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Margaret Sanger & Planned Parenthood's Eugenic Worldview

Margaret Sanger was the founder of Planned Parenthood. Starting as a single birth control clinic in New York City in 1916, Planned Parenthood has grown into the largest provider and promoter of abortion in America. Far from being an obscure historical figure, Margaret Sanger's ideas continue to influence her organization today. Planned Parenthood even continues to hand out a prestigious award in her name.

The following is a fact sheet examining the life of Margaret Sanger, her views on eugenics, her association with well-known racists, and the influence it has on Planned Parenthood today.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF MARGARET SANGER

Margaret Higgins (Sanger) was born in New York in 1879. Her family dynamics are very interesting. Her father, Michael Higgins, was an Irish immigrant and Civil War veteran. His job was to carve gravestones, but his passion as a freethinking socialist was politics. Her mother, Anne, was a devout Catholic. Anne died from tuberculosis when Sanger was 19. The Higgins family had 11 children; Sanger was the sixth child. Sanger blames her mother's death on these 11 births.

Sanger pursued a career as a nurse. She married architect William Sanger in 1902, and they had three children. Like her father, Sanger's husband was also very interested in radical politics, and the family moved to Greenwich Village to take part in a variety of generally left-wing political movements.

Sanger stated her commitment to promoting birth control began after witnessing a woman die following an illegal abortion in 1912. Sanger founded a monthly journal, *The Woman Rebel*, to openly confront

federal laws against promoting and providing birth control. To escape a conviction, Sanger briefly fled to England in 1914, where she became associated with Havelock Ellis, the noted eugenicist and researcher of sex and drugs.

Around this time Sanger abandoned her marriage and carried on affairs with several notable people, including Ellis and famous author H.G. Wells. In 1922 she married wealthy oil businessman James Noah Slee and remained in an open marriage with her much older second husband until his death in 1943.

After her return from England, Sanger founded Planned Parenthood in 1916 in Brooklyn as a small birth control clinic, and from there it would quickly expand into a national movement.

In 1917 Sanger founded another monthly journal, the *Birth Control Review*. In 1921 her movement became known as the American Birth Control League. She continued to tirelessly produce books, articles, and

speeches as she continued her fight against the federal Comstock laws banning contraception.

Her organization suffered from fierce internal conflicts and Sanger left to start another organization in 1928. The two organizations would eventually merge in 1939 as the Birth Control Federation of America, later changing their name to Planned Parenthood Federation of America in 1942.

Sanger went on to found the International Planned Parenthood Federation in 1952, serving as the president until her retirement in 1959.

Sanger died in 1966 from heart failure in Arizona at age 86.

MARGARET SANGER'S EUGENICS

Eugenics is the science of improving society through controlling reproduction. "Eugenics" is derived from Greek, meaning "good race." Eugenics is generally divided into two camps: positive eugenics and negative

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eugenics. The positive camp believes in encouraging those with superior genetics to have more children than those with inferior genetics, and the negative camp believes in preventing those with inferior genetics from having children. Sanger was a strident believer in negative eugenics.

Eugenicists came to believe the field of genetics was the key to all human traits and

behavior. Sanger agreed that genetics was the cause of human poverty and therefore believed poor individuals were incapable of developing into useful members of the human race. By allowing the poor to "breed," Sanger believed they were going to swamp the privileged elite through sheer numbers.

In Sanger's mind, charity was horribly cruel because she believed it perpetuated poverty. In her 1922 book *The Pivot of Civilization*, Sanger devoted an entire chapter to "The Cruelty of Charity."

She wrote, "[Charity] encourages the healthier and more normal sections of the world to shoulder the burden of unthinking and indiscriminate fecundity of others; which brings with it, as I think the reader must agree, a dead weight of human waste. Instead of decreasing and aiming to eliminate the stocks that are most detrimental to the future of the race and the world, it tends to render them to a menacing degree dominant."

Despite Sanger's own upbringing in a large family, Sanger wrote that people who had large families were engaging in monstrous evils. In 1920 Sanger wrote *Women and the New Race*, and devoted an entire chapter to "The Wickedness of Creating Large Families."

She wrote, "The most merciful thing that the large family does to one of its infant members is to kill it. The same factors which create the terrible infant mortality rate, and which swell the death rate of children between the ages of one and five, operate even more extensively to lower the health rate of the surviving members."

Throughout her life Sanger held the view that the poor and the disabled were sub-human. In a 1957 television interview with Mike Wallace on ABC, she said, "I think the greatest sin in the world is bringing children into the world that have disease from their parents, that have no chance in the world to be a human being practically."

While birth control is largely advocated today as something that frees women—and Margaret Sanger certainly believed in this given her personal lifestyle—Sanger's advocacy always came back to improving society at the cost of personal liberty of those she decided were "unfit."

In her concluding chapter of *The Pivot of Civilization*, Sanger wrote, "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; 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.”

