

## Margaret Sanger and the African American Community

*Compiled by Anna Holley, SisterSong Intern – July 2010*

Opponents of abortion promote myths and half-truths about Margaret Sanger in the African American community and elsewhere. This brief research summation is meant to dispel such falsified information distributed by those opposed to abortion and who are determined to distort her impressive historical legacy of enabling reproductive freedom for all women as a pioneering advocate for birth control. Sanger's opponents use quotes taken out of context, exaggerations and outright falsehoods to paint a grim and racist picture of Sanger. It is important that we, as African American women, examine the historical evidence for ourselves to avoid the pitfalls of historical revisionism. While some falsify the evidence, others attempt to whitewash uncomfortable facts. We consulted with experts on Sanger's life, reviewed primary historical source documents, and received valuable assistance from the archivists at Smith College and New York University.

### **Sanger's Campaign for Birth Control**

Having grown up in a progressive household, Margaret Sanger began to question the medical industry as a result of her mother's death of tuberculosis in 1896. Shortly after, she began challenging medical ignorance. Sanger trained as a nurse and began working in the slums of New York City. From working in desperate conditions, Sanger had the opportunity to observe the hardships of poor mothers who pleaded for information on controlling their fertility. Convinced that the lack of birth control and oversized families were a primary cause of poverty, Sanger became a social radical and joined the Socialist Party. After publishing a monthly newspaper advising women to limit the size of their families, she was arrested and fled to Europe to continue her research on birth control methods. Because of the 1875 Comstock Law prohibiting the spread of information about contraceptives in the U.S., information was more freely available in Europe.

Upon her return to the United States in 1916, she moved back to New York City to open up a birth control clinic in the slums. Yet again, she was arrested and spent a month in prison with her sister who acted as her partner. Spending time in prison only encouraged Sanger to intensify her work. She began lecturing more, raising money, and writing for her new publication: *Birth Control Review*, where she encouraged liberalization of state and federal laws regarding fertility control. By 1930, she had established fifty-five birth control clinics across the

country. Reaching worldwide fame, Sanger spoke at the first World Population Conference in Geneva, Switzerland and continued to push the United States government to allow for easier distribution of contraceptives and sex education.

The American Birth Control Movement finally gained public approval by 1940. As her last act in the movement, she founded the International Planned Parenthood Federation in 1946.[1] Today, Margaret Sanger's accomplishments are recognized in a different light used to fuel anti-abortion activism across the country. Without acknowledging the complexities of the time, her work is often deemed pro-genocide and racist. However, her words and actions are often taken out of context instead of revealing a complicated woman and her true dedication to women's lives.

### Margaret Sanger's Core Principles

- A woman's right to control her body is the foundation of her human rights
- Every person should decide when to have a child
- Every child should be wanted and loved
- Women deserve sexual pleasure and fulfillment

### Eugenics and African Americans

- When the movement for birth control began, organizers like Margaret Sanger believed that fertility control was linked to upward social mobility for all women, regardless of race or immigrant status. [2]
  - Because the medical establishment largely opposed birth control, Sanger initially emphasized woman-controlled methods that did not depend on medical assistance. Her arguments persuaded middle-class women, both Black and white, to use birth control when available.[2]
  - Sanger's immediate effect on African American women was to help transform their covert support for and use of family planning into the visible public support of activists in the Club Movement. But African-American women envisioned an even more pointed concept of reproductive justice: the freedom to have, or not to have, children.
  - The early feminism of the birth control movement, which promoted equality and reproductive rights for all women regardless of race or economic status, collapsed under the weight of support offered by the growing number of nativist whites. Under the influence of eugenicists, Sanger changed her approach, as did other feminists. [3]
  - In 1919, Sanger's American Birth Control League began to rely heavily for legitimacy on

medical doctors and the growing eugenics movement.[2] The eugenics movement provided scientific and authoritative language that legitimated women's right to contraception.[4] This co-optation of the birth control movement produced racist depopulation policies and doctor-controlled birth control technology.[5]

