Solutions to the Poor: Margaret Sanger's Birth Control Crusade During the Progressive Era

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The birth control movement of the Progressive Era inspired anti-immigrant, anti-black, and anti-poor actions and sentiments throughout the United States. Margaret Sanger, the crusading pioneer behind the dissemination of birth control information, took the reins of this movement aspiring to uplift the nation's profile. Her utopian vision of American civility was significantly grounded in the hegemony of white middle-class values as well as limiting lower-class reproduction. Much of the historiography on Sanger's birth control movement ignores or apologizes for her uncharitable interpretation of how to help America's poor. "Birth control," a term coined in 1914 by Sanger, provided access to some socioeconomic uplift via Sanger's tireless efforts to distribute contraception and family planning education. However, when combined with the pseudoscience movement of eugenics, the advocacy of "breeding out" undesirable human traits—poverty and non-whiteness—for the betterment of society, Sanger's work spread classist, racist, and xenophobic notions that still linger today. Drawing from primary sources written by Sanger herself, the fin de siècle eugenicists, and the small social movements she inspired around the country, this paper discusses how prejudices against poor Americans became the main driver of Sanger's birth control movement.

The Second Industrial Revolution of the late nineteenth century drew migrants from rural areas, leaving their agrarian ways behind, to centers of industrialization in America. Between 1870 and 1914, millions of immigrants, mostly from southern and eastern Europe, came to America through Ellis Island in search of income and political stability. Immigrants succeeded in finding employment—mostly low wage labor—and created multicultural spheres in cities throughout the U.S. However, they were also met with prejudice regarding their religions, languages, cuisines, and traditional beliefs of family planning. This last cultural sphere, in particular, came under the scrutiny of Progressive Era birth control proponents.

Progressive Era activists endorsed "America-improving" ideologies that promoted a disparaging, one-dimensional profile of the working class; Margaret Sanger was chief among fervent believers. The innate bigotry of Sanger's message, which she was extremely successful in spreading, appears in the era's written literature, immigration policy, labor reform, health, science, women's and mother's culture, and governmental actions. Undeniably, social and medical advances in birth control would improve the lives of many socioeconomically oppressed people. Through the distribution of birth control information and materials, disenfranchised families and communities received the means to control the economic demands of their lives.

Nevertheless, many middle-class Americans began to believe that sexual reproduction of immigrants, minorities, and poor whites was detrimental to the strength of the U.S. The social movement started by Margaret Sanger to uplift the American population as a whole was reappropriated by a segment of activists with white supremacy beliefs. Prejudiced reformers were drawn to Sanger's mission because they were interested in population control. The population they wanted to control, or rather limit, was the poor, non-white people of America.

Historians who have written about Sanger justly hail her as a birth control pioneer, however, the prejudiced elements of her efforts are addressed ruefully and direct lines of influence between her mission and white supremacy movements of the time are never drawn. Sanger is often praised as an emancipator and credited for her earliest efforts with bringing both "the pill" as well as 1965's *Griswold v. Connecticut* Supreme Court ruling to fruition.[1] Her unshakable belief in her mission is demonstrated via tales of numerous run-ins with the law and her hunger strikes in jails. Yet, one historian highlight Sanger's role in the promotion of problematic class attitudes of the times as she describes Sanger as, "never herself a racist, but she lived in a profoundly bigoted society, and her failure to repudiate prejudice—especially when it was manifest among proponents of her cause—has haunted her ever since."[2] Equal scrutiny should be given to the harmful effects

[1] Ellen Chesler, *Woman of Valor: Margaret Sanger and the Birth Control Movement in America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 11.
[2] Chesler, *Woman of Valor*, 15.

of Sanger's embrace of eugenics and perhaps less to the damage done to her reputation.

