

Margaret Sanger:  
The Literature

Jacob Spencer

History 297  
April 13, 2018

## Abstract

The modern discussion surrounding birth control, contraception, and abortion did not arise out of nowhere. This discussion stems from the work of early feminists dating back to the progressive era. One such feminist is Margaret Sanger. Through a lifetime of activism and commitment, she earned her place amongst the stars of the feminist movement, yet her involvement in eugenics has earned her some ire. The literature surrounding such a controversial figure is understandably dense and numerous, but after thorough examination of the literature there is a noticeable, upwards trend in the number of publications based on her life in recent years. Through careful research, the reason for this trend appears to be the reawakening over the fight for birth control and abortion legislation that has taken place in the United States over this past decade.

In the modern world, access to birth control and abortions has come under attack in recent years, with a new wave of conservatism fueled by the “alt-right” and religious authorities seeking to eliminate all sense of progress made over the course of the Obama administration. Margaret Sanger is regarded as the founder of the modern birth control movement. The literature surrounding this fascinating individual is wide-ranging in the dates in which they were published, with publications ranging from the seventies to modern day. There are notably few publications in the eighties and nineties however, possibly due to the rise of neo-conservatism inspired by Ronald Reagan.

In September of 1879, Margaret Sanger was born in Corning, New York. She was the daughter of Michael Higgins and Anne Purcell, both Catholics whose parents were Irish immigrants. Despite their Irish background, her father was not a religious man, and this lack of religiosity resulted in the townspeople boycotting his work, as the town was fervently devoted to the religion. This led her family to live a life of poverty. In the poor county Sanger grew up in, there was little expectation of anything more than domestic service or early marriage. Despite having no education beyond eighth grade, Sanger was sent to the Claverack College and Hudson River Institute with the help of her family. She studied there for three years before returning to help support her family. However, her time spent at the Institute had already changed her life perspective, having learned proper dress and etiquette, as well as exploring her sexuality. After her return home, she witnessed the death of her mother first-hand and the new, overbearing nature of her father. After some time spent assisting the family Sanger understood that best way to pursue her dreams was to leave Corning. Sanger left her home with a better understanding of the inherent class divisions of the world and a distrust of the Catholic ideology. After leaving home, Sanger accepted the help of a former Claverack schoolmate and became a probationary

nurse. It was in this occupation that the young Margaret Higgins would meet the man who would give her the name she would keep for the rest of her life, William Sanger. During this time another phase of Sanger's radicalization occurred, due to her involvement in the Socialist Party. She witnessed the fight for women's suffrage and equal property rights and became further radicalized until she herself became involved in the movement as well. This involvement led Sanger into creating the first birth control clinic in America, leading to her founding the American Birth Control League in 1921, which is a predecessor to today's Planned Parenthood. It is from this intriguing life of activism and political prowess and savvy that many writers interested in gender, social, political, cultural, and women's history find themselves attracted to Margaret Sanger and her story.

The literature on this impressive individual is wide spanning, with publications occurring before her death, the seventies, and even modern day. The first publication came in 1955, by Lawrence Lader.<sup>1</sup> A journalist and major abortion rights activist for four decades, Lader lays out the totality of Sanger's life, ranging from her early life, to her adolescence, and finally to the height of her political activism and heroism. While this piece is incredibly informative and is extremely useful for anyone seeking a basic understanding of Margaret Sanger, it provides little analysis into the effects of her life on society, though it is important to note this book was published before her death. This lack of analysis does not come as a surprise as the political atmosphere of this era was deeply against any form of birth control, thus any literature that directly supported the accomplishments of Margaret Sanger would receive heavy criticism.

---

<sup>1</sup> Lawrence Lader, *The Margaret Sanger Story and the Fight for Birth Control* (New York: Doubleday, 1955).

After Sanger's death in September of 1966, there is a renewed interest in her life. This interest leads to an increasing number of works regarding Margaret Sanger. In total, there are six notable publications within the decade following her death. Beginning in 1970, David M. Kennedy published the work *Birth Control in America: The Career of Margaret Sanger*. Kennedy takes on a noticeably negative portrayal of Sanger, in which he focuses on how she could have better ran her birth control campaign, specifically he remarks on her disapproval of any allies that did not conform to her beliefs. As Kennedy states, "However hard others might work for the cause, she nevertheless insisted on the major part of the glory. She spurned any organization she could not dominate; she relentlessly maneuvered to displace her rivals within the movement. And for her enemies outside the movement, however useful she knew them to be for her ultimate purposes, she had irreconcilable scorn."<sup>2</sup> Here he argues that Sanger did not advocate for women's rights simply because she believed in the cause, but also because he believed she wanted control over others and the credibility that came with it, thus highlighting her own hypocrisy. In one of Kennedy's startling chapters, he analyzes the conservative side of the birth control movement, that which was reinforced by eugenics. In this, he states how Sanger was attracted to birth control not simply because it gave women more choice over their own lives, but also as a means of controlling the population. This is seen in Kennedy's assertion, "To her depiction of birth control as a device to alleviate the suffering of the poor, she now added the persuasive argument that contraception could be effective means of social control."<sup>3</sup> Here, Kennedy introduces a new perspective of Sanger that would be built upon in later texts, that

---

<sup>2</sup> David M. Kennedy, *Birth Control in America: the Career of Margaret Sanger* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1970), 106-7.