- Birth control was demanded as a right and an option for privileged women, but through public policy at the hands of the government, it became an obligation for the poor.[6]

- Sanger launched the Negro Project, designed by Sanger's Birth Control Federation in 1939. It hired several African-American ministers to travel through the South to recruit African-American doctors. The project proposal included a quote by W.E.B. Dubois, saying that "the mass of ignorant Negroes still breed carelessly and disastrously, so that the increase among Negroes, even more than the increase among Whites, is from that part of the population least intelligent and fit, and least able to rear their children properly." [7] This quote, often mistakenly attributed to Sanger, reflected the shared race and class biases of the project's founders. The Negro Project relied on Black ministers because of its white sponsors' belief that "the most successful educational approach to the Negro is through a religious appeal." [8]

- Among the quotations frequently and incorrectly credited to Sanger is, "More children from the fit, less from the unfit—that is the chief issue of birth control." It is so widely misattributed to her that it appeared on the wall of an International Center for Photography exhibit on eugenics. Another common offender showed up in a recent fundraising letter from Priests for Life: "Colored people are like human weeds and have to be exterminated." The historian Esther Katz, director of the Margaret Sanger Papers Project at New York University, explains that Sanger never said anything of the sort. [9]

- "According to the 'Black genocide' movement, Sanger worked in cahoots with the Ku Klux Klan and the Nazis to advance a theory of White supremacy and forced sterilization. The truth is more complicated than this caricature. Sanger did embrace ideas about eugenics that were popular in the 1920s; the eugenics movement offered her legitimacy, says [Ellen] Chesler, adding that

*'Margaret Sanger had no choice but to engage eugenics. It was a mainstream movement, like public health or the environment today. It was to sanitize birth control and remove it from the taint of immorality and the taint of feminism, which was seen as an individualistic and antisocial group that addressed the needs of women only, and immoral women at that'* [Italics in original]. [9]

- "...Most eugenicists didn't believe in birth control and were hostile to the idea of women's bodily autonomy. Sanger, conversely, derided what she called 'cradle competition' by leaders angling for higher birthrates among the White upper class and said women's first procreative duty was not to the state, nor their race, but to themselves. She believed women's reproductive choices should be voluntary and individualistic." [9]

- "She believed women were natural eugenicists," explains Alex Sanger, "and that birth control, which could limit the number of children and improve their quality of life, was the panacea to accomplish this." [9] (Alex Sanger is Margaret Sanger's grandson).