In addition to Sanger's background accounting for her ideas of race and class, historians downplay her embrace of the theory of eugenics. Eugenics theorizes that society would benefit if only those with the most desirable traits were encouraged to reproduce and those with dysgenic traits should not. One critic correctly surmised that Sanger's main intention was for reproductive autonomy, but her adoption of eugenics offered respectability for a cause that would have otherwise seemed shameful.[3] While it may be the responsibility of historians to frame events through the appropriate historical lens, Sanger's eugenics stance is sometimes treated as an aside. Her support for population control and sterilization cannot be dismissed. In order to understand how Sanger's actions and words inspired bigoted activist movements in her wake, a direct quote regarding sterilization provides a clear example. In a letter written to Katherine McCormick, a wealthy patron of the birth control movement, Sanger calls sterilization a "simple, cheap, safe contraceptive to be used in poverty-stricken slums, jungles, and among the most ignorant people…I believe that now, immediately there should be national sterilization for certain dysgenic types of our population who are being encouraged to breed and would die out were the government not feeding them."[4]

The problem with a concept like *dysgenics* being wielded by those without a scientific understanding, yet armed with a cultural agenda, is that the desirability of traits is left to interpretation. While Sanger suggested sterilization as a means of preventing hunger and poverty, she also recommended it to prevent the births of humans with disabilities as well.[5]

None of this is to raise any suspicion regarding Sanger's crusade to relieve America's downtrodden communities of the economic weight of raising children they could not afford. The introduction of solid birth control advice and materials improved

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[3] Michelle Goldberg, "Awakenings: on Margaret Sanger," *The Nation*, February 27, 2012, https://www.thenation.com/article/awakenings-margaret-sanger/.
[4] Goldberg, "Awakenings: on Margaret Sanger."
[5] Goldberg, "Awakenings: on Margaret Sanger."

the lives of people who wanted to better plan their families. If Sanger's legacy has undeniably problematic spots today, it is because of eugenics; if it gave her cause scientific legitimacy, her embrace of eugenics gave it an air of nobility, perhaps even bravery in the face of resistance. Sanger was passionate about birth control development causing her to work with intolerant people and she began to hold their same beliefs.[6] In a time when Sanger's connection to eugenics and her founding of Planned Parenthood can be twisted by anti-abortion activists into a false plan to exterminate non-white populations, it is vital to understand the true lengths of her involvement in xenophobic or racist practices. However, this does not mean historians should exclusively champion her contributions while brushing over the reverberations of her moral failures.

In Margaret Sanger's autobiography published in 1931, she recounts "associate[ing] poverty, toil, unemployment, drunkenness, cruelty, quarreling, fighting, debts, jails with large families."[7] The book served to illustrate how Sanger was motivated by a lifetime of bearing witness to the nightmarish hardships endured by women who gave birth to too many children. Immediately after the aforementioned text follows a passage allowing readers to explore through Sanger's critical lens: socioeconomics. She observed the wealthy "own[ing] their homes, had few children, dressed them well, and kept their houses and their yards clean and tidy" Sanger's tone towards wealthy mothers conjure comfort, happiness and leisure especially as she describes them as "young looking [..] with pretty, clean dresses, and they smelled of perfume."[8]

Ignoring the likelihood that these "young looking" mothers had full-time assistance in keeping their homes clean and hired child-supervision while they played tennis with their husband, Sanger is not championing good parenting in this recollection. She dreamily celebrated leisure time. This is not accidental on her part, however. Sanger, like most Progressive Era activists, viewed leisure as an intrinsic part of high-quality American life—the

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[6] Goldberg, "Awakenings: on Margaret Sanger."
[7] Margaret Sanger, *My Fight for Birth Control* (New York: Ferrar & Reinhart, Inc., 1931), 5.
[8] Sanger, *My Fight for Birth Control, 5.*

natural reward for the well-paid hard work done by the husband, father, and provider. The birth control crusade proudly bore its righteousness under the Progressive banner of creating the ideal American citizenry.

In a front page story in *The Day Book*, a Chicago newspaper published without advertisements in an attempt to keep its writers unmoved by the persuasion of wealthy advertisers, Sanger revealed her impression of inner-city immigrants who she presumed did not keep their houses tidy, much less play croquet in the evening. Sanger portrays immigrants in "the stockyards district, or any other swarming working-class district, babies come and these babies are not welcome."[9] In this comparison, Sanger described immigrant neighborhoods as "swarming" to frame her argument as one based on the inequality of education provided to working-class mothers. Inherently, there is a disdain for and willful overlooking of cultural differences. The article supports Sanger's stance on working-class women having the same rights to education about reproduction as upper-class women do.[10] Part of the problem for working-class mothers may have been the lack of access to information about effective birth control, but I would argue a bigger obstacle for these women was a lack of access to income.

