

MARGARET SANGER AND THE BIRTH CONTROL MOVEMENT

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

As documented in chapter 6, Upton Sinclair aimed his arrows at the “meat trust,” and his rhetoric attacking the greed of consolidated capital was very much in the Progressive tradition. But *The Jungle* found its moral center in the family, in the need to stop modern business from destroying families. The concern for home was central to Progressives, and the impetus for reform came especially from women, traditionally seen as defenders of the family. While the phrase “the personal is political” did not arise until half a century after the Progressive Era, it might well have described those years. Educated women such as Jane Addams, Florence Kelly, and Margaret Sanger—who all came of age in an era that still shunted women into the home and away from leadership roles in the public sphere—publicized women’s and children’s issues; raised public awareness of matters such as day care, playgrounds, and child labor; and turned the nation’s attention to topics where public policy and home life met.

The use of contraceptive devices for family planning has become so common that it is difficult to imagine a time when it was shrouded in secrecy. Yet in 1914, when Margaret Sanger began to speak and write openly in behalf of birth control, she put herself in jeopardy of prosecution under the so-called Comstock Law of 1873, which prohibited mailing, importing, or selling materials of an “obscene, lewd, or lascivious” nature. Both she and her husband, William Sanger, were indicted under the law for distributing birth control information.

The irony is that family planning had been practiced in America for a century. (Indeed, ancient Greek and Roman doctors had prescribed a variety of contraceptive methods.) Couples limited their offspring by simply abstaining from sexual contact and by practicing *coitus interruptus*. Equally important, a variety of contraceptive devices, including forerunners of modern condoms, diaphragms, and douches, had been available since at least the early nineteenth century. Not only were such items discretely advertised in popular magazines, but retailers of contraceptive paraphernalia mailed printed circulars advertising their wares to couples whose wedding announcements appeared in the newspapers.



Image 8.1 Margaret Sanger, 1917

Margaret Sanger photographed the year she was convicted of violating the New York state law for opening a birth control clinic.

Source: New York: Bain News Service, 1917. Courtesy Library of Congress.

One bit of indirect evidence that the use of such devices was widespread is to be found in declining birthrates: In 1800, American families averaged slightly over 7 children; under 6 by 1825; 5.4 in 1850; 4.24 by 1880; and 3.54 in 1900. The overall fertility rate declined by half in a century, with most urban middle-class families having no more than two children.

The declining birthrate was not simply a matter of new technology changing peoples' lives. Couples' willingness to use contraceptive devices or to otherwise limit the size of their families had social, economic, and cultural origins. As Americans left the countryside for the city, and as the old artisan system of manufacture declined, large numbers of children usually became a hindrance rather than an aid to a family's economic well-being; in a modern urban setting, children entered a family more as mouths to feed than as hands to labor. A cash-based economy (in which people exchanged goods and labor for money) rather than a subsistence one (where work produced items for home consumption) made

raising a child very costly and made the "return" on parents' "investment" in their children very slow. Class mattered too. Children still could be an asset in working class households, where they might enter the mills and mines at a young age, but white-collar and professional families, whose numbers were rising rapidly, focused on educating their children into the middle class, an expensive proposition in terms of time and money.

Other important social changes encouraged the use of birth control. The turn of the century witnessed a new emphasis on sexuality as an expression of passion, love, and intimacy. Contraception liberated these feelings from the fear of unwanted pregnancy. This was especially true for women, who had always borne the burden of child rearing. Birth control was part of a larger transformation of women's position in society. Important female voices were raised during the nineteenth and early twentieth century demanding new roles for women—roles apart from the home-centered ones of wife and mother, roles

that placed women in the practical worlds of politics, business, and reform. Needless to say, the average of seven children per family in 1800, had it continued, would have made education and careers impossible for most women.

Even though contraception had been practiced for a century in America when Margaret Sanger began to champion the cause in the years just before and after World War I, her crusade generated great controversy. Part of the reason was that she was so open in her advocacy. The genteel Victorian code still held sway sufficiently that sex remained a subject most people preferred not to talk about in public. Even couples who practiced birth control—a criminal act, after all—were silent. Birth control advocates' open discussion of sex made them harbingers of the freer, less morally rigid styles of living and speaking that we associate with the 1920s.

But it was more than a matter of style alone. At the beginning of her crusade, Sanger allied herself with a variety of radical thinkers—feminists, socialists, and labor militants—and it was out of the creative, avant-garde ferment of New York City in the prewar era that she forged her ideas. Earlier feminists in the late nineteenth century often opposed the use of contraception, believing that birth control would make women more vulnerable to sexual aggression. In this way of thinking, abstinence and self-control became a form of sexual liberation because women rejected male desires.

So birth control was not merely a technique. Its distribution grew out of changing ideas about sex, the family, and the role of women. By the early twentieth century, birth control was linked to radical political ideologies, and Margaret Sanger believed it could contribute to the liberation of women, especially working-class women. She did not argue for the open distribution of contraceptive information and devices simply to expand the realm of personal freedom; she believed that limitation of family size was the key to freeing women from the physical dangers of serial childbearing and to giving them the opportunity to become active outside the home. Contraceptive devices and literature were illegal in most states for years after Sanger began her crusade. They remained a delicate subject until birth control pills became widely available in the 1960s; the Catholic Church prohibits their use today (feminists point out that the burden of contraception still falls on women). Nonetheless Sanger succeeded in opening the *public* debate that led to eventual legalization. Although she was forced to flee the country in 1914 for distributing literature about family limitation, she returned a few years later and founded the National Birth Control League, an organization supported by doctors, social workers, and other professionals from the mainstream of American life. In twenty years, with over 200 offices, it changed its name to Planned Parenthood.