- “When Sanger began her work, Black communities were ignored by the medical establishment. So from early on, Sanger’s clinics in Harlem were welcomed by esteemed black leaders of the day including W.E.B. Du Bois and Mary McLeod Bethune, the founder of the National Council of Negro Women. In 1939 Sanger founded the Negro Project, a birth control campaign for southern Blacks. As soon as it secured funding, the project was wrested from her control by the White men running the Birth Control Federation of America—a merger between Sanger’s Birth Control Clinical Research Bureau and the American Birth Control League—and by Robert Seibels, the chairman of the Committee on Maternal Welfare of the South Carolina Medical Association.” [9]
  - “...Sanger had written, ‘We don’t 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.’ Sanger meant that she didn’t want rumors to spread of nefarious intentions behind family planning.” [9]
  - Generations of anti-family planning activists have presented Sanger’s remarks that she didn’t want word to ‘go out’ as proof that she secretly intended genocide. Sanger had nothing to do with the project’s implementation, and indeed, as the Margaret Sanger Papers Project documents, the Negro Project was a failure, enacted without regard for Black needs and in terms that today sound blatantly racist. Nevertheless, her early involvement is still cited by the Black genocide movement as evidence that she supported coercive programs.[9]
  - “In years past, says Esther Katz, these arguments spread slowly, as only zealots sought out materials like the lurid 1979 pamphlet, *Margaret Sanger: Father of Modern Society*, which paints Sanger as a promiscuous Nazi sympathizer. But starting in the mid-1990s, the internet enabled accusations fly farther and faster, and unsourced, unchecked material built a mountain of false allegations and attributions, with Wikipedia a key battleground. ‘It fits in with the tendency to use the Big Lie as a tool. You can take the smallest phrase and make a whole industry out of it. It’s a deliberate refusal to address the complexity of our past and its figures,’ says Katz. In fact, Katz says, Sanger was among the few family planning activists who sought to partner with those Black leaders who believed uncontrolled reproduction was harming their communities.”
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- “...Serious abuses sprang from the eugenics movement with which Sanger was allied, including forced or coerced sterilizations of tens of thousands of women, mostly Black or Latina. Although Sanger opposed racially based eugenics and generally believed that sterilization should be voluntary, she made an exception in the cases of people she thought were unable to parent their children, such as the mentally ill—a position upheld by the Supreme Court in its 1927, eight-to-one *Buck v. Bell* decision concerning an allegedly ‘feebleminded’ White woman . But while this is downplayed in biographies of the judges involved, Sanger’s association with eugenics has been so overemphasized it often eclipses her role in promoting birth control.” [9]
  - She brought about the reversal of federal and state “Comstock laws” that prohibited publication and distribution of information about sex, sexuality, contraception, and human reproduction.
  - Sanger furthered the contemporary American model for the protection of civil rights through nonviolent civil disobedience.
  - She created access to birth control for low-income, minority, and immigrant women.

- She also expanded the American concept of volunteerism and grassroots organizing by setting up a network of volunteer-driven family planning centers across the U.S.

### Sanger's Outreach to the African American Community

#### Harlem—1930

In 1930, Sanger opened a family planning clinic in Harlem that sought to enlist support for contraceptive use and to bring the benefits of family planning to women who were denied access to their city's health and social services. Staffed by a black physician and black social worker, the clinic was endorsed by *The Amsterdam News* (the powerful local newspaper), the Abyssinian Baptist Church, the Urban League, and the Black community's elder statesman, W.E.B. DuBois (Chesler, 1992).

#### Negro Project—1939-1942

Beginning in 1939, DuBois served on the advisory council for Sanger's "Negro Project," which was designed to serve African Americans in the rural South. The advisory council called it a "unique experiment in race-building and humanitarian service to a race subjected to discrimination, hardship, and segregation (Chesler 1992).

In a letter to philanthropist Albert Lasker, from whom she hoped to raise funds for the project, Sanger wrote that she wanted to help

A group notoriously underprivileged and handicapped to a large measure by a "caste" system that operates as an added weight upon their efforts to get a fair share of the better things in life. To give them the means of helping themselves is perhaps the richest gift of all. We believe birth control knowledge brought to this group, is the most direct, constructive aid that can be given them to improve their immediate situation (Sanger, 1939, July).

In 1942, she wrote again to Lasker, saying:

I think it is magnificent that we are in on the ground floor, helping Negroes to control their birth

rate, 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 for those who will be born (Sanger, 1942).

**National Negro Advisory Council of**

**Planned Parenthood Federation of America (1942)**

Mary McLeod Bethune

Founder of the National Council of Negro Women, Washington, DC

Rev. Adam Clayton Powell Jr.

Pastor of the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem, New York, NY