As a great influx of immigrants moved to America, a form of pseudo-science also become popular among the elite and middle-class who wished to see society shaped in their own image. The privileged classes viewed communities of Anglo-Saxon origin and Protestant faith as having the most appealing qualities when it came to the building of a nation. The work ethic and limited childbearing practices seen in the successful industrialized nations of northern and western Europe stood as ideal for many Progressives. In Europe, Sir Francis Galton, a British anthropologist and half-cousin of Charles Darwin, created the theory of eugenics in 1883. Galton posited that the human population of any country could be improved through the controlled designation of who should be allowed to reproduce. Humans possessing genetic traits deemed desirable were encouraged to have offspring and those people in possession of

[9] Sanger, *My Fight for Birth Control, 5.*
[10] Sanger, *My Fight for Birth Control, 2.*

"inferior" genetic traits should be discouraged to reproduce. Galton wrote in 1869, "the best form of civilization in respect to the improvement of the race would be one in which society was not costly."[11] Here, Galton explains how the most effective and ideal society would operate—one where no one has to pay for anyone else's participation in that society. Here, Progressive attitudes about population and society are connected. Birth control activists fought to dispense family-limiting information in order to save the wealthy from feeling compelled to contribute to their welfare of the poor.

Some figures in the medical and psychological communities moved to capitalize on the trend of eugenics that intrigued members of the upper and middle classes. Eden Paul, a British socialist physician (not coincidentally, the son of a woman who had 11 sisters), wrote at great length connecting wage earnings and society. He also examined the physical and mental dangers of overpopulation due to poor family planning. Writing about the "darkest side" of married life, Paul grimly explained how marrying too young and having too many children will drive husbands astray in search of deviant distractions. Paul argued early marriages caused many men to seek out the services of prostitutes and "the result is a terrible prevalence of venereal disease."[12] The threat of dead-end marriages resulted in acts of infidelity, Paul theorized, with the children of these marriages suffering from the effects of being born with the acquired sexually transmitted diseases. The philandering of unhappy husbands resulted in young mothers "who for seven or eight years have undergone the misery of having diseased children, most of which have died under their eyes or have struggled on ricketty [*sic*] and deformed, half-blinded from gonorrheal infection, or mentally defective from syphilis."[13]

The works of Eden Paul and his wife, Cedar, contain clear examples of how the language used by some Progressive birth control proponents suggested classist, xenophobic, or racist attitudes. Since Progressive birth control reformers used

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[11] Sir Francis Galton, *Hereditary Genius* (London: Macmillan, 1869), 29.
[12] Eden Paul, "Birth Control and Wage-Earners," *Population and Birth Control: a Symposium* (New York: Critic and Guide, 1917), 88-89.
[13] Paul, "Birth Control and Wage-Earners," 88-89.

depressing imagery in their writing and portrayed the entirety of the working class as living in filth and misery, it is not surprising they used descriptive wording synonymous with urban decay. Like Sanger's use of "swarming," the Pauls wrote as though they were describing a pest infestation. Children are found in "teeming hordes" and "herded together like beasts."[14] In an attempt to examine a real problem—the poor living standards and health risks of those living in urban slums—the Pauls use vocabulary not typically employed when referring to human beings. Ultimately, this inferior positioning makes it easier for the privileged castes to view the deprived as merely uncouth, uniformly unfit, and not a people struggling to get ahead without much in the way of resources.

Tapping into Progressive beliefs that were in line with the abolition movement of the nineteenth century, Sanger often referred to impoverished children as "slaves," suggesting their inevitable destiny would amount to exploitation by the labor market. She described unplanned children as "bodies" that would "fill the hospitals and jails, factories and mills, insane asylums and premature graves."[15] Some Progressive reformers seized upon the final destination in Sanger's quote as justification for another one of their pet causes—the anti-war movement. Progressive reformers disagreed on war wherein those in favor of World War I optimistically argued that it would perhaps end all wars forever and bring peace on earth. In order to gain the support of Progressives, Woodrow Wilson framed the war as one to defend democracy beyond America's borders—the ultimate Progressive reform on a global level.

