

MUSINGS

Eugenics, Race, and Margaret Sanger Revisited: Reproductive Freedom for All?

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In winter 2001, the International Center for Photography (ICP) in New York City sponsored an exhibit, “Perfecting Mankind: Eugenics and Photography,” where posted on the wall was a quotation ascribed to my grandmother, Margaret Sanger: “More children from the fit, less from the unfit—that is the chief issue of birth control.” My grandmother never said this. The quotation actually came from a 1919 editorial in *American Medicine* that followed my grandmother’s review of an article. This quotation has been repeatedly and falsely attributed to my grandmother over the decades since. After I objected, the ICP promptly removed the offending quotation from the exhibit, but only after countless gallery visitors had seen it.

Misattributions, misunderstandings, and outright falsehoods about eugenics, race, and Margaret Sanger have too often been the norm in the twentieth and now the twenty-first centuries. Issues of race permeate current American arguments about abortion and reproductive rights. Abortion opponents, including some African Americans, liken abortion to slavery or the Holocaust in Nazi Germany. Such imagery is not new. My grandmother called women subject to “involuntary motherhood” slaves.

Some of the most prominent men of the early twentieth century endorsed eugenics. At the First International Eugenics Congress in London in 1912, the attendees included the type of men my grandmother wanted to win over for birth control—Alexander Graham Bell; Winston Churchill; Charles Eliot, immediate past president of Harvard University; and Havelock Ellis, her friend-to-be. While attended by an overwhelmingly white, male, well-to-do audience, the impulses of the attendees and of those who supported eugenics should not be classified as necessarily class, gender, or race based. Eugenics in its infancy was seen as a tool for societal and human improvement. Reformers saw it as a way to enlist science, biology, and genetics in service of healthy human reproduction

and outcomes and thereby to improve the health and quality of all children being born. At its least offensive, eugenics called for improved prenatal care. At its most offensive, it called for involuntary sterilization. The downfall of eugenics came when reformers began to use it as a program of social control, promoting government intervention and coercion in human reproduction. This shift points to an ongoing issue in modern science—how to use science for good and how to define what that good is.

The entry point for eugenics into political discourse came from societal disapproval of certain sexual activities, specifically masturbation. Social, religious, and cultural fears and taboos, portrayed as medical “opinion,” said that masturbation was bad for the human body and psyche, not to mention sinful. Masturbation was never, however, illegal. Doctors in the late nineteenth century developed methods of sterilizing both men and women, including the vasectomy; one physician began experimenting in an Indiana prison, illegally, by sterilizing those men he diagnosed as “chronic masturbators.” The doctor, Henry Clay Sharp, performed vasectomies, circumcisions, and castrations on the inmates, presumably mostly white, sometimes doing over one hundred procedures in a year.

Sharp’s zeal for his job led him on a crusade to legalize what he was doing and to expand the class of those to whom he could legally do it. In a 1902 paper, Sharp wrote: “I therefore suggest that you endeavor to secure such legislation as will make it mandatory that this operation be performed on all convicted degenerates. It renders them powerless to reproduce their kind, and it is an undoubted fact that the progeny of degenerates becomes a charge upon the state.” In 1907, Indiana became the first of thirty states to legalize compulsory sterilization of “confirmed criminals, idiots, rapists, and imbeciles” if procreation was deemed “inadvisable” by a committee and there was “no probability of improvement of the mental condition of the inmate.”

At the same time as doctors and reformers were pushing for so-called negative eugenic legislation, some early feminists and birth controllers were also using eugenics to advance their cause. They used eugenic arguments in favor of eliminating involuntary motherhood and of permitting motherhood by choice, which in their view would produce healthier children. Late nineteenth-century feminists were of the opinion, as unscientific as it was, that unwanted children, the products of involuntary motherhood, were likely to be morally or physically defective. They argued that every child had a right to be born healthy—an argument Margaret Sanger used repeatedly throughout her life: “Every child should be a wanted child.”