There were ironies on the road to victory. Those who believed contraception to be against the laws of God and nature were marginalized and mostly dismissed as prudes or fanatics. But Sanger's morally earnest campaign to uplift the downtrodden through family planning moved onto a side rail of history, too. The birth control campaign succeeded when it became a movement by and for the middle class; family planning grew acceptable not because of some new passion for the plight of the poor but because it was indispensable to middle-class families balancing growing expenses, careers for both parents, sexual pleasure within marriage, the allures of consumer life, and the difficulties of raising children in urban or suburban nuclear families.

The debate over birth control takes us into a variety of important issues. These include the right of individuals to privacy versus the right of a community to regulate moral behavior, the ethnic make-up of the American people, the ability of women to control their own physical destinies by limiting family size, and the feeling of many people that opportunities for advancement were shrinking and that small families were one way to keep the American dream alive.

As you read these documents, ask yourself about the connections between personal and social issues. Was birth control merely a matter of individual choice, or was it about power, wealth, opportunity, and similar matters? How did gender, ethnicity, and social class figure in the debate?

INTRODUCTION TO DOCUMENT 1

Margaret Sanger burst on the scene in 1914 with the publication of the first issue of *The Woman Rebel*. The tabloid described itself as "A Monthly Paper of Militant Thought." Testimony to the editor's radical political commitments was the reprinting of the Preamble to the Charter of the Industrial Workers of the World:

The working class and the employing class have nothing in common. . . . Between these two classes a struggle must go on until the workers of the world organize as a class, take possession of the earth and the machinery of production, and abolish the wage system. . . . It is the historic mission of the working class to do away with capitalism.

Making contraceptive devices available, then, was part of a much larger project of radical social change, embracing the liberation of women and of the working class. In the very first issue, Sanger explained herself in "Why the Woman Rebel?" Later on the same page, in an article entitled "The Prevention of Conception," Sanger made it clear that she would defy the laws against distributing birth control information.

1. FROM THE WOMAN REBEL (1914)

MARGARET SANGER

"WHY THE WOMAN REBEL?"

Because I believe that deep down in woman's nature lies slumbering the spirit of revolt.

Because I believe that woman is enslaved by the world machine, by sex conventions, by motherhood and its present necessary child-rearing, by wage

THE WOMAN REBEL

NO GODS NO MASTERS

VOL. I.

MARCH 1914

NO. 1.

THE AIM

This paper will not be the champion of any "ism."

All rebel women are invited to contribute to its columns.

The majority of papers usually adjust themselves to the ideas of their readers but the WOMAN REBEL will obstinately refuse to be adjusted.

The aim of this paper will be to stimulate working women to think for themselves and to build up a conscious fighting character.

An early feature will be a series of articles written by the editor for girls from fourteen to eighteen years of age. In this present chaos of sex atmosphere it is difficult for the girl of this uncertain age to know just what to do or really what constitutes clean living without prudishness. All this slushy talk about white slavery, the man painted and described as a hideous vulture pouncing down upon the young, pure and innocent girl, drugging her through the medium of grape juice and lemonade and then dragging her off to his foul den for other men equally as vicious to feed and fatten on her enforced slavery — surely this picture is enough to sicken and disgust every thinking woman and man, who has lived even a few years past the adolescent age. Could any more repulsive and foul conception of sex be given to adolescent girls as a preparation for life than this picture that is being perpetuated by the stupidly ignorant in the name of "sex education"?

If it were possible to get the truth from girls who work in prostitution to-day, I believe most of them would tell you that the first sex experience

was with a sweetheart or through the desire for a sweetheart or something impelling within themselves, the nature of which they knew not, neither could they control. Society does not forgive this act when it is based upon the natural impulses and feelings of a young girl. It prefers the other story of the grape juice procurer which makes it easy to shift the blame from its own shoulders, to cast the stone and to evade the unpleasant facts that it alone is responsible for. It sheds sympathetic tears over white slavery, holds the often mythical procurer up as a target, while in reality it is supported by the misery it engenders.

If, as reported, there are approximately 35,000 women working as prostitutes in New York City alone, is it not sane to conclude that some force, some living, powerful, social force is at play to compel these women to work at a trade which involves police persecution, social ostracism and the constant danger of exposure to venereal diseases. From my own knowledge of adolescent girls and from sincere expressions of women working as prostitutes inspired by mutual understanding and confidence I claim that the first sexual act of these so-called wayward girls is partly given, partly desired yet reluctantly so because of the fear of the consequences together with the dread of lost respect of the man. These fears interfere with mutuality of expression — the man becomes conscious of the responsibility of the act and often refuses to see her again, sometimes leaving the town and usually denouncing her as having been with "other fel-

slavery, by middle-class morality, by customs, laws and superstitions.

Because I believe that woman's freedom depends upon awakening that spirit of revolt within her against these things which enslave her.

Because I believe that these things which enslave woman must be fought openly, fearlessly, consciously.

Because I believe she must consciously disturb and destroy and be fearless in its accomplishment.

Because I believe in freedom, created through individual action.

Because I believe in the offspring of the immigrant, the great majority of whom make up the unorganized working class to-day. . . .

Because I believe that through the efforts of the industrial revolution will woman's freedom emerge.

Because I believe that not until wage slavery is abolished can either woman's or man's freedom be fully attained. . . .

"THE AIM"

This paper will not be the champion of any "ism."

All women are invited to contribute to its columns.

The majority of papers usually adjust themselves to the ideas of their readers but the WOMAN REBEL will obstinately refuse to be adjusted.

The aim of this paper will be to stimulate working women to think for themselves and to build up a conscious fighting character.

. . . It will be the aim of the WOMAN REBEL to advocate the prevention of contraception and to impart such knowledge in the columns of this paper.

Other subjects, including the slavery through motherhood; through things, the home, public opinion and so forth, will be dealt with.

It is also the aim of this paper to circulate among those women who work in prostitution; to voice their wrongs; to expose the police persecution which hovers over them and to give free expression to their thoughts, hopes and opinions.

And at all times the WOMAN REBEL will strenuously advocate economic emancipation.¹

Image 8.2 From *The Woman Rebel* (1914)

The inaugural issue of Sanger's radical newspaper aimed squarely at the laws and conditions that subordinated women and often confined them to poverty. In 1914 Sanger was arrested for promoting contraceptives in the paper, a violation of the Comstock Law.