On the other hand, those activists who prized birth control over the protection of democracy abroad adhered to their vision of population limitation. They believed that during wartime when many of the nation's strongest members are sent off to war, "then it listens (to birth control advocates) with but ill-concealed or open and angry impatience to the suggestion of limiting the number of

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[14] Paul, "Birth Control and Wage-Earners," 88-89.
[15] "Mrs. Sanger Explains Where Most Chicago Babies Come From," *The Day Book*, April 27, 1916, 2.

offspring, of controlling the production of future war material."[16] Anti-war Birth control proponents who were also anti-war could then draw the conclusion "… reckless breeding with its resulting overpopulation and economic and moral misery is one of the causes of war, (we) must not halt in our propaganda; on the contrary, we must, if possible, intensify it."[17] Birth control advocates who opposed WWI aimed to link the cause of war with unregulated reproduction, in the hopes of drawing more support to their cause.

Intensifying the stories of working-class mothers and their "moral misery" was one of the most effective tools at birth control's disposal. Much of Sanger's written work includes detailed stories of the hardships endured by ill-suited parents. Alternately, Sanger also harnessed the power of printed media to recount her commitment to the distribution of birth control information to the poor. Sanger traveled to the socioeconomically efficient countries of Europe's northern and western regions, in search of solutions to unwanted pregnancies among America's working class. Seeking examples of successful birth control policies in England, Scotland, Belgium, and Germany, Sanger reported that limited-offspring families in middle-class neighborhoods displayed the qualities of the ideal Progressive family life and observes, "for so many rooms, so much light, so many people to a square foot, no overcrowding allowed."[18] While she highlights their comfortable middle-class lifestyle, Sanger also fails to address these comforts as the result of an industry that paid their employees a livable minimum wage. Whereas Paul flatly argued that "the state cannot provide for an unlimited number [of children]"[19] due to the challenges of feeding a population, Sanger could have at least added social welfare to her mission. She may have been able to gain some ground or success in replicating European-style organizations if she had been willing to include some other aspects of social reform to her crusade.

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[16] William J. Robinson, M.D., "Introduction," *Population and Birth-Control: A Symposium*, edited by Eden and Cedar Paul (New York: Critic and Guide, 1917), 6.
[17] Eden and Cedar Paul, "Introduction," 6.
[18] Sanger, *My Fight for Birth Control*, 64.
[19] Eden Paul, "Birth Control and Wager-Earners," 88-89.

Like the majority of Progressive reformers, Sanger is critical of the capitalist class, acknowledging its shortcomings, yet she insists child limitation is the ultimate prerequisite to the success of families around the world. She also highlights the strain on city infrastructures large families have when she wrote, "municipal ownership was successful *only* where the size of the family was considered and limited."[20] Sanger's view that contraceptive knowledge was the preeminent key to societal uplift fails to take into consideration the many socioeconomic barriers faced by the working-class. Nowhere in her writing does she demand higher salaries for working fathers. She never calls for expecting mothers to receive prenatal healthcare benefits through their husband's or their own employment. Sanger never argued for a system that provides daycare in addition to a child-healthcare education for working-class mothers. Her sole solution to what she views as a crisis in America is the distribution of birth control information to poor women in order for them to stop having children they cannot afford to raise.

The Comstock Act stood in the path of Sanger's mission. Passed by Congress in 1873, the Comstock Laws were created by Anthony Comstock, an appointed officer of the U.S. Postal Service, in order to suppress the distribution of "obscene" publication or items used for contraception.[21] To circumvent these laws, Sanger published numerous pamphlets (free of charge) to surreptitiously spread her message of birth control. On several incidents, she clashed with the law, resulting in court dates and prison sentences excitedly covered by the media.[22] The prurient air that surrounded Sanger's birth control publications and providing of contraceptives did little to discourage certain Progressive reformers from championing her ventures. Many in the eugenics field supported Sanger's risky cause as it fell in line with their goal of decreasing the reproduction of "undesirable" types in society. Activists like Mary Ware Dennett argued since

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[20] Sanger, *My Fight for Birth Control*, 64.
[21] Ana C. Garner, *Wicked or Warranted?: US press coverage of contraception 1873-1917* (London: Routledge, 2013), 1.
[22] Janet Farrell Brodie, *Contraception and Abortion in Nineteenth-Century America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), 290.