<sup>3</sup> Kennedy, *Birth Control in America*, 113-14.

Sanger, like most progressivists, was not a reformer in every aspect of her life, despite her involvement in one of the most progressive movements of the era.

The next major book published in the seventies is by Linda Gordon, a historian with roots in social policy issues. Her work, published in 1976, *Woman's Body, Woman's Right: A Social History of Birth Control in America* uses a chronological approach to examine the social history of birth control in America, which is linked directly to Sanger<sup>4</sup>. In this work, she divides the movement into three stages, one where contraception is directly linked to morality, a birth control phase, and finally “planned parenthood” phase. While this text it does little to add to the understanding of her as an individual, it is heavily referenced in later texts as a supplementary resource for understanding birth control politics of the progressive era as well as Margaret Sanger. Two similar works, both published in 1978 were Sheila Rothman’s *Woman's Proper Place: A History of Changing Ideals and Practices, 1870 to the Present*<sup>5</sup> and James Reed’s *From Private Vice to Public Virtue*.<sup>6</sup> Rothman’s work, influenced by David Kennedy, takes an ideological approach to the analysis of the birth control movement. Drawing from Kennedy’s ideas, Rothman analyses the period that Sanger lived in using social policies from the era. This work, unlike some pieces on social history is largely historical in its analysis, leading it to be referenced in many works following its publication. Similarly, Reed’s piece looks at the ideology of the birth control movement. Also published in 1978 was *Margaret Sanger: A Biography of the*

---

<sup>4</sup> Linda Gordon, *Woman's body, Woman's Right: A Social History of Birth Control in America* (New York: Penguin Books, 1976).

<sup>5</sup> Sheila M. Rothman, *Woman's Proper Place: A History of Changing Ideals and Practices, 1870 to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 1978).

<sup>6</sup> James Reed, *From Private Vice to Public Virtue: The Birth Control Movement and American Society since 1830* (New York: Basic Books, 1978).

*Champion of Birth Control*.<sup>7</sup> This book, written by Madeline Gray, is an amazing look into the life of Margaret Sanger. It features extensive notes which draw from primary sources including letters and interviews with Sanger. Overall, the decade of the seventies included six major pieces about the birth control movement in America. This large increase in publication since 1955 was likely due to the shifting narrative of this decade, as youth participated more in sexual liberation and a fascination with the foundations of the birth control movement was at an all-time high.

The next major publication on Margaret Sanger occurs nearly twelve years later in 1992, written by Ellen Chesler, a public policy creator, lecturer, and director of the Eleanor Roosevelt Institute on Women and Public Life. This dense piece, *Woman of Valor: Margaret Sanger and the Birth Control Movement in America* takes into account new knowledge from the time as opposed to those published in the seventies.<sup>8</sup> One major development this piece expands upon is the great hypocrisy in Sanger's life. One such example is how Margaret Sanger began her life as a known socialist yet ended her life as a staunch Republican. Additionally, unlike earlier publications Chesler portrays Sanger in a new light. Unlike older publications that depict Sanger as a hero, like Lader, or a hypocrite, like Kennedy, Chesler calls Sanger a woman of valor. In doing so she does not comment upon the ideals Sanger champions or judge her for them either. Rather she acknowledges how difficult it must have been for a woman of this era to stand up for what she believed in and elicit change upon the world that has lasted to this day. This book, unlike other before it, features a lengthy afterword in which more recent court cases involving the use of contraceptives and abortion are mentioned, like *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*. By

---

<sup>7</sup> Madeline Gray, *Margaret Sanger: A Biography of the Champion of Birth Control* (New York: Richard Marek Publishers, 1978).

<sup>8</sup> Ellen Chesler, *Woman of Valor: Margaret Sanger and the Birth Control Movement in America* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2007).

involving the legal history behind birth control, a new perspective is added to the literature on Margaret Sanger. One interesting thing to note about this book is that it was published during the height of conservatism in the United States. This book was published in 1992, at which time America was under the George H. W. Bush presidency directly after Ronald Reagan's term. In this time, major rollbacks in terms of woman's access to reproductive health care and contraception were being called for by a Republican president. These threats to women's rights and general political atmosphere are likely the reason behind the slow rate of publication during this decade.

Starting back up in 2003, a new book titled *Margaret Sanger: Her Life in Words* by Miriam Reed was published. This work expertly revives the scholarship surrounding American birth control and Margaret Sanger. This work provides an easy to read biography of the life of Margaret Sanger as well as analysis about the field of birth control. Despite this, the book seemingly does not go in-depth enough with its analysis and would benefit greatly from including the turn of the century terms, like consent, and interpreting these in the context of the era of Margaret Sanger. This book also makes an argument that the eugenics that Sanger supported was not race-based. Rather, it was simply her being pragmatic in her search for allies. Baker argues that calling her racist is a tactic by pro-life groups to alienate her.