While not entirely correct from a biological point of view, this argument contained the seeds of a larger valid point. Women know when they want to have a child. They know when they are ready to take on the physical and emotional burdens of pregnancy and child rearing. My grandmother argued

that “women are natural eugenicists.” All women want healthy children that will survive to adulthood and have children of their own. Bringing science to motherhood and children’s health was seen as a natural extension of the so-called purity crusade in which many feminists were engaged at the turn of the twentieth century. This pursuit of mental, moral, marital, and physical health was expanded to encompass voluntarily producing healthy children. It is interesting to note that in those times many feminists talked of making motherhood a profession and more scientific. In their view, motherhood was woman’s major contribution to the human race, and improving motherhood’s status and outcomes was a method of improving women’s lives.

At this time, women’s colleges were producing a steady stream of graduates who were not only delaying childbearing but also having fewer children. President Theodore Roosevelt attacked this trend in 1905 as “race suicide,” calling it decadent and a sign of moral decline, and labeling the woman, or man, who avoided having children as “criminal against the race.” The fact that a president of the United States attacked birth control, a decade before the term had been coined and a decade before my grandmother entered the fray, made the prevention of conception a major national issue. The arguments Roosevelt and others used against birth control, in addition to eugenic ones, were similar to those first used by the Know-Nothings in the early nineteenth century that birth control would lead to the decline in Yankee hegemony and that the United States needed a growing population to fulfill its manifest destiny, as well as antifeminist and religious arguments that birth control enabled women to avoid their duty to the human race and was unnatural and sinful for both men and women.

Among the political results of eugenic thinking in the early twentieth century were immigration quotas and restrictions and restrictive marriage laws, including a resurgence of antimiscegenation statutes, which prohibited marriage between blacks and whites. Additionally, before 1920, almost one-half of the states prohibited marriage between “imbeciles, epileptics, paupers, drunkards, criminals, and the feeble-minded.” Various words were used at the time to classify persons of low intelligence: for example, feeble-minded, moron, imbecile, and idiot. Whether there was a hierarchy of intelligence levels understood in these words remains unclear, but they seem to have been interchangeable. Today, these terms refer specifically (and derogatorily) to persons with severe mental retardation. Then, such terms were applied across the board to persons with mental retardation, persons with other disabilities, and sometimes people whose behavior did not conform to social norms. Such people were deemed “unfit,” which became the code word among eugenicists for people who should not be allowed to reproduce. In 1913, the year my grandmother began her birth-control work in earnest, thirteen states had compulsory sterilization laws for the unfit. The number would grow to thirty.

Into this milieu came my grandmother. She was an intelligent women but not a formally educated one. I doubt she had read or studied evolution, natural selection, or genetics. She came from one of the classes that Protestant eugenicists looked down upon and discriminated against—Irish Catholics. She was also poor and female. She had married a Jew. She had a criminal record from her days as a labor organizer. She had inherited diseases. No eugenicist would call her “fit.” She had three children.

Margaret Sanger was truly committed to improving the lot of poor, immigrant, and non-English speaking woman in America. As a nurse, she saw their living conditions firsthand. She saw the abysmal poverty, unsanitary environments, and endless stream of unwanted children. She had seen all this growing up with ten brothers and sisters, a father who could not provide a steady income, and a sickly mother dying before her time. She herself had been deathly ill with tuberculosis, and repeated childbearing would have killed her, just as it had her mother. While she may have appeared to espouse elitist views about reproduction as the years passed, her views were directly descended from her life experiences in poverty-stricken upstate New York and the Lower East Side of New York City.

Margaret Sanger was an amalgam of views on reproduction. As a radical in the early years, she believed that both the inherent unfairness of the capitalist economic system and a disadvantaged environment, including poor living conditions that lead to poor health and lack of education, prevented poor people from improving their lot. And yet she believed that it was up to poor people themselves to extricate themselves from poverty—after all, she herself had done so. She believed that women wanted their children to be free of poverty and disease, that women were natural eugenicists, and that birth control, which could limit the number of children and improve their quality of life, was the panacea to accomplish this.