only a morally reprehensible person would seek out contraception, the benefit of their usage of such birth control tools would keep them from having children who would also grow up to be sexually irresponsible.[23]

Responsibility (or lack thereof) factored heavily in the prevailing attitudes toward lower-class parents with too many children. After admonishing poor parents for being too "indolent to wash and cleanse" themselves or "too selfish to consider the consequences of the act,"[24] Sanger's pamphlet "Family Limitation" warned women of the tragic outcome of bearing too many children. She depicts the scenario as, "burdened down with half a dozen unwanted children, helpless, starved, shoddily clothed, dragging at your skirt" while describing mothers as "a dragged out shadow of the woman you once were."[25] Intimidating scenarios of poorly planned motherhood like this were a staple in birth control propaganda. Similarly, Eden Paul wrote, "unlimited childbearing is a cruel strain on the health and strength of a woman; it ages her prematurely, and ruins all possibility of her being anything other than a domestic drudge."[26] Following Sanger's narrative, Paul presented no alternative to the unhappy life and wretched appearance of the woman who gave birth to too many children.

Only slightly more generosity can be found in Sanger's actual birth control advice. Assuming that at the end of the day, it was all too much work for the working-class woman, Sanger attempted to empathize with the harried housewife. Douching is "troublesome," keeping track of one's menstrual cycle is a "nuisance," inserting a cervical pessary "inartistic." As a first option, Sanger always promoted the time-worn *coitus interruptus* and the "rhythm method."[27] Eventually, Sanger accepted the reality of sexual intercourse between humans; namely, that "pulling out" is not the safest failproof form of birth control. She

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[23] Mary Ware Dennett, *Birth Control Laws: Shall We Keep Them, Change Them, or Abolish Them*, (New York: Grafton Press, 1926), 178.
[24] Margaret Sanger, "Family Limitation," (1914), 2.
[25] Sanger, "Family Limitation," 1.
[26] Paul, "Birth Control and Wager-Earners," 88-89.
[27] Sanger, "Family Limitation," 2.

began to provide information on the use of physical contraceptives. Under the Comstock Act, it was illegal to dispense birth control information and products through the mail. Physicians advertised contraceptives as "feminine hygiene" or "marriage hygiene" to avoid legal troubles for both sellers and buyers.[28] Sanger supplied these devices for use in the first birth control clinic she opened—the first of its kind in the country—in Brooklyn, New York. Specifically, she chose "the Brownsville neighborhood of Brooklyn—home to thousands of Jewish and Italian immigrants."[29] If Sanger's efforts had the best of intentions, sadly, the mission was adopted and misrepresented by those who sought to make the underclass synonymous with poorly planned families and if left unchecked, the undoing of America.

Those who rejected the notion of granting any agency unto the working-class saw them as people who needed to be controlled in order to curb the problem of overpopulation. Founder of the International Federation of Eugenics Organizations, Charles Davenport intended on halting the deleterious effects of a large underprivileged citizenry.[30] Having received a Ph.D. in biology from Harvard University, Davenport's pursuits led him to meet Francis Galton, the creator of eugenics, in England.[31] Davenport returned home and became highly involved in the eugenics movement in the U.S. and wrote a scientific text entitled *Heredity in Relation to Eugenics* gaining him plenty of followers but was also rejected by many scientists who questioned his theories.[32] Regardless, Davenport sent *Heredity* and another one of his works to President Theodore Roosevelt, who enthusiastically embraced Davenport's eugenics views. Responding to Davenport's

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[28] "The Pill and the Pessary," Proto, Massachusetts General Hospital//Dispatches from the Frontiers of Medicine, October 21, 2016, www.protomag.com/articles/the-pill-and-the-pessary.

[29] "The Pill and the Pessary."

[30] "Charles B. Davenport," *Archives at Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory*, Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory, 2019, http://library.cshl.edu/personal-collections/charles-b-davenport.

[31] Garland E. Allen, "Eugenics and Modern Biology: Critiques of Eugenics, 1910-1945," Annals of Human Genetics, April 13, 2011, https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/j.1469-1809.2011.00649.x.