Walter G. Alexander, MD

Past-Resident, National Medical Association, Orange, NJ

Claude A. Barnett

Director, Associated Negro Press, Chicago, IL

Michael J. Bent, MD

Meharry Medical School, Nashville, TN

M.O. Housfield, MD

Director for Negro Health, Rosenwald Fund, Chicago, IL

E.R. Carney

President, National Hospital Association, Detroit, MI

William M. Cooper

Director of Extension, Hampton Institute, Virginia

Frank R. Crosswaith

Chairman, Negro Labor Committee, New York

Paul B. Cornely, MD

Assoc. Prof. of Preventive Medicine, Howard University, Washington, DC

John W. Davis

President, West Virginia State College, West Virginia

Albert W. Dent

President, Dillard University, New Orleans, LA

W.E.B. DuBois, PhD

Dept. of Sociology, Atlanta University, Atlanta, GA

Crystal Bird Fauset

Philadelphia, PA



Dorothy Boulding Ferebee, MD

President, Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Washington, DC

A.L. Holsey

Secretary, National Negro Business League, Tuskegee, AL

Mrs. John Hope

New York, NY

Charles D. Hubert, DD

Morehouse College, Atlanta, GA

Charles S. Johnson, PhD

Director, Dept. of Social Science, Fisk University, Tennessee

Eugene Kinckle Jones

National Urban League, New York

John W. Lawlah, MD

Dean of Medicine, Howard University, Washington, DC

Walter Maddux, MD

Slossfield Health Center, Birmingham, AL

Peter Marshall Murray, MD

Publications Committee, Journal of the National Medical Association, New York

Frederick D. Patterson

President, Tuskegee Institute, Alabama

Ira DeA. Reid

Dept. of Sociology, Atlanta University, Atlanta, GA

Emmett Scott

Secretary, Southern Education Foundation, Washington, DC

Bishop David H. Sims

African Methodist Episcopal Church, Philadelphia, PA

Mrs. Mabel E. Staupers, RN

Executive Secretary, National Association of Colored Graduate Nurses, New York

Mrs. Mary Church Terrell

Honorary President, National Association of Colored Women, Washington, DC

Jesso O. Thomas

National Urban League, New York

Channing H. Tobias

National Council, Y.W.C.A., New York

Forrester B. Washington

Director, Atlanta University School of Social Work, Atlanta, GA

John West

Medical Director, Provident Hospital, Chicago, IL

Walter White

Secretary, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, New York, NY

J. Finley Wilson

Grand Ruler of I.B.P.O.E., Washington, DC

Max Yergan

President, National Negro Congress, New York, NY



The Negro Project was also endorsed by prominent white Americans who were involved in social justice efforts at this time, including Eleanor Roosevelt, the most visible and compassionate supporter of racial equality in her era; and the medical philanthropists Alert and Mary Lasker, whose financial support made the project possible (Chesler, 1992).

### **Division of Negro Service—1940-1943**

Sanger's Birth Control Federation of America, which became Planned Parenthood Federation of American in 1942, established a Division of Negro Service to oversee the Negro Project and to implement Sanger's educational outreach to African Americans nationally. Sponsored by Sanger's fundraising efforts and directed by Florence Rose, the division provided Black

organizations across the country with Planned Parenthood literature, set up local educational exhibits, facilitated local and national public relations, and employed an African-American doctor, Mae McCarroll, to lobby medical groups and teach contraceptive techniques to other Black doctors.

### Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.

In 1966, the year Sanger died, the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. said  
There is a striking kinship between our movement and Margaret Sanger's early efforts. ...Our sure beginning in struggle for equality by nonviolent direct action may not have been so resolute without the tradition established by Margaret Sanger and people like her (King, 1966).

In 1966, Planned Parenthood Federation of America inaugurated the PPFA Margaret Sanger Award to honor the woman who founded America's family planning movement. The PPFA Margaret Sanger Award is given annually to individuals of distinction in recognition of excellence and leadership in furthering reproductive health and reproductive rights.

In its first year, the award was bestowed upon **The Reverend Martin Luther King Jr.**, for "his courageous resistance to bigotry and his lifelong dedication to the advancement of social justice and human dignity"



Dr. King's award was presented on May 5, 1966. Mrs. Coretta Scott King delivered her husband's acceptance speech on his behalf. Before reading Dr. King's speech, Mrs. King declared, "I am proud tonight to say a word in behalf of your mentor, and the person who symbolizes the ideas of this organization, Margaret Sanger. Because of her dedication, her deep convictions, and for her suffering for what she believed in, I would like to say that I am proud to be a woman tonight." Following is Dr. King's acceptance speech read by his wife, Mrs. Coretta Scott King.