Eugenics at that time was not only “scientific” but also much more respectable than birth control, which under my grandmother’s leadership was seen as the cause of radical, feminist lawbreakers. Eugenics was there to be co-opted and used. At the time, it must have seemed a winning strategy, since not only would eugenics give birth control a scientific patina but my grandmother also hoped to convert eugenicists who opposed birth control into supporters. Still, substantial philosophical differences existed between my grandmother and the eugenicists, particularly around the issue of women’s autonomy.

In one of her earliest pieces on eugenics in the February 1919 issue of *Birth Control Review*, my grandmother laid out those differences:

Before eugenists [eugenicists were originally called eugenists] and others who are laboring for racial betterment can succeed, they must first clear the way for Birth Control. Like advocates

of Birth Control, the eugenists, for instance, are seeking to assist the race towards the elimination of the unfit. Both are seeking a single end but they lay emphasis upon different methods. . . . We who advocate Birth Control, on the other hand, lay all our emphasis upon stopping not only the reproduction of the unfit but upon stopping all reproduction when there is not economic means of providing proper care for those who are born in health. The eugenist also believes that a woman should bear as many healthy children as possible as a duty to the state. We hold that the world is already over-populated. Eugenists 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 the time and conditions under which her child should be brought into the world. We further maintain that it is her right, regardless of all other considerations, to determine whether she should bear children or not, and how many children she shall bear if she chooses to become a mother.

This statement outlined my grandmother's support of some of what eugenists stood for and her objection to other parts of their agenda. She stated that she shared the goal of the "elimination of the unfit," but by mostly voluntary means. She asserted that a woman is best judge of whether and when to bring a child into the world. When a woman makes this determination, children will be healthier and better cared for. In other words, women are natural eugenists.

That said, my grandmother *advised*, but did not mandate, that birth control be used in the following conditions:

1. If the parents have a transmissible disease such as epilepsy or alcoholism.
2. If the mother had heart or kidney disease so that the pregnancy could endanger the woman's life.
3. If the parents already have a subnormal child.
4. There should be an interval of two or three years between children in order to give the woman time to rest from her last birth.
5. No woman should have children until she has finished her adolescent period and attained age 22 or 23.
6. There should be no more children than can be brought up decently and properly provided for.
7. Children should not be born until the young couple has two years of married life so that their marriage and relationship can mature.

Most of these guidelines are much akin to the commonsense advice a mother might give a daughter. She also claimed that birth control would improve marriages, family life, and one's sex life. But that wasn't enough. She went on:

No permanent peace is possible without a grasp of the population problem. Birth Control is not merely an individual problem; it is not merely a national question; it concerns the whole wide world, the ultimate destiny of the human race. . . . In his last book, Mr. Wells speaks of the meaningless, aimless lives which cram this world of ours, hordes of people who are born, who live, who die, yet who have done absolutely nothing to advance the race one iota. Their lives are hopeless repetitions. All that they have done has been done better before. Such human weeds clog up the path, drain up the energies and the resources of this little earth.

My grandmother's reference to some of humanity as "human weeds" is among her most troubling. To call it elitist and unhumanitarian would be an understatement. Yet she also recognized the inherent biases of eugenics. When she objected to "cradle competition" between the fit and the unfit, the eugenic solution to the race problem, my grandmother said:

In passing, we should here recognize the difficulties presented by the idea of the "fit" and the "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 one cannot ignore the distinct middle-class bias that prevails. . . . The official policy it has pursued for years has been inspired by a class-bias and sex-bias.