[32] Allen, "Eugenics and Modern Biology: Critiques of Eugenics, 1910-1945."

assertion that the poor could not make responsible decisions for themselves, Roosevelt responded: "You say that those people are not themselves responsible, that it is 'society' that is responsible. I agree with you if you mean…that society has no business to permit degenerates to reproduce their kind."[33] After suggesting that wise human reproduction should operate like "stock breeding" by "successful farmers," Roosevelt ends his letter to Davenport with the following pro-eugenics sentiment: "Some day (*sic*) we will realize the prime duty…of the good citizen of the right type is to leave his or her blood behind him in the world! and that have no business to permit the perpetuation of citizens of the wrong type."[34] Davenport's preferred human reproduction perspective may not appear to have much in common with Sanger's birth control message, but over time, history has certainly lumped them together into the same controversial category.

If President Roosevelt's letter to Davenport represented the highest societal embrace of eugenics via birth control, then the Better Babies Contest was its most grassroots-based movement. Popular throughout the midwestern and southern United States, the Better Babies Contest was spurred into existence by concern over high mortality rates for infants in America.[35] Embracing ideas from eugenics, the contests displayed the physical ideal child—well-fed to point of being chubby, clean, and white. The contests also spotlight the mothering of that child in order to encourage other women to raise their children in conjunction with the competition's guidelines. First presented at the 1908 Louisiana State Fair, Better Babies Contest pioneer, Mary DeGarmo, sought to legitimize a combination of heredity and nurturing as the Progressive ideal for child raising. Part of DeGarmo's social efficiency movement included the measurement-taking of and

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[33] Theodore Roosevelt, (January 3, 1913), http://eugenics.us/letter-by-theodore-roosevelt-to-charles-davenport-society-should-not-permit-degenerates-to-reproduce-their-kind/176.htm.

[34] Roosevelt, "Letter by Theodore Roosevelt to Charles Davenport: Society should not permit degenerates to reproduce their kind."

[35] "Better Babies Contests," Eugenics Archives, http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/eugenics/topics_fs.pl?theme=43.

awarding of prizes to babies by one Dr. Jacob Bodenheimer. This aspect caught the attention of the *Woman's Home Companion* magazine in 1913 and the publication co-sponsored contests throughout the country.[36] A Better Babies Contest organized in Iowa in 1920 by Mary T. Watts and Florence Brown Sherbon caught the attention of Charles Davenport who was working for the American Association for the Study and Prevention of Infant Mortality at the time.[37] Davenport issued new forms with which to evaluate babies in the competition and Watts and Sherbon changed the name of the competition to "Fitter Families for Future Firesides Competition" to reflect its optimistic eugenics goals. The winners of a Pensacola, Florida-area Better Babies Contest were described as "plump," "chubby," "prettiest," and "near to perfect."[38] The excellence of "mother's care" would not be complete with the acknowledgment of the equally important good looks of the mother.

The inclusion of the words "plump" and "chubby" are of particular note, here. To have a child who appeared so thoroughly well-fed was to present proof of proper, Progressive parenting. A plump baby represented the economic stability of a family, as did the clean, new clothes the child wore and its cheerful temperament. This celebration of the healthy baby and its well-off, well-planned family harkens back to Sanger's recollections of the families in the houses on the hill. The Better Babies Contest stood in stark contrast to the families Sanger aimed to help which were those suffering with a transmissible disease, where pregnancy endangered the life of the mother and whose parents would be given "knowledge which might prevent further conception of abnormal children."[39] The legitimacy of Sanger's desire to provide ailing social classes with the agency birth control provides may have been warped by those with more pointedly bigoted intentions, but Sanger provided signposts, even if unwittingly.

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[36] "Better Babies Contests," Eugenics Archives.
[37] "Better Babies Contests," Eugenics Archives.
[38] "The Better Babies' Contest," People and Events, *The Pensacola Journal*, page 5, October 14, 1913, https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/better+babies
[39] Sanger, *My Fight for Birth Control*, 204.

When Sanger examined the effects of immigration in America, she began by challenging the notion that "the mixture of stocks, the intermingling of ideas and aspirations" would result in a great American race.[40] "What is the basis for this hope that is so generally indulged in" Sanger asked of the American melting pot. After having listed several numerical statistics regarding the foreign immigrants living in America at the time of the 1910 census, Sanger posits they "have not been in the United States long enough to produce great families [and] the census of 1920 will probably tell a story of a greater and more serious problem than did all the last."[41] Sanger concludes with the statistics regarding the lack of literacy in the immigrant population and questions if they would lead to a stronger race or if the nation is doing anything productive to tackle this problem.[42] The illogical framing of immigrants of their own homogeneous race, one at odds with an "American race," is how a line can be drawn from her work toward family limitation and those who would view it through a white supremacy lens.