Source: National Archives and Records Administration.

INTRODUCTION TO DOCUMENT 2

The second issue of *The Woman Rebel* announced that the United States postmaster banned the newspaper under section 211 of the U.S. Criminal Code, whose violation carried a maximum five-year prison sentence or a \$5,000 fine. Copies of that issue and subsequent ones were confiscated. Anthony Comstock was the man responsible for the law and its enforcement. Comstock had a long career during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a crusader against vice. He founded the Society for the Suppression of Vice in 1873, which drew financial backing from some of America's wealthiest men, and he was appointed special agent of the U.S. Post Office Department. In an interview with Mary Alden Hopkins, who wrote a series of articles on the birth control controversy for *Harper's Weekly* in 1915, Comstock justified the laws against publicizing contraception.

2. ANTHONY COMSTOCK'S VIEWS ON BIRTH CONTROL (1915)

The three great crime-breeders of today are intemperance, gambling, and evil reading. The devil is sowing his seed for his future harvest. There is no foe so much to be dreaded as that which perverts the imagination, sears the conscience, hardens the heart, and damns the soul.

If you allow the devil to decorate the Chamber of Imagery in your heart with licentious and sensual things, you will find that he has practically thrown a noose about your neck and will forever after exert himself to draw you away from the "Lamb of God which taketh away sins of the world." You have practically put rope on memory's bell and placed the other end of the rope in the devil's hands, and, though you may will out your mind, the memory of some vile story or picture that you may have looked upon, be assured that even in your most solitary moments the

devil will ring memory's bell and call up the hateful thing to turn your thoughts away from God and undermine all aspirations for holy things.

... My experience leads me to the conviction that once these matters enter through the eye and ear into the chamber of imagery in the heart of the child, nothing but the grace of God can ever erase or blot it out. ...

When a man and woman marry they are responsible for their children. You can't reform a family in any of these superficial ways. You have to go deep down into their minds and souls. The prevention of conception would work the greatest demoralization. God has set certain natural barriers. If you turn loose the passions and break down the fear you bring worse disaster than the war. It would debase sacred things, break down the health of women and disseminate a greater curse than the plagues and diseases of Europe.²

INTRODUCTION TO DOCUMENT 3

Just before she was to be arrested for distributing contraceptive information, Sanger fled America for England, where she spent her time among European radicals, reformers, and family-planning professionals. But a few months later, her husband, William Sanger, was arrested by Anthony Comstock in New York City, then imprisoned for purveying lewd materials (he gave a copy of

his wife's little book, *Family Limitation*, to one of Comstock's undercover agents). Margaret Sanger returned to New York, where she knew she would face trial. She was eventually acquitted, but in the meantime, she lectured, wrote essays, and opened the nation's first family-planning clinic.

Document 3 comes from the introduction to a book Sanger edited called *The Case for Birth Control* (1917). In this brief essay, she summarized much of the argument she had been promulgating since returning to the United States. While her commitment to poor and working women is still evident here, her style had changed considerably since *The Woman Rebel*. Sanger was in the midst of concentrating all of her efforts on birth control, distancing herself from the radical positions she had staked out earlier. Perhaps she thought this was the practical way to achieve her most important goal. Or maybe the experience of exile had tempered her ardor. Certainly, Sanger now spent more time among wealthy women who helped finance both her trial defense and the birth control movement. Note how the tone of this essay differs from that of *The Woman Rebel*—radical passion gives way to fact-laden analysis in the name of practical reform, very much the progressive style.



Image 8.3 The Sanger Clinic, New York City, 1916
Sanger opened this birth control clinic in Brooklyn—the first of its kind in the United States—on October 16, 1916.
Ten days later it was shut down.

Source: Courtesy Library of Congress.

3. FROM THE CASE FOR BIRTH CONTROL (1917)

MARGARET SANGER

Before I attempt to refute the arguments against birth control, I should like to tell you something of the conditions I met with as a trained nurse and of the experience that convinced me of its necessity and led me to jeopardize my liberty in order to place this information in the hands of the women who need it.

My first clear impression of life was that large families and poverty went hand in hand. I was born and brought up in a glass factory town in the western part of New York State. I was one of eleven children—so I had some personal experience of the struggles and hardships a large family endures.

When I was seventeen years old my mother died from overwork and the strain of too frequent child bearing. I was left to care for the younger children and share the burdens of all. When I was old enough I entered a hospital to take up the profession of nursing.

In the hospital I found that seventy-five percent of the diseases of men and women are the result of ignorance of their sex functions. I found that every department of life was open to investigation and discussion except that shaded valley of sex. . . .

So great was the ignorance of the women and girls I met concerning their own bodies that I decided to specialize in woman's diseases and took up gynecological and obstetrical nursing.

A few years of this work brought me to a shocking discovery—that knowledge of the methods of controlling birth was accessible to the women of wealth while the working women were deliberately kept in ignorance of this knowledge!

I found that the women of the working class were as anxious to obtain this knowledge as their sisters of wealth, but that they were told that there are laws on the statute books against imparting it to them. And the medical profession was most religious in obeying these laws when the patient was a poor woman.

For the laws against imparting this knowledge force these women into the hands of the filthiest

midwives and the quack abortionists—unless they bear unwanted children—with the consequence that the deaths from abortions are almost wholly among the working-class women.

No other country in the world has so large a number of abortions nor so large a number of deaths of women resulting therefrom as the United States of America. Our law makers close their virtuous eyes. A most conservative estimate is that there are 250,000 abortions performed in this country every year.

How often have I stood at the bedside of a woman in childbirth and seen the tears flowing in gladness and heard the sigh of "Thank God" when told that her child was born dead! What can man know of the fear and dread of unwanted pregnancy? What can man know of the agony of carrying beneath one's heart a little life which tells the mother every instant that it cannot survive? Even were it born alive the chances are that it would perish within a year.