### **Family Planning — A Special and Urgent Concern**

by the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.

Recently, the press has been filled with reports of sightings of flying saucers. While we need not give credence to these stories, they allow our imagination to speculate on how visitors from outer space would judge us. I am afraid they would be stupefied at our conduct. They would observe that for death planning we spend billions to create engines and strategies for war. They would also observe that we spend millions to prevent death by disease and other causes. Finally they would observe that we spend paltry sums for population planning, even though its spontaneous growth is an urgent threat to life on our planet. Our visitors from outer space could be forgiven if they reported home that our planet is inhabited by a race of insane men whose future is bleak and uncertain.

There is no human circumstance more tragic than the persisting existence of a harmful condition for which a remedy is readily available. Family planning, to relate population to world resources, is possible, practical and necessary. Unlike plagues of the dark ages or contemporary diseases we do not yet understand, the modern plague of overpopulation is soluble by means we have discovered and with resources we possess.

What is lacking is not sufficient knowledge of the solution but universal consciousness of the gravity of the problem and education of the billions who are its victims.

It is easier for a Negro to understand a social paradox because he has lived so long with evils that could be eradicated but were perpetuated by indifference or ignorance. The Negro finally had to devise unique methods to deal with his problem, and perhaps the measure of success he

is realizing can be an inspiration to others coping with tenacious social problems.

In our struggle for equality we were confronted with the reality that many millions of people were essentially ignorant of our conditions or refused to face unpleasant truths. The hard-core bigot was merely one of our adversaries. The millions who were blind to our plight had to be compelled to face the social evil their indifference permitted to flourish.

After centuries of relative silence and enforced acceptance, we adapted a technique of exposing the problem by direct and dramatic methods. We had confidence that when we awakened the nation to the immorality and evil of inequality, there would be an upsurge of conscience followed by remedial action.

We knew that there were solutions and that the majority of the nation were ready for them. Yet we also knew that the existence of solutions would not automatically operate to alter conditions. We had to organize, not only arguments, but people in the millions for action. Finally we had to be prepared to accept all the consequences involved in dramatizing our grievances in the unique style we had devised.

There is a striking kinship between our movement and Margaret Sanger's early efforts. She, like we, saw the horrifying conditions of ghetto life. Like we, she knew that all of society is poisoned by cancerous slums. Like we, she was a direct actionist — a nonviolent resister. She was willing to accept scorn and abuse until the truth she saw was revealed to the millions. At the turn of the century she went into the slums and set up a birth control clinic, and for this deed she went to jail because she was violating an unjust law. Yet the years have justified her actions. She launched a movement which is obeying a higher law to preserve human life under humane conditions. Margaret Sanger had to commit what was then called a crime in order to enrich humanity, and today we honor her courage and vision; for without them there would have been no beginning. Our sure beginning in the struggle for equality by nonviolent direct action may not have been so resolute without the tradition established by Margaret Sanger and people like her. Negroes have no mere academic nor ordinary interest in family planning. They have a special and urgent concern.

Recently the subject of Negro family life has received extensive attention. Unfortunately, studies have overemphasized the problem of the Negro male ego and almost entirely ignored the most serious element — Negro migration. During the past half century Negroes have migrated on a massive scale, transplanting millions from rural communities to crammed urban ghettos. In

their migration, as with all migrants, they carried with them the folkways of the countryside into an inhospitable city slum. The size of family that may have been appropriate and tolerable on a manually cultivated farm was carried over to the jammed streets of the ghetto. In all respects Negroes were atomized, neglected and discriminated against. Yet, the worst omission was the absence of institutions to acclimate them to their new environment. Margaret Sanger, who offered an important institutional remedy, was unfortunately ignored by social and political leaders in this period. In consequence, Negro folkways in family size persisted. The problem was compounded when unrestrained exploitation and discrimination accentuated the bewilderment of the newcomer, and high rates of illegitimacy and fragile family relationships resulted.