A common theme in all publications on Margaret Sanger is her involvement in eugenics. Eugenics is the science of controlling a population through controlled breeding, and this pseudo-science was popular during the Progressive era. Sanger considered herself a proponent of eugenics, yet the literature on her has interpreted this in different ways. In Kennedy's piece, for example, she is depicted as someone who agreed with the idea of controlling the population's breeding habits, and for this reason she attempted to popularize birth control amongst the poor.

In a recent work by Baker, *Margaret Sanger: A Life of Passion*,<sup>9</sup> Sanger's involvement in eugenics is one of coincidence, in that she simply was searching for allies and was an intelligent leader, not a racist. Either way, her involvement in eugenics remains a consistently debated topic amongst scholars. Another common theme amongst these works is the development of Sanger's portrayal throughout the years. In the very first work, she is regarded as a hero and the original champion of American birth control. After this work by Lader, this perception changes in the seventies. Her involvement in eugenics led scholars to form a more negative perception of Sanger, that being she was a hypocrite and a racist. Recent publications like those published in the last decade, however, have begun to contradict this notion. In both Chesler and Baker's books, Sanger is made out to be a courageous and heroic woman, disregarding any notions of racism attributed to her. These books regard Sanger as a powerful individual who forever changed birth control politics in the United States.

Like many other early feminists like Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Jane Addams, Margaret Sanger too found her way into history for her contributions. Her lifelong commitment to keeping the choices a woman makes about her body her own and the legislation that sprung from that commitment are exactly why she remains such a popular figure amongst scholars to this day. The literature on Margaret Sanger is wide ranging in its dates of publication with the first piece being written in 1955 spanning to 2011. Additionally, the backgrounds which the authors come from too is diverse, with representation from academics, historians, to journalists. Considering the current atmosphere of American politics, it seems likely there will be another publication soon,

---

<sup>9</sup> Jean H Baker, *Margaret Sanger: A Life of Passion* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2011).

and hopefully this new perspective will shed new light on the topic of birth control and access to abortion.

## Bibliography

- Baker, Jean H. *Margaret Sanger: A Life of Passion*. New York: Hill and Wang, 2011.
- Chesler, Ellen. *Woman of Valor: Margaret Sanger and the Birth Control Movement in America*. New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2007.
- Gordon, Linda. *The Moral Property of Women: A History of Birth Control Politics in America*. 3rd ed. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002.
- Gordon, Linda. *Woman's body, Woman's Right: A Social History of Birth Control in America*. New York: Grossman Publishers, 1976.
- Gray, Madeline. *Margaret Sanger: A Biography of the Champion of Birth Control*. New York: Richard Marek Publishers, 1978.
- Kennedy, David M. *Birth Control in America: the Career of Margaret Sanger*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1970.
- Lader, Lawrence. *The Margaret Sanger Story and the Fight for Birth Control*. New York: Doubleday, 1955.
- Reed, James. *From Private Vice to Public Virtue: The Birth Control Movement and American Society since 1830*. New York: Basic Books, 1978.
- Reed, Miriam. *Margaret Sanger: Her Life in Her Words*. Fort Lee, NJ: Barricade Books, 2003.
- Rothman, Sheila M. *Woman's Proper Place: A History of Changing Ideals and Practices, 1870 to the Present*. New York: Basic Books, 1978.

Margaret Higgins Sanger (born Margaret Louise Higgins, September 14, 1879 – September 6, 1966, also known as Margaret Sanger Slee) was an American birth control activist, sex educator, writer, and nurse. Sanger popularized the term "birth control", opened the first birth control clinic in the United States, and established organizations that evolved into the Planned Parenthood Federation of America. Margaret Higgins Sanger was born Margaret Higgins on September 14, 1884, in Corning, New York. Her father was a fun-loving freethinker. Her mother was a devoted Roman Catholic who had eleven children before dying of tuberculosis, a deadly disease that attacks the lungs and bones. Margaret was greatly influenced by her father's political views in support of women's suffrage (the right to vote) and tax reform (improvements), although these and other beliefs caused the family to be seen as radical (extreme) in the eyes of their neighbors. After graduating from the local high school and Margaret Sanger was born Margaret Louise Higgins on September 14, 1879, in Corning, New York. Margaret was the sixth of 11 children born to Michael Hennessey Higgins and Anne Purcell Higgins. Michael Higgins was an outspoken radical who taught Margaret to stand up for what she believed in and made sure she always spoke her mind. At the age of 50, after 18 pregnancies, 11 live births and seven miscarriages, Anne Higgins died from tuberculosis. Nine days later, police closed down the clinic and confiscated its literature, condoms and diaphragms. Sanger, Byrne and their staff were arrested and charged with "maintaining a public nuisance." Sanger and Byrne were convicted; while the former spent 30 days in prison, the latter went on a hunger strike for the cause.