Do you know that three hundred thousand babies under one year of age die in the United States every year from poverty and neglect, while six hundred thousand parents remain in ignorance of how to prevent three hundred thousand more babies from coming into the world the next year to die of poverty and neglect?

I found from records concerning women of the underworld that eighty-five percent of them come from parents averaging nine living children. And that fifty percent of these are mentally defective.

We know, too, that among mentally defective parents the birth rate is four times as great as that of the normal parent. Is this not cause for alarm? Is it not time for our physicians, social workers and scientists to face this array of facts and stop quibbling about woman's morality? I say this because it is these same people who raise objection to birth control on the ground that it *may* cause women to be immoral.

Solicitude for woman's morals has ever been the cloak Authority has worn in its age-long conspiracy to keep woman in bondage. . . .

Is woman's health not to be considered? Is she to remain a producing machine? Is she to have time to think, to study, to care for herself? Man cannot travel to his goal alone. And until woman has knowledge to control birth she cannot get the time to think and develop. Until she has the time to think, neither the suffrage question nor the social question nor the labor question will interest her, and she will remain the drudge that she is and her husband the slave that he

is just as long as they continue to supply the market with cheap labor. . . .

Am I to be classed as immoral because I advocate small families for the working class while Mr. [Theodore] Roosevelt can go up and down the length of the land shouting and urging these women to have large families and is neither arrested nor molested but considered by all society as highly moral? . . .³

INTRODUCTION TO DOCUMENT 4

As a Jesuit priest, Michael P. Dowling articulated a position familiar to the Catholic Church and its followers. Document 4 is excerpted from his pamphlet *Race-Suicide* (1915), which couched arguments against birth control in the language of duty, self-sacrifice, religious obligation, and family values. Whereas Sanger argued for the right of women and the poor to make individual decisions about contraception, Dowling appealed to the good of the community, which he asserted took precedence over personal needs or desires. Note that the phrase "race-suicide" in this era was highly charged but not clearly defined. Usually it did not imply the entire human race but "civilized" people and, by implication, the white race. For Dowling, "race-suicide" was more specifically a religious failure to spread the faith with large Christian families.

4. FROM RACE-SUICIDE (1915)

MICHAEL P. DOWLING

... At three different epochs in human history, the Creator made known His will. Just as to the first man, He said: "Increase and multiply," so a thousand years later to the second father of humanity, to Noe [Noah], and to his sons, He spoke a pregnant word, and it bore the same burden, "Increase and multiply and fill the earth"; for so we read in Genesis. Still another thousand years rolled on and the same blessing was repeated, for the word of the Lord came to Abraham: "Fear not; I am thy protector and thy reward exceeding great." The patriarch answered: "What wilt Thou give me; behold, I have no child." Then God

brought him forth out of the tent, saying: "Look up to the heavens and number the stars, if thou canst; so shall thy seed be." The reward of Abraham's faith is paternity.

And after that, from Abraham to the last of the prophets, text on text and example after example, confirm the doctrine that children are the blessing of marriage, no matter what the new gospel of selfishness may proclaim. In the Old Testament curse alternates with blessing: "He who is blessed shall be a father, the cursed shall stand alone." If it is said to the just, "Thy wife shall be like a fruitful vine," to the

wicked man and the sinner comes the sentence: "In a single generation his name will be blotted out." . . .

God said: "Increase and multiply"; man says: "Let us fear to increase and multiply; the earth might become too narrow; the fewer there are to share the good things of life the more there will be for each. . . ."

. . . Malthus, in his book entitled "Principles of Population As It Affects the Future Improvement of Society," gave the impetus to the movement. He held that the population of the earth increases more rapidly than the means of subsistence, because population advances almost in a geometrical proportion, as two, four, eight, sixteen, while the fertility of the land increases approximately only in an arithmetical proportion, as one, two, three, four, five and so on. Hence, the continually increasing population must eventually exceed the capacity of the earth to supply food. . . .

But the facts are against the theory that the earth is inadequate to support the growth of population. The United States, even with the wasteful methods of farming now in vogue, could feed hundreds of millions. Under different conditions even little Ireland would be capable of supporting three times its present population. Brazil, Peru, Mexico have room for teeming millions within their borders. Portions of the dark continent of Africa were once densely peopled; so was Asia Minor; and they might become garden spots of the earth once more. There is still plenty of elbow room on the globe. . . .

God makes no mistakes, and for every soul He creates and infuses into a mortal body, He furnishes what is needful for its well-being. History may be reviewed in vain for an instance of any considerable country wherein poverty and want can be fairly traced to the increase of the number of mouths beyond the power of the accompanying hands to fill them. In most cases they can, more properly, be attributed to unjust laws, misgovernment, destructive warfare, decadent commerce, a disregard of the Divine law, vice and crime. . . .

Can it be possible that wealth is the natural enemy of infancy and childhood? And is the instinct of reproduction weaker in the privileged classes, the spirit of self-denial more pronounced? Is it not rather that large families are looked upon with disdain as a plebeian institution, entailing too much sacrifice, debarring the mother from many pleasures she is unwilling to forgo? Is it not because every new birth requires the expense account to be overhauled, several chapters of travel to be blotted out, transfers to be made to the side of the nurse and the governess, balls and parties and receptions to be given up? . . .

We must get back to Christian principles and mold Christian lives, till the humblest sees that life is not all for pleasure, self-ease and enjoyment, that duty and conscience must play a great part and march in the vanguard of true progress.⁴

INTRODUCTION TO DOCUMENT 5

In its series of articles by Mary Alden Hopkins on contraception in 1915, *Harper's Weekly* published the thoughts of several doctors. While we cannot assume that the following statements represented the opinions of the entire medical profession, they do give a sense of the arguments offered by physicians. The only doctor who spoke unequivocally in favor of contraception to *Harper's* (the first interview here) was Dutch, not American, and a woman, not a man.

