 as a concerted effort to educate blacks about birth control. To substantiate her beliefs, Gordon quotes Sanger's project proposal, which she labels racist and elitist:

The mass of significant Negroes, particularly in the South, still breed carelessly and disastrously, with the result that the increase among Negroes, even more than among whites, is [in] that portion of the population least intelligent and fit, and least able to rear children properly.¹⁵

What Gordon perhaps did not realize was that Sanger was quoting the famous civil rights leader and founder of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), W. E. B. DuBois. Except for the omission of one word (DuBois had referred to the "increase among ignorant Negroes"), the sentence was taken verbatim from an article DuBois wrote for the June 1932 *Birth Control Review*, in which he recommended providing birth control to the black population.¹⁶ (In 1922, he had come out strongly in favor of birth control for black people in the NAACP publication he edited, *The Crisis*.¹⁷) Sanger's proposal was in response to the recommendation by DuBois.

The goals of the Negro Project and the means to implement them were debated for several years before the project came to fruition in the early 1940s under the auspices of the newly formed Birth Control Federation of America. The project involved employing a black physician and a minister to embark on an extensive campaign throughout the South to address the fears of blacks and educate them about birth control. As DuBois explained:

As it is, the mass of Negroes know almost nothing about birth control, have a good many misapprehensions and a good deal of fear at openly learning about it. Like most people with middle-class standards of morality, they think that birth control is inherently immoral.¹⁸

A preliminary report from the Federation's Division of Negro Service described the problems that DuBois and Sanger wanted to address, including that "Negro mothers die in childbirth at twice the rate of white mothers" and that "out of 250,000 Ne-

gro babies born alive each year, more than 22,000 die in their first year, a rate 60 percent higher than for white babies." Among other benefits, the report suggested that birth control could "reduce the maternal death rate by enabling mothers with tuberculosis, heart disease, kidney disease and other serious ailments to avoid pregnancy" and "reduce the infant death rate by enabling mothers to space their children at two- or three-year intervals."¹⁹

Gordon uses quotations that, taken out of context, indict Sanger as a racist. She quotes Sanger as saying, "We do not want word to get out that we want to exterminate the Negro population. . . ." The full context of this remark, taken from a letter of Sanger's to Clarence J. Gamble, a physician who championed birth control, is as follows:

It seems to me from my experience . . . in North Carolina, Georgia, Tennessee and Texas, that while the colored Negroes [sic] have great respect for white doctors, they can get closer to their own members and more or less lay their cards on the table, which means their ignorance, superstitions and doubts. They do not do this with the white people, and if we can train the Negro doctor at the clinic, he can go among them with enthusiasm and with knowledge, which, I believe, will have far-reaching results among the colored people. His work, in my opinion, should be entirely with the Negro profession and the nurses, hospital, social workers, as well as the County's white doctors. His success will depend upon his personality and his training by us.

The minister's work is also important, and also he should be trained, perhaps by the Federation, as to our ideals and the goal that we hope to reach. We do not want word to go out that we want to exterminate the Negro population, and the minister is the man who can straighten out that idea if it ever occurs to any of their more rebellious members.²⁰

When the letter is read in its entirety, one can see that Sanger and Gamble did not want to "exterminate the Negro population." Rather, Sanger was referring to coping with the fear of some black people that birth control was the white man's means of reducing the black population.

In another letter to Gamble, posted about two weeks before the one Gordon chose to quote, Sanger stated her beliefs about the project plainly. It is notable that the real conflict was between two schools of thought regarding how the Federation should be

spending its time and money. Should it educate black people about contraceptives first, as Sanger proposed, or should it, as a major contributor to the project suggested, actually provide family planning services?²¹ In this case, Sanger felt that an intense educational effort was necessary first. She understood exactly how sensitive the issue was for many black people and felt it best to dispel their fears. Sanger objected to the idea of a small demonstration project run by white men.²²

In his book *Genocide? Birth Control and the Black American*, Robert G. Weisbord chronicles the Negro Project's alliance with black leadership, workers' unions and civil rights and health care organizations:

To meet the family planning needs of Black Americans, the Birth Control Federation formed a Division of Negro Service. Its national advisory council on Negro problems included Dr. DuBois; Mary McLeod Bethune, founder and head of the National Council of Negro Women; Walter White, executive director of the NAACP; Reverend Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., pastor of the Abyssinian Baptist Church; Professor E. Franklin Frazier; and other prominent blacks. The council supplied public speakers on family planning to interested groups, of which there were many.²³

Weisbord also identifies A. Philip Randolph, founder and president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (one of the first black trade unions), and the National Medical Association, an organization of black physicians who were barred from membership in the American Medical Association, as strong supporters of the "fledgling black birth control movement."²⁴

Gordon views the Negro Project, in retrospect, as racist. But in reality, black leaders had expressed impatience with the slow progress of the birth control movement in reaching their people. As early as 1932, such prominent blacks as Elmer A. Carter, editor of the Harlem-based publication *Opportunity*, and Charles H. Garvin, a noted black surgeon, had cited the lack of family planning clinics to serve black people.²⁵

In a letter written in 1942, Sanger summed up the expectations of the project the following way:

I believe that the Negro question is coming definitely to the fore in America, not only because of the war, but in anticipation of the place the Negro will occupy after the peace. I think it is magnificent that we are in on the ground floor, helping Negroes to control their birthrate, to reduce their high infant and maternal death rate, to

maintain better standards of health and living for those already born, and to create better opportunities to help themselves, and to rise to their own heights through education and the principles of a democracy.²⁶

It would be more valid to accuse Margaret Sanger of racism if, after considering the urgent need among black people for the health benefits of birth control, she had chosen to do nothing.

References

1. R. G. Weisbord, *Genocide? Birth Control and the Black American*, Greenwood Press, Westport, Conn., 1975, pp. 41-42.
2. J. Reed, *From Private Vice to Public Virtue*, Basic Books, New York, 1978, p. 135.
3. M. Sanger, *Pivot of Civilization*, Maxwell Reprint Co., Elmsford, N.Y., 1969, pp. 179-180.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 181.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 144-155; and E. A. Kempf, *Proceedings of the International Conference of Women Physicians*, Vol. IV, pp. 66-67, New York, 1920.
6. J. Reed, 1978, op. cit., p. 130 (see reference 2).
7. E. T. Douglas, *Margaret Sanger: Pioneer of the Future*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York, 1970, pp. 202-203.
8. D. M. Kennedy, *Birth Control in America*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1970, p. 115.
9. Editors of *American Medicine*, "Intelligent or Unintelligent Birth Control," *Birth Control Review*, Vol. 3, No. 5, 1919, p. 12.
10. Editorial, *Birth Control Review*, Vol. 3, No. 5, 1919, p. 13.
11. M. Sanger, 1969, op. cit., p. 91 (see reference 3).
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 80-104.
13. K. Rose, letter to M. Sanger, New York, Dec. 22, 1939.
14. M. Sanger, letter to K. Rose, Tucson, Dec. 27, 1939.
15. L. Gordon, *Woman's Body, Woman's Right*, Grossman Publishers, New York, 1976, p. 332.
16. W. E. B. DuBois, "Black Folks and Birth Control," *Birth Control Review*, June 1932, p. 166.
17. —, "Birth," *The Crisis*, Oct. 1922, p. 248.
18. —, 1932, op. cit. (see reference 16).
19. Division of Negro Service, "Preliminary Annual Report," Birth Control Federation of America, New York, Jan. 7, 1942.
20. M. Sanger, letter to C. J. Gamble, Dec. 10, 1939.
21. K. Rose, letter to M. Sanger, New York, Apr. 15, 1941; and Sanger reply in handwriting on same.
22. M. Sanger, letter to C. J. Gamble, Nov. 26, 1939.
23. R. G. Weisbord, op. cit., pp. 45-46 (see reference 1).
24. *Ibid.*, pp. 47-48.
25. E. A. Carter, "Eugenics for the Negro," *Birth Control Review*, June 1932, pp. 169-170; and C. H. Garvin, "The Negro Doctor's Task," *Birth Control Review*, Nov. 1932, pp. 269-270.
26. M. Sanger, letter to A. D. Lasker, Fishkill, N.Y., July 9, 1942.