Sterilizing the poor was one of Sanger’s passions. In a 1932 speech Sanger laid out several points crucial to a plan for worldwide peace.¹ Peace required people to, “apply a stern and rigid policy of sterilization, and segregation to that grade of population whose progeny is already tainted or whose inheritance is such that objectionable traits may be transmitted to offspring.”

Forced sterilization was sadly a common practice in America in her time, and Sanger endorsed it. In 1927, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the practice of forced sterilization in *Buck v. Bell*. Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes infamously concluded his opinion in the case by writing, “Three generations of imbeciles are enough.” The case has never been overturned, though Sanger-style forced sterilization has mostly come to be seen today for the atrocious evil it is. Even Planned Parenthood is reluctantly forced to acknowledge Sanger’s painful role in endorsing the infamous decision in *Buck v. Bell*.²

The legacy of eugenics still lives on today. Planned Parenthood’s president in 1973—when *Roe v. Wade* and *Doe v. Bolton* were decided by the U.S. Supreme Court—was Dr. Alan F. Guttmacher, former vice president of the American Eugenics Society. Today his name adorns the Guttmacher Institute, the premier research organization affiliated with the abortion industry.

Planned Parenthood continues to oppose late-term abortion bans on grounds that a prenatal diagnosis of disability happens later in pregnancy; they believe late-term abortions must stay legal so disabled children can be aborted. Many abortion supporters today will argue there are too many human beings and we’re incapable of taking care of all of them, so this “dead weight of human waste” ought to be aborted. Arguments for aborting a child rather than letting them grow up poor or in a less privileged environment echo the sentiment that the most “merciful” thing we can do for them is to kill them.

MARGARET SANGER AND ABORTION

In public, Margaret Sanger opposed claims that she was encouraging abortion, and her organization’s educational information promoted birth control instead

of abortion. Yet, in private correspondence she showed a cavalier attitude about abortion, and her organization referred women for illegal abortions.³

Was Margaret Sanger secretly supportive of abortion, but recognized that public opinion on the issue was vociferously against it at the time? Maybe Sanger truly believed that birth control and eugenics would create a race of supermen, thus completely eliminating any “need” for abortion. Or perhaps Sanger was simply ambivalent about the issue.

As late as the 1950s, Planned Parenthood was still publicly stating that abortion takes the life of a child.⁴ Around this time their leaders began discussing early



pushes to legalize abortion.⁵ When New York legalized abortion in 1970, Planned Parenthood was ready to open an abortion clinic the next day. Planned Parenthood has since opposed every limit on abortion imaginable, even opposing the ban on partial-birth abortions.

MARGARET SANGER AND RACISM

Much like her views on abortion, Sanger didn’t really speak publicly in favor of racism. Yet looking at how Sanger aided and abetted genuine racists, it’s impossible for anyone to honestly claim Sanger wasn’t complicit in normalizing racism.

In 1926, Sanger accepted a speaking invitation from the women’s branch of the Ku Klux Klan in New Jersey. She wrote in her autobiography that her speech went over so well she received a dozen invitations to speak to other similar groups.

Racists were allowed to write in her journal, *Birth Control Review*, and were invited to help lead her organization. One notable example was Lothrop Stoddard, author of the 1920 book *The Rising Tide of Color: The Threat Against White World-Supremacy*.

Stoddard is not some fringe character; his book is even mentioned in *The Great Gatsby*. After Stoddard published his book, Sanger's American Birth Control League invited him to join their national council.

Sanger was not naive; she understood the practical implications her views on poverty and unfit racial traits would have on minorities. When she sought to increase commitment to birth control in Black communities through her "Negro Project," Sanger feared the conclusions some Black citizens might logically reach given the effects of her quest to stop the poor from having families. She wrote a letter in 1939 to fellow eugenicist Dr. Clarence Gamble (heir to the Proctor & Gamble fortune), laying out her goals for managing public relations:

"The ministers 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."⁶

It's crucial to understand the practical effects that eugenics—and later legalized abortion—would have on the Black community and other minorities. Margaret Sanger and Planned Parenthood were fully aware that minorities were heavily represented in the categories of people Sanger called "human waste" and "racial mistakes."

According to the census there are about 44 million Americans who identify themselves as Black in 2019. Since *Roe v. Wade* and *Doe v. Bolton* legalized abortion in 1973, numbers from the Guttmacher Institute and the Centers for Disease Control show that Black women have had more than 20 million abortions. A third of the Black community is missing today largely because of the work of Margaret Sanger and her Planned Parenthood Federation of America.

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- ⁵ Jacque Wilson, "Before and After *Roe v. Wade*," CNN, January 22, 2013, online at www.cnn.com.
- ⁶ Margaret Sanger, letter to Clarence Gamble, December 10, 1939, Smith College, online at libex.smith.edu.

FURTHER READING:

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Margaret Sanger, *Women and the New Race* (1920), free online at www.bartleby.com.
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