5. PHYSICIANS' STATEMENTS ABOUT BIRTH CONTROL (1915)

DR. ALETTA JACOBS

Very often the mothers in this hospital did not want the babies that were born to them. They were actually glad when the babies were born dead. No, they were not bad women—just ordinary, every-day women. Sometimes it was because they already had enough babies, sometimes because the previous baby was still so little, sometimes because they were so very poor, sometimes for other reasons. But whether the reason was a good one or a bad one, the fact remained that the baby was not desired. Now it seemed to me that a baby should not be a punishment. If a woman does not want a child it is better both for her and for the child that she should not have one.

Moreover, I noticed that many of the sickly children born in the hospital were children that had been born against their mothers' wishes. The mothers' state of mind during pregnancy had affected the baby. Besides this there were many children with very bad heredity—mental sickness and physical sickness in the parents, which would very probably appear in the offspring. These children should never have been born.

Sometimes a mother would say to me. "No wonder the baby is puny and sick. Why, when this child was conceived my husband was as drunk as could be." For reasons like these I decided that mothers should be taught how to prevent conception.

Children should be born not oftener than once in three years. For the first year the mother should devote herself to caring for the child. The second year she should have to get back her vitality and strength. The third year she may again become pregnant.⁵

DR. HOWARD A. KELLY

Let me enunciate these fundamental principles which must control my judgment:

1. That the medical profession must continually deal with the moral aspects of a case, and today our great loss is the unwillingness of some doctors to have anything to do with morals, because they have had no moral training and have done no moral thinking. . . .

2. That in times of great decadence we are not to try to accommodate ourselves to decadent conditions by temporizing expedients, but by the highest moral remedies and by righteousness—at whatever cost. Practically I find that the people who came to me having used various mechanical means of preventing conception, have lost something in their married life which ought to have been more precious to them than life itself. All meddling with the sexual relation to secure facultative sterility degrades the wife to the level of a prostitute.

Therefore there is no right or decent way of controlling births but by total abstinence. . . .⁶

DR. JOHN W. WILLIAMS

I make it a rule to refuse to discuss the question with perfectly healthy, normal persons. On the other hand, if I find that a wife is steadily losing ground as the result of rapidly recurring pregnancies, I send for the husband and say that in my opinion as a medical man it is highly advisable that his wife should not have another child for a specified length of time. In that event I advise him as to the most efficacious method of preventing conception; as I consider it more intelligent to prevent a breakdown than to treat it after it has occurred.

I give the same advice after certain serious obstetrical complications, and in women who are suffering from tuberculosis, certain forms of heart disease and other serious chronic disease, in which I know by experience that another pregnancy will subject the patient to serious danger. In such cases I consider it more conservative to give such advice than to be obliged to perform a therapeutic abortion after pregnancy has occurred.

Finally, in the presence of certain chronic diseases, which to my mind will always complicate the occurrence of pregnancy, and in which therapeutic abortion is necessary to relieve immediate danger to the patient's life, I hold that it is justifiable to render the patient sterile by operative means. . . .

In other words, I do not believe that the physician is justified in giving advice as to the prevention of

conception solely for the convenience of his patients, but should limit it entirely to those cases which present a definite medical indication for the temporary or permanent avoidance of pregnancy. To my mind any other course practically places the physician in the same class as the professional abortionist.⁷

DR. R.C. BRANNON

I beg to take issue with you, in regard to your propaganda for the control of births, as being subversive to religion, morals, and health of both men and women. This, when you come to sift the matter down to its final analysis, is what is shortening the lives of the human race, making weaklings in mind and body the children of strong men, and wrecking the nerves and bodies of women who ought to be the proud and happy mothers of a dozen healthy children.

The prevention of large families has caused an increase in insanity, tuberculosis, Bright's disease,

diabetes and cancer, and I am willing to submit the proposition to the judgment of three of the greatest gynecologists in the United States. I have stepped in the breach and used my influence to curtail the bad practice of limiting the size of the family, as my experience as a physician of twenty years' practise has proven to my mind that it is the most hurtful, and wicked sin that was ever indulged in since the world was created. It is a swift and sure road to the grave.

Man was put here to multiply and replenish the earth. How terrible has been the punishment of many a rich man I have known—perhaps poor and struggling in early life, who decided he would escape the responsibility of rearing a large family, with the result when a little past life's prime his wife died of a cancer, and what enjoyment did either of them derive from his fortune of more than a half million dollars; filthy lucre begotten by miserly habits, that rightly should have been expended unselfishly in bringing up a large family that would have blessed the earth.⁸

INTRODUCTION TO DOCUMENT 6

By the end of the decade, Sanger's arguments had fully taken on the Progressive Era style—fact laden, scientific, and analytical. The following debate occurred in New York City in 1920. Note that there is no apparent fear of arrest here; the issue of birth control had become part of open public discourse. Sanger shared the stage with Winter Russell, a prominent New York City attorney.

6. DEBATE BETWEEN MARGARET SANGER AND WINTER RUSSELL (1920)

WINTER RUSSELL

... I am a member of the bar of the State of New York. I trust that I have due regard and respect for the statutes, the constitution, and the laws of this great city, state and nation. But I hold them as the veriest trash when they come up against the laws of Nature. The laws of Nature cannot be revised. They cannot be repealed. There is no power in this whole universe that can change these laws, and you have to deal with that.

That means you can't get pleasure without paying for it. Nature is inexorable in bringing about her retribution. It does not need any balance book. You can never embezzle. You can't cheat. You can't get away from it. ...

You must pay at last for your own debt. Those are the laws. Now we recognize it in physics. Energy cannot be annihilated. Birth control says "yes." You shall pay the price. You can annihilate that energy and

drink from the cup of pleasure, but you don't take the responsibility—the duty and the care. . . . It is along the lines of the people who are alchemists, who think they can turn the base metals into gold. It is an age-long dream. It is a belief that has been held from the beginning of time. That thing cannot be done. That is the law of life—of God—that you have to pay. . . .