In her desire to spread her message of birth control to its greatest reaches possible, Sanger gave a speech before a women's meeting of the Ku Klux Klan in Silver Lake, New Jersey, in 1926.[43] Sanger wrote in her autobiography "to me any aroused group is a good group,"[44] yet unfortunately, the misperception remains the Sanger was at least sympathetic to the racist interests of the KKK. In truth, Sanger wrote of her wariness once confronted with the women's branch of the KKK in New Jersey. Calling it "one of the weirdest experiences I had in lecturing," Sanger describes her speech as delivered "in the most elementary of terms, as though I were trying to make children understand…I believed I had accomplished my purpose."[45] Additionally, Sanger's efforts to bring a birth control clinic to the Harlem area

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[40] Margaret Sanger, *Woman and the New Race* (New York: Brentano's Publishers, 1920), 30.
[41] Sanger, *Woman and the New Race, 30.*
[42] Sanger, *Woman and the New Race, 31.*
[43] Chesler, *Woman of Valor,* 320.
[44] Margaret Sanger, *An Autobiography* (New York: Norton Publishing, 1938), 366.
[45] Sanger, *An Autobiography*, 367.

of New York City, supported by the NAACP and its founder, W.E.B. DuBois, showcase her desire to work alongside African Americans. Sanger opened a clinic in Harlem in 1930 to help bring family planning awareness and contraceptives to those typically denied health and social services in their community.[46] Still, one meeting with the KKK cast a racist shadow over Sanger's mission which is still being clarified today. Pro-life and anti-Planned Parenthood propaganda can be found masquerading as racial awareness-raising in websites with names like "BlackGenocide.org" and "klannedparenthood.com" furthering the image of Sanger as an unrepentant racist.

Today, as the cultural pendulum swings back to heightened anti-immigrant sentiments, with many proponents flagrantly eschewing facts for xenophobia, it makes sense to reexamine the past. How do complex societal issues such as birth control in 1916 and immigration in 2016, for example, become warped into tools of divisiveness? Currents of nativism have always existed throughout United States history and proves to be a galvanizing topic. Whether it was Benjamin Franklin warning of the infiltration of "swarthy Germans", the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, Irish immigrants classified as "non-whites", or Donald Trump planting false suspicions regarding the citizenship of Barack Obama, The United States—or at least particular vocal groups—has always held an exclusionary attitude towards immigrants. Regardless of the times or veracity of the claims made, the same three concerns are voiced in American anti-immigrant movements: the question of an economic drain that accompanies immigrants, the physical threat immigrants pose to the safety of Americans, and the diminishing of white American cultural supremacy.

Like all Progressive activists, Margaret Sanger was in search of social reform that would solve America's troubles born out of immigration, industrialization, and urbanization. Offended by the abuses of the wealthy elite and concerned by problems stemming from the poor, middle-class activists championed the modern science and social advancements found in fin de siècle Western

[46] "The Truth About Margaret Sanger," Planned Parenthood Affiliates of New Jersey, https://web.archive.org/web/20100317231816/http://www.plannedparenthoodnj.org/library/topic/contraception/margaret_sanger.

Europe. Sanger was correct to believe that access to birth control information and contraception would improve the lives of the many impoverished people she encountered in U.S. cities and small towns. The error in her approach must be attributed to the privileges and prejudices of her own class experience and times in which she lived. She was raised, educated, and surrounded by people who believed in the supremacy of the white, middle-class, Protestant lifestyle. She took for granted the entitlements possessed by economically secure, middle-class families and reasoned that the poor simply needed family limitation to end their hardships. Reformers with less benevolent intentions misappropriated much of her mission in order to advocate clear-cut Americanism. As is the case with so much of what we examine in history, there is a complex and messy dual nature to Sanger's crusade that belongs wholly to its period. Today, we must be able to champion what was right while also boldly clarifying what we know to be wrong.