For the Negro, therefore, intelligent guides of family planning are a profoundly important ingredient in his quest for security and a decent life. There are mountainous obstacles still separating Negroes from a normal existence. Yet one element in stabilizing his life would be an understanding of and easy access to the means to develop a family related in size to his community environment and to the income potential he can command.

This is not to suggest that the Negro will solve all his problems through Planned Parenthood. His problems are far more complex, encompassing economic security, education, freedom from discrimination, decent housing and access to culture. Yet if family planning is sensible it can facilitate or at least not be an obstacle to the solution of the many profound problems that plague him.

The Negro constitutes half the poor of the nation. Like all poor, Negro and white, they have many unwanted children. This is a cruel evil they urgently need to control. There is scarcely anything more tragic in human life than a child who is not wanted. That which should be a blessing becomes a curse for parent and child. There is nothing inherent in the Negro mentality which creates this condition. Their poverty causes it. When Negroes have been able to ascend economically, statistics reveal they plan their families with even greater care than whites. Negroes of higher economic and educational status actually have fewer children than white families in the same circumstances.

Some commentators point out that with present birth rates it will not be long before Negroes are a majority in many of the major cities of the nation. As a consequence, they can be expected to take political control, and many people are apprehensive at this prospect. Negroes do not seek political control by this means. They seek only what they are entitled to and do not wish for domination purchased at the cost of human misery. Negroes were once bred by slave owners to be sold as merchandise. They do not welcome any solution which involves population breeding as a weapon. They are instinctively sympathetic to all who offer methods that will improve their

lives and offer them fair opportunity to develop and advance as all other people in our society.

For these reasons we are natural allies of those who seek to inject any form of planning in our society that enriches life and guarantees the right to exist in freedom and dignity.

For these constructive movements we are prepared to give our energies and consistent support; because in the need for family planning, Negro and white have a common bond; and together we can and should unite our strength for the wise preservation, not of races in general, but of the one race we all constitute — the human race.

*About two weeks after the award ceremony, Dr. King wrote the following letter to Cass Canfield, chairman of the Executive Committee of the PPFA — World Population Emergency Campaign:*

Dear Mr. Canfield:

Words are inadequate for me to say how honored I was to be the recipient of the Margaret Sanger Award. This award will remain among my most cherished possessions. While I cannot claim to be worthy of such a signal honor, I can assure you that I accept it with deep humility and sincere gratitude. Such a wonderful expression of support is of inestimable value for the continuance of my humble efforts.

Again let me say how much I regret that at the last minute urgent developments in the civil rights movement made it impossible for me to be in Washington to personally receive the award. My wife brought glowing echoes of the wonderful reception and impressiveness of the total occasion.

I am happy to be the recipient of the Margaret Sanger Award and I can assure you that this distinct honor will cause me to work even harder for a reign of justice and a rule of love all over our nation.

Sincerely yours,

Martin Luther King Jr.

### **Was Sanger Racially Motivated?**

Despite the admiration that African-American heroes like DuBois, Powell, and King held for Sanger, arguments continue about whether or not her outreach to the Black community was racially motivated. The patriarchal racism of the social policy of the time and the well-intentioned paternalism of philanthropists to “lift up” African-Americans, may have influenced Sanger. But there is no evidence that Sanger, or the Federation, intended to coerce Black women into using birth control.

The fundamental belief, underscored at every meeting, mentioned in much of the behind-the-scenes correspondence, and evident in all the printed material put out by the Division of Negro Service, was that uncontrolled fertility presented the greatest burden to the poor, and Southern Blacks were among the poorest Americans. In fact, the Negro Project did

not differ very much from the earlier birth control campaigns in the rural South. It would have been more racist, in Sanger's mind, to ignore African Americans in the South than to fail at trying to raise the health and economic standards of their communities ("Birth Control or Race Control," 2001).