MARGARET SANGER

. . . The only weapon that women have and the most uncivilized weapon that they have to use if they will not submit to having children every year or every year and a half, the weapon they use is abortion. We know how detrimental abortion is to the physical side as well as to the psychic side of the woman's life, and yet there are in this nation, because of these generalities and opinions that are here before us, that are stopping the tide of progress, we have more than one million women with abortions performed on them each year. . . . We speak of the rights of the unborn. I say that it is time to speak of those who are already born. . . .

We find in the South that where children come according to Nature, every year and one-half, that as soon as they are able, they are shuffled and hustled on in to take the place and compete with their father in the factories. That is the place that society has for the children of the poor. . . . In some of the factories of Lowell and Fall River, Mass., it was found that of the children who work and toil there, under ten years of age, that 85% of them come from families of eight—their mothers have given birth to eight children—and we find in the South very much the same thing, excepting a higher percentage of 90 to 93% of the children there.

That is not the only thing. We have a condition not only as these that I have related, but we have a condition again that is more disastrous to the race than child labor or infant mortality, and that is the transmission of venereal disease to the race that is to come. . . . We know, too, that out of this terrible scourge of venereal disease that we have 90% of the insanity in this country, due to syphilis. Anyone who is dealing with fundamentals would know that these people should use means to protect themselves against having children. They should absolutely in due regard to themselves, to their children and to the race, not allow a child to be born while that disease is running riot in the system, and then we have that terrible consequence which is insanity. . . .

We have here 400,000 feeble-minded people in the United States, that any authority on this subject would say to you, "Not one of them should have been born." They never should have been born and sometimes these parents are perfectly normal, and yet this taint has gone through the blood and has left this perfectly normal, physical person, who arrives at the adult age with all its physical functions, and yet it has the mentality of a child eight years of age. The feeble-minded man or woman is of no use to itself or society, and it would be better if we were living in a real civilization that they should not have been born. Only 40,000 of this 400,000 are entered in institutions, and the others are living among us, producing and reproducing their progeny and providing abundant material and opportunity for the continuance of charities and other institutions for ages and generations more to come.

We found also in one institution—a so-called reformatory where they take the girls of the underworld—prostitutes—in Geneva, Ill., they find that 50% of these girls coming into the underworld—the prostitutes—was of this cause, that she belonged to the feeble-minded, and again we find that 89% of these came from large families. . . .

Also our child labor—we make laws in Washington against child labor, hoping we will wipe that out of existence. For fifty years they have been trying to wipe child labor off the books in the United States, but they have not succeeded and they will never succeed until they establish birth control clinics in those districts where these women are, where they put in birth control clinics, like they have in Holland—in every industrial section in the United States where women can come to trained nurses and physicians and get from them scientific information whereby they may control birth. . . .

Now, Mr. Russell has said some things that are very interesting to me, He tells us that we cannot have pleasure without pain. It is a man who is speaking. (*Laughter and applause.*) It is very peculiar that Nature only works on the one side of the human family when it comes to that law. She applies all the pain to the woman. It is absurd—a perfectly absurd argument in the face of rational intelligence (*applause*) to talk about marriage being for one purpose. . . .

WINTER RUSSELL

May I say at the outset that I did not say we could not have pleasure without pain. I said we could not have

pleasure without paying for it and the man has to pay. (*Laughter.*) . . . Mrs. Sanger sees poverty, she sees misery and she sees unwanted children. To be sure, there are many thousands of these homes where, sad to say, the children are unwanted, but they have made this devout prayer to God, I believe, for children, and they have gotten them. They have gotten what I believe to be the greatest wealth and treasure of the Kingdom of Heaven that there is on the face of the earth, and when they get that, they have to pay for it. They have to pay and take the responsibility. . . .

I am going to give you a picture of the block on which I was born and brought up, that I have watched

for 30 years. Thirty years ago I began to watch the block. There were 17 families, 34 people at the start; 34 people who were successful, they believe, in this little town of 3,500 people. It had a fine high school, a State Normal School—one of the foremost in the State. It had a Boys' School known nationally, if not internationally, and they were 34 people in 17 homes. . . .

Out of . . . 17 families, 9 are extinct. Nine are dead and gone. They have passed away. Is that race suicide? Out of the 8 who remain, out of the 34 people, out of these 8 families, there are 26 grandchildren. My father's family produced 12 of the 26. Out of 33 of the families, there are 14 grandchildren if you except

BIRTH CONTROL REVIEW

Edited by Margaret Sanger

TWENTY CENTS A COPY

NOVEMBER, 1923

TWO DOLLARS A YEAR



Image 8.4 American Birth Control League, *Birth Control Review* (1923)

Founded in 1921, the American Birth Control League promoted the right of women to control their own fertility.

Source: Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College.

Official Organ of
THE AMERICAN BIRTH CONTROL LEAGUE, INC., 104 FIFTH AVENUE, NEW YORK CITY

mine. I think I am an exception. There is race suicide. Don't tell me that that is one exceptional block. I can duplicate that block on every street in that town except one blessed community, Little Canada. They were not Americans. They were vulgar. They were poor. They want big families, but from these poor families in Little Canada, there have come the French Canadians. From them come doctors, lawyers, and teachers, and they are inheriting the town. There is race suicide.

I can duplicate that block in practically every American city in this country. I can duplicate that block in every apartment house on the west side. . . . America is dying today—the America that we know.

MARGARET SANGER

. . . I am speaking for the millions of women who are crushed with over child-bearing, whose lives are

broken and who have become drudges in the family today. I am speaking for the mothers and the individual here and there does not concern me in the least. They may be an exception, but I know there are millions and millions of women who are married, who are just as self-controlled as anyone Mr. Russell can show us, who are living in a terror of pregnancy, and they have men who are just as good to them. Men are not all beasts. . . .

Birth control will free the mother from the trap of pregnancy. It will save the child from that procession of coffins, as well as from the toil of mill and factory.

