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## Letters to the Editor

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### *The Demonization of Margaret Sanger*

Steven Mosher's May 5 editorial-page piece "The Repackaging of Margaret Sanger" is an unfair vituperation of a woman who believed first and foremost that every woman, rich or poor, is entitled to decide when and how many children she wants to bring into the world. For her courage and compassion she was recently named by Life magazine as one of the top 25 American heroes of all time, along with Harriet Tubman and Abraham Lincoln.

Margaret Sanger was born poor and saw her mother die young after 11 births and seven miscarriages. As a young nurse working on Manhattan's Lower East Side, Sanger witnessed many other women die from too many pregnancies and from botched, self-inflicted abortions. She understood that birth control information was the key to saving the lives of thousands of women and mothers.

Margaret Sanger believed, unequivocally, in voluntary family planning, not forced sterilization. While the sterilization of the severely mentally handicapped was popular among many intellectual circles for a while, by the time the Birth Control Review had an issue entitled "Sterilization Number," Margaret Sanger had not been affiliated with the publication for four years. And when she spoke of the "Negro project," hers was the language of W.E.B. DuBois, with whom she worked side by side to correct the enormous mortality and morbidity rates among rural black women, infants and children. This is racism? This is bigotry? On the contrary, Margaret Sanger's only cause was to help women, regardless of race or nationality, lead productive, full lives with the healthy, happy children they wanted. The tools she gave women to do this was knowledge about birth control.

Together with Martin Luther King, W.E.B. DuBois, Eleanor Roosevelt, Shidzue Kato in Japan, Lady Dhanvanthi Rama Rau in India among many, many others, Margaret Sanger strove to make a reality her most powerful dictum of all, one which ironically, but not surprisingly, Mr. Mosher ignores: "Let every child be a wanted child."

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Mr. Mosher's hysterical attack on Margaret Sanger was seemingly prompted by the fact that a documentary on Chinese orphanages was to receive Planned Parenthood's Margaret Sanger Award. He tells us he approved of the documentary (in which he happens to appear), but not of Margaret Sanger or of Planned Parenthood. None of this comes as a surprise if one knows that Mr. Mosher has long been an opponent of what he has called "the abuses of human rights undertaken in the name of population control"—specifically abortion—or that Human Life International, the organization of which he is currently vice president, is an extremely conservative Roman Catholic anti-abortion group. In fact, Mr. Mosher's demonization of Margaret Sanger is a path well-trod by many anti-choice groups seeking a way to undermine the moral legitimacy of Planned Parenthood, population control and the pro-choice movement.

It surprised me that Mr. Mosher actually needed to be "helped with the research for this article" as the blurb at the end of this polemic noted. Why would he need help finding the old chestnut used with unrelenting regularity by anti-abortion groups about Sanger calling for the [in Mr. Mosher's word] "extirpation" of "weeds . . . overrunning the human garden." In fact, Sanger used the human garden analogy quite often, as in a 1923 arti-

cle published in the New York Tribune, in which she wrote:

"Birth Control aims to introduce into the creation of the next generation of American citizens those sound and scientific principles observed by the gardener and the agriculturalist. We must cultivate the human garden by proper spacing, by improving the quality of our precious crop of children by methods of intensive cultivation and not by the production of mere number. We are not, I must repeat, trying to force this doctrine upon the American public. Every day thousands of poor mothers are begging us for help, fully conscious that their sacred duty to the children they have already brought into the world demands that they shall not assume further parental responsibilities which they cannot fulfill."

As for the persistent charges of Sanger's racism, a close reading of the textual evidence reveals that Sanger did not rationalize her support for birth control on racist grounds, that she never advocated genocidal policies aimed at racial, ethnic or religious groups, and that she, in fact, believed access to birth control would benefit, not eliminate minority populations. For example, in a July 9, 1942, letter to Albert D. Lasker, Sanger wrote: "I think it is magnificent that we are in on the ground floor, helping Negroes to control their birth rate, to reduce their high infant and maternal death rate, to maintain better standards of health and living for those already born." Similarly, in a 1944 article entitled "Population—Everybody's Business," published in Tomorrow, she asserted that "we must protect tomorrow's Chinese baby and Hindu baby, English and Russian baby, Puerto Rican, Negro and white American babies who will stand side by side to heal the scars of this conflict and to bring a promise of a better future. . . . Never before in history have we realized how important it is to all of us that each of these children be born strong and with a prospect of growing into useful and decent adulthood."

If your readers would like to know only what many anti-choice groups believe about Margaret Sanger, then Mr. Mosher's piece will surely satisfy them. But if they are seeking an accurate account of what Margaret Sanger really thought and said, I suggest they take a look at her writings (both published and unpublished), all of which are now on microfilm and available at many libraries. I certainly do not challenge Mr. Mosher's right to hold any view he wants on the issue of abortion or population control, but as an historian I take issue with his gross misuse of historical sources to support those views. Mr. Mosher and his "researcher" might want to be more careful when using historical materials.

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