### Sanger and Eugenics

Eugenics is a theory of improving hereditary qualities by socially controlling human reproduction. Eugenacists, including the Nazis, were opposed to the use of contraception or abortion by healthy and "fit" women (Grossmann, 1995). In fact, Sanger's books were among the very first burned by the Nazis in their campaign against family planning ("Sanger on Exhibit," 1999/2000). (Sanger helped several Jewish women and men and others escape the Nazi regime in Germany ("Margaret Sanger and the 'Refugee Department'," 1993)).

Sanger, however, clearly identified with the broader issues of health and fitness that concerned the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century eugenics movement, which was enormously popular and well respected during the 1920s and '30s—decades in which treatments for many hereditary and disabling conditions were unknown. But Sanger always believed that reproductive decisions should be made on an individual and not a social or cultural basis, and she consistently and firmly repudiated any racial application of eugenics principles. For example, Sanger vocally opposed the racial stereotyping that effected passage of the Immigration Act of 1924, on the grounds that intelligence and other inherited traits vary by individual and not by group (Chesler, 1992).

Though she tried for years, Sanger was unable to convince the leaders of the eugenics movement to accept her credo that "No woman can be free who does not own and control her body (Sanger, 1920)." Her on-going disagreement with the eugenacists of her day is clear from her remarks in *The Birth Control Review* of February 1919:

Eugenicists 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 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...Only upon a free, self-determining motherhood can rest any unshakable structure of racial betterment (Sanger, 1919a).

Although Sanger uniformly repudiated the racist exploitation of eugenics principles, she agreed with the "progressives" of her day who favored:

- Incentives for the voluntary hospitalization and/or sterilization of people with untreatable, disabling, hereditary conditions
- The adoption and enforcement of stringent regulations to prevent the immigration of the diseased and "feebleminded" in the U.S.
- Placing so-called illiterates, paupers, unemployables, criminals, prostitutes, and dope-fiends on farms and open spaces as long as necessary for the strengthening and development of moral conduct.

On their website, PPFA states that: Planned Parenthood Federation of America of today finds these views objectionable and outmoded. Nevertheless, anti-family planning activists continue to attack Sanger, who has been dead for nearly 40 years, because she is an easier target than the unassailable reputation of PPFA and the contemporary family planning movement. However, attempts to discredit the family planning movement because its early 20<sup>th</sup> century founder was not a perfect model of early 21<sup>st</sup>

century values is like disavowing the *Declaration of Independence*

because its author, Thomas Jefferson, bought and sold slaves.

### **Published Statements that Distort or Misquote Margaret Sanger**

Through the years, a number of alleged Sanger quotations, or allegations about her, have surfaced with regularity in anti-family planning publications:

**“More children from the fit, less from the unfit that is the chief issue of birth control.”** A quotation falsely attributed to Margaret Sanger, this statement was made by the editors of *American Medicine* in a review of an article by Sanger. The editorial from which this appeared, as well as Sanger’s article, “why Not Birth Control Clinics in America?” were reprinted side-by-side in May 1919 *Birth Control Review* (Sanger, 1919b).

**“The Mass of Ignorant Negroes still breed carelessly and disastrously, so that the increase among Negroes, even more than the increase among whites, is from the portion of the population least intelligent and fit, and least able to rear their children properly.”**

Another quotation falsely attributed to Margaret Sanger, this was actually written for the June 1932 issue of *The Birth Control Review* by W.E.B. DuBois, founder of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Taken out of the context of his discussion about the effects of birth control on the balance between quality-of-life considerations and race-survival issues for African Americans, DuBois’ language seems insensitive by today’s



standards.

**“Blacks, soldiers, and Jews are a menace to the race.”**

This fabricated quotation, falsely attributed to Sanger, was concocted in the late 1980s. The alleged source is the April 1933 *Birth Control Review* (Sanger ceased editing the *Review* in 1929). That issue contains no article or letter by Sanger.