Birth control will make parenthood a voluntary function instead of an accident as it is today. When motherhood and childhood is free, we then can go hand in hand with man, to remake the world, for the glorification as well as the emancipation of the human race. (Applause.) . . .⁹

INTRODUCTION TO DOCUMENT 7

In 1922, Sanger published *The Pivot of Civilization*. Here she elaborated on some of the arguments from her debate with Winter Russell, especially the idea that "overfecundity" of the "degenerate classes" was responsible for poverty and crime. Words like "feeble-minded," "moron," and "imbecile" had the imprimatur of science in the early twentieth century, though their meanings were far from clear. Sanger also used phrases like "human waste," "human weeds," the "unfit," and "dead weight" to describe the poor and the disabled; she argued that charity only encouraged overbreeding; she advocated that the state administer IQ tests to identify "degenerates" and prevent them from breeding uncontrollably. While eugenicists in the 1920s called for stopping particular populations from reproducing, especially immigrants, African Americans, and the poor, Sanger was less clear about precisely whom the feeble-minded were.

7. FROM THE PIVOT OF CIVILIZATION (1922)

MARGARET SANGER

. . . There is but one practical and feasible program in handling the great problem of the feeble-minded. That is, as the best authorities are agreed, to prevent the birth of those who would transmit imbecility to their descendants. Feeble-mindedness as investigations and

statistics from every country indicate is invariably associated with an abnormally high rate of fertility. Modern conditions of civilization, as we are continually being reminded, furnish the most favorable breeding-ground for the mental defective, the moron, the imbecile. . . .

Modern studies indicate that insanity, epilepsy, criminality, prostitution, pauperism, and mental defect, are all organically bound up together and that the least intelligent and the thoroughly degenerate classes in every community are the most prolific. Feeble-mindedness in one generation becomes pauperism or insanity in the next. There is every indication that feeble-mindedness in its protean forms is on the increase, that it has leaped the barriers, and that there is truly, as some of the scientific eugenicists have pointed out, a feeble-minded peril to future generations—unless the feeble-minded are prevented from reproducing their kind. To meet this emergency is the immediate and peremptory duty of every State and of all communities. . . .

Here is a case showing the astonishing ability to "increase and multiply," organically bound up with delinquency and defect of various types:

The parents of a feeble-minded girl, twenty years of age, who was committed to the Kansas State Industrial Farm on a vagrancy charge, lived in a thickly populated Negro district which was reported by the police to be headquarters for the criminal element of the surrounding state. . . . The mother married at fourteen, and her first child was born at fifteen. In rapid succession she gave birth to sixteen live-born children and had one miscarriage. The first child, a girl, married but separated from her husband. . . . The fourth, fifth and sixth, all girls, died in infancy or early childhood. The seventh, a girl, remarried after the death of her husband, from whom she had been separated. The eighth, a boy, who early in life began to exhibit criminal tendencies, was in prison for highway robbery and burglary. The ninth, a girl, normal mentally, was in quarantine at the Kansas State Industrial Farm at the time this study was made; she had lived with a man as his common-law wife, and had also been arrested several times for soliciting. The tenth, a boy, was involved in several delinquencies when young and was sent to the detention house but did not remain there long. The eleventh, a boy . . . at the age of seventeen was sentenced to the penitentiary for twenty years on a charge of first-degree robbery; after serving a portion of his time he was paroled, and later was shot and killed in a fight. The twelfth, a boy, was at fifteen years of age implicated in a murder and sent to the industrial school, but escaped from there on a bicycle which

he had stolen; at eighteen he was shot and killed by a woman. The thirteenth child, feeble-minded, is the girl of the study. The fourteenth, a boy, was considered by the police to be the best member of the family; his mother reported him to be much slower mentally than his sister just mentioned; he had been arrested several times. Once he was held in the detention home and once sent to the State Industrial school; at other times, he was placed on probation. The fifteenth, a girl sixteen years old, has for a long time had a bad reputation. Subsequent to the commitment of her sister to the Kansas State Industrial Farm, she was arrested on a charge of vagrancy, found to be syphilitic, and quarantined in a state other than Kansas. At the time of her arrest, she stated that prostitution was her occupation. . . . [quoted from the U.S. Public Health Service: *Psychiatric Studies of Delinquents*. Reprint no. 598, pp. 64–65.]

We do not object to feeble-mindedness simply because it leads to immorality and criminality. . . . We object because both are burdens and dangers to the intelligence of the community. As a matter of fact, there is sufficient evidence to lead us to believe that the so-called "borderline cases" are a greater menace than the out-and-out "defective delinquents" who can be supervised, controlled and prevented from procreating their kind. The advent of the Binet-Simon and similar psychological tests indicates that the mental defective who is glib and plausible, bright looking and attractive, but with a mental vision of seven, eight or nine years, may not merely lower the whole level of intelligence in a school or in a society, but may be encouraged by church and state to increase and multiply until he dominates and gives the prevailing "color"—culturally speaking—to an entire community.

The advocate of Birth Control realizes as well as all intelligent thinkers the dangers of interfering with personal liberty. Our whole philosophy is, in fact, based upon the fundamental assumption that man is a self-conscious, self-governing creature, that he should not be treated as a domestic animal; that he must be left free, at least within certain wide limits, to follow his own wishes in the matter of mating and in procreation of children. Nor do we believe that the community could or should send to the lethal chamber the defective progeny resulting from irresponsible and unintelligent breeding.

But modern society, which has respected the personal liberty of the individual only in regard to the unrestricted and irresponsible bringing into the world of filth and poverty an overcrowding procession of infants fore-doomed to death or hereditary disease, is now confronted with the problem of protecting itself and its future generations against the inevitable consequences of this long-practised policy of *laissez-faire*.