One can feel the tug of values here. Under strict eugenic principles, my grandmother herself would have been prevented from being born. Her father was an Irish Catholic alcoholic, her mother suffered chronic poor health, they were poor, there were already five children by the time she came along, and a subsequent child would die shortly after birth. The only eugenic factors in her favor were that they were white, spoke English, and were not a burden on the government. Some strict eugenicists of the day would nevertheless have prevented Margaret Sanger's parents, or Margaret Sanger herself, from having more than one or two children.

All the while maintaining that birth control should be voluntary and educational, Margaret Sanger attempted to establish social norms for childbearing and motherhood and, in some instances, went beyond this to endorsing legal restrictions on childbearing. Some eugenicists endorsed the sterilization of criminals. My grandmother did not. Putting aside the fact that she was a criminal herself,

having been arrested and jailed multiple times, and could be classified a repeat offender and thereby subject to sterilization, she stated:

As for the sterilization of criminals, not merely must we know much more of heredity and genetics in general, but also acquire more certainty of the justice of our laws and the honesty of their administration before we can make rulings of fitness or unfitness merely upon the basis of a respect for law. The fact that a man is for the purposes of society classed as a criminal tells me little as to his value, still less as to the possible value of his offspring.

In general, she opposed both negative eugenics and positive eugenics. She not only felt that we did not know enough scientifically to make informed judgments about reproduction but she also believed that, no matter what the law says regarding marriage and reproduction, humans will find a way around it. As she once said, negative eugenics “must resort to compulsory and restrictive legislation, which, as events prove, is ineffective and ineffectual.”

She did, however, call for the sterilization of the insane and the feebleminded. She felt that these people, however defined, were incapable of understanding birth-control information and making an informed and rational decision about whether to become a parent. She believed that the feebleminded give birth to more feebleminded, and that the only way to break the cycle was to prevent them from having children.

She also called for a ban on the immigration into the United States of various “unfit” people. She endorsed keeping “the doors of immigration closed to the entrance of certain aliens whose condition is known to be detrimental to the stamina of the race, such as feebleminded idiots, morons, syphilitic, epileptic, criminal, professional prostitutes and others in this class barred by the immigration laws of 1924.”

She further endorsed segregation of “illiterates, paupers, unemployables, criminals, prostitutes, [and] dope-fiends” as long as necessary for them to develop moral conduct so that they could return to society. It is not clear why she thought “unemployables” or poor people needed to develop moral conduct when she stated in other contexts that the environment, societal, and economic conditions were largely responsible for poverty. This belief appears to be a case of what we now call blaming the victim, but which fell right in line with my grandmother’s opinion that almost anyone could work their way out of poverty.

At her core though, she remained a feminist:

Compulsory motherhood is the cornerstone of the subjection of women and the subjection of women is the basis of all the evils of over-population. Birth is the woman’s problem, and she

must be put in a position to solve it for herself. She must have the right to her own body, and the right to choose when she will bear a child. If this right be made absolutely hers, there will be an end to the bearing of children for whom the world has no room and no opportunities; there will be an end to the bearing of diseased and defective children.

The ironies of race, eugenics, and birth control are legion. So are the tragedies. Eugenics found fertile soil in the United States because of our history of competition between differing ethnic groups for political, economic, and cultural power. Eugenics did not begin as an anti-black program. The first eugenic laws were enacted because of white men masturbating. The U.S. Supreme Court upheld eugenics laws in a case involving a white woman. Margaret Sanger tried to co-opt eugenics in a bid for respectability. It failed miserably and the damage continues to this day.

My grandmother's entire career shows that she was motivated by a desire to save the women she took care of as a nurse—the poor, the uneducated, the immigrant. There was no motivation to eliminate them. She wanted every child to have the chance that hers did—poverty combined with having too many children were the root causes of racial degeneration, not heredity or ethnicity or race. Her emphasis on childbearing served to reinforce the notion that the fertility of the poor, and by extension that of the black race, was a proper subject of social and governmental control. The dangers inherent in this view are still with us.

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