**“To create a race of thoroughbreds...”**

This remark, again attributed originally to Sanger, was made by Dr. Edward A. Kempf and has been cited out of context and with distorted meaning. Dr. Kempf, a progressive physician, was actually arguing for state endowment of maternal and infant care clinics. In her book *The Pivot of Civilization*, Sanger quoted Dr. Kempf’s argument about how environment may improve human excellence:

*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 automatic 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 (Sanger, 1922 [1969]).*

It was in this spirit that Sanger used the phrase “Birth Control: To Create a Race of Thoroughbreds,” as a banner on the November 1921 issue of the *Birth Control Review*. (Different slogans on the theme of voluntary family planning sometimes appeared under the title of *The Review* e.g., “Dedicated to the Cause of Voluntary Motherhood,” January 1928).

**“The most merciful thing that the large family does to one of its infant members is to kill it.”** This statement is taken out of context from Margaret Sanger’s *Woman and the New Race* (Sanger, 1920). Sanger was making an ironic comment—not a prescriptive one—about the horrifying rate of infant mortality among large families of early 20<sup>th</sup>

century urban America. The statement, as grim as the conditions that prompted Sanger to make it, accompanies this chart, illustrating the infant death rate in 1920:

#### Deaths During First Year

1<sup>st</sup> born children 23%

7<sup>th</sup> born children 31%

2<sup>nd</sup> born children 20%

8<sup>th</sup> born children 33%

3<sup>rd</sup> born children 21%

9<sup>th</sup> born children 35%

4<sup>th</sup> born children 23%

10<sup>th</sup> born children 41%

5<sup>th</sup> born children 26%

11<sup>th</sup> born children 51%

6<sup>th</sup> born children 31%

12<sup>th</sup> born children 60%

**“We do not want word to get out that we want to exterminate the Negro population.”** Sanger was aware of African-American concerns, passionately argued by Marcus Garvey in the 1920s, that birth control was a threat to the survival of the Black race. This statement, which acknowledges those fears, is taken from a letter to Clarence J. Gamble, M.D., a champion of the birth control movement. In that letter, Sanger describes her strategy to allay such apprehensions. A larger portion of the letter makes Sanger’s meaning clear:

It seems to me from my experience...in North Carolina, Georgia, Tennessee, and Texas, that while the colored Negroes have great respect for white doctors, they can get closer to their own members and more or less lay their cards on the table...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...His work, in my opinion, should be entirely with the Negro progression 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 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 (Sanger, 1939, December).

**“As early as 1914 Margaret Sanger was promoting abortion, not for white middle-class women, but against ‘inferior race’—black people, poor people, Slavs, Latins, and Hebrews were ‘human weeds.’”**

This allegation about Margaret Sanger appears in an anonymous flyer, “Facts about Planned Parenthood,” that is circulated by anti-family planning activists. Margaret Sanger, who passionately believed in a woman’s right to control her body, never “promoted” abortion because it was illegal and dangerous throughout her lifetime. She urged women to use contraceptives so that they would not be at risk for the dangers of illegal, back alley abortion. Sanger never described any ethnic community as an “inferior race” or as “human weeds.”

In her lifetime, Sanger won the respect of international figures of all races, including the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.; Mahatma Gandhi; Shidzue Kato, the foremost family planning advocate in Japan; and Lady Dhanvanthi Rama Rau of India—all of whom were sensitive to issues of race.

### **The Rising Tide of Color Against White World Supremacy**

This is the title of a book falsely attributed to Sanger. It was written by Lothrop Stoddard and reviewed by Havelock Ellis in the October 1920 issue of *The Birth Control Review*. Its general topic, the international politics of race relations in the first decades of the century, is one in which Sanger was not involved. Her interest, insofar as she allowed a review of Stoddard’s book to be published in

*The Birth Control Review*

, was in the overall health and quality of life of  
*all*

racess and not in tensions between them. Ellis’s review was critical of the Stoddard book and of distinctions based on race or ethnicity alone.

## For Further Reading

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