The emergency problem of segregation and sterilization must be faced immediately. Every feeble-minded girl or woman of the hereditary type, especially of the moron class, should be segregated during the reproductive period. Otherwise, she is almost certain to bear imbecile children, who in turn are just as certain to breed other defectives. The male defectives are no less dangerous. Segregation carried out for one or two generations would give us only partial control of the problem. Moreover, when we realize that each feeble-minded person is a potential source of an endless progeny of defect, we prefer the policy of immediate sterilization, of making sure that parenthood is absolutely prohibited to the feeble-minded. . . .

This degeneration has already begun. Eugenists demonstrate that two-thirds of our manhood of military age are physically too unfit to shoulder a rifle; that the feeble-minded and syphilitic, the irresponsible and the defective breed unhindered; that

women are driven into factories and shops on day-shift and night-shift; that children, frail carriers of the torch of life, are put to work at an early age; that society at large is breeding an ever increasing army of under-sized, stunted and dehumanized slaves; that the vicious circle of mental and physical defect delinquency and beggary is encouraged, by the unseeing and unthinking sentimentality of our age, to populate asylum, hospital and prison. . . .

The great principle of Birth Control offers the means whereby the individual may adapt himself to and even control the forces of environment and heredity. Entirely apart from its Malthusian aspect or that of the population question, Birth Control must be recognized, as the Neo-Malthusians pointed out long ago, not "merely as the key of the social position," and the only possible and practical method of human generation, but the very pivot of civilization. Birth Control which has been criticized as negative and destructive, is really the greatest and most truly eugenic method, and its adoption as part of the program of Eugenics would immediately give a concrete and realistic power to that science. As a matter of fact, Birth Control has been accepted by the most clear thinking and far seeing of the Eugenists themselves as the most constructive and necessary of the means to racial health. . . .¹⁰

POSTSCRIPT

Laws against transmitting contraceptive information and devices were gradually repealed, overturned, or ignored. But the general acceptance of birth control was accompanied by a shift away from its radical beginnings. Slowly, the movement became professionalized. Clinics proliferated, run by middle-class professionals, including doctors, nurses, social workers, and public health administrators. With bureaucratization and professionalization from the 1920s onward came a distinctly elitist shift in direction. When the early opponents of contraception spoke their fears of "race-suicide," they usually meant that "inferior" peoples—immigrants, the poor, and blacks—would out-reproduce old-stock, respectable white people. The solution, many now suggested, was eugenics, the "science" of human engineering. Legalized contraceptives could limit the "breeding" of "racially inferior" peoples. Looking back, Sanger wrote in her *Autobiography*, "The eugenists wanted to shift the birth-control emphasis from less children for the poor to more children for the rich. We went back of that and sought first to stop the multiplication of the unfit."¹¹ Sanger had become less concerned with empowering the poor to resist their oppression, more with stopping them from producing so many "unfit" babies. She never adopted the nativist and xenophobic assumptions of many eugenicists, and she never threw her lot with the racists. Yet Sanger's fascination with social engineering—with the "scientific" improvement of the race—in an era rising ethnic

hatred worldwide was, to say the least, disturbing. By the 1930s, the American eugenics movement was of keen interest to the German political party known as the Nazis, led by Adolph Hitler.

QUESTIONS

1. How and why did the birth control movement change over time?
2. Do you see similarities between the effort to advance birth control and the reforms of the meatpacking industry, as presented in the prior chapter? Would you deem birth control a "progressive" measure as advocated by Sanger in the 1910s and 1920s?
3. Did Michael Dowling and Winter Russell use the same arguments to oppose Sanger's position? Do you see distinctions between their positions and values?
4. Note that Sanger, Comstock, Russell, and Dowling all argue that their position will best protect the public. Given this shared emphasis, how did they come to such differing conclusions about public policy?
5. Summarize Sanger's position in *The Pivot of Civilization*. How had her arguments changed by 1922?
6. How does the birth control debate resonate with contemporary discussions on abortion?

ADDITIONAL READING

For the birth control movement, the best general history of sex and ideology is Estelle Friedman and John D'Emilio, *Intimate Matters* (1988). The literature on birth control is extensive; see Ellen Chesler, *Woman of Valor: Margaret Sanger and the Birth Control Movement in America* (1992); Jean H. Baker, *Margaret Sanger: A Life of Passion* (2012); Jonathan Eig, *The Birth of the Pill: How Four Crusaders Reinvented Sex and Launched a Revolution* (2014); David M. Kennedy, *Birth Control in America* (1970); Andrea Tone, *Devices and Desires* (2001); and Linda Gordon, *The Moral Property of Women* (2007). Related works include Elaine Tyler May, *Great Expectations: Marriage and Divorce in Post Victorian America* (1980); Janet Farrell Brodie, *Contraception and Abortion in Nineteenth Century America* (1994); and Mary Odem, *Delinquent Daughters* (1996). On the larger context of motherhood, see Linda Gordon, *Pitied But Not Entitled: Single Mothers and the History of Welfare* (1994). On the advent of feminism in this era see Nancy F. Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (1987), and Rosalind Rosenberg, *Beyond Separate Spheres: Intellectual Roots of Modern Feminism* (1982).

ENDNOTES

1. *The Woman Rebel*, v.1 n.1 (March 1914), page 1. Records of the Post Office, Record Group 28, National Archives.
2. *Harper's Weekly* v.60, May 22, 1915, pp. 489-490.
3. Margaret Sanger, *The Case for Birth Control* (New York, 1917), pp. 5-7, 8-11.
4. Michael P. Dowling, *Race-Suicide* (New York, 1915), pp. 1-13.
5. Mary Alden Hopkins, "What Doctors Say of Birth Control," *Harper's Weekly*, v.61, October 16, 1915, p. 380.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*, pp. 380-382.
9. *Debate between Margaret Sanger and Winter Russell* (New York: The Fine Arts Guild, 1920).
10. Margaret Sanger, *The Pivot of Civilization* (New York, 1922), pp. 80-86, 91, 100-102, 175, 189.
11. Margaret Sanger, *An Autobiography* (New York: Norton, 1938), pp. 374-375.