

PART II

By Angela Franz

Margaret Sanger & PPFA:

THE EUGENICS CONNECTION

In Part I of this series, I examined Margaret Sanger's personal acceptance of the eugenic creed (See *NRL News*, 9/30/97, page 10.) In this article I will look at her organizational connections with eugenics, her thoughts on charity, and her advocacy of forced sterilization.

Organizational Connections to the Eugenics Movement

Sanger worked with the American Eugenics Society (AES), among other eugenicists, to promote her agenda. The following demonstrate the extent of her collusion with eugenicists.

- Of the clergymen, scientists, and physicians listed on the **National Council** of her American Birth Control League in the 1920s, at least 23 of the 50 people were involved at a prominent level in eugenics, either as members of the Board of Directors of the AES or by otherwise publicly supporting her eugenics agenda.

- The first issue of *The Birth Control Review* (Feb. 1917, p. 15) contains a "Working Bibliography on Birth Control" which lists half a dozen eugenics books as recommended reading.

- Sanger was a **dues-paying member of the AES** (see the Library of Congress Manuscript Division, Margaret Sanger Papers Collection, letter, AES to Margaret Sanger (MS), 9/29/63).

- The AES officially **endorsed** her group (Ibid., note, 5/32).

- The AES testified for birth control bills which Sanger's **National Committee on Federal Legislation for Birth Control** (a forerunner of Planned Parenthood) supported, and it pledged its complete support of her efforts (Ibid., AES Board Meeting minutes, 1/9/35). Of its testimony, Sanger said once, "I very much want your organization represented at our hearing, for certainly the eugenic aspect must be brought out . . ." (Ibid., MS to Leon Whitney, 1/29/31).

- Sanger participated in AES **conferences**, including giving a luncheon speech on her trip to India in 1936 (Ibid., Ellsworth Huntington to MS, 4/11/36).

- Sanger and her birth control clinic's main doctor, Dr. Hannah Stone, wrote several times on eugenic topics for *Eugenics*, the journal of the AES (see, for example, "Symposium on Genius and Birth Control," featuring both Stone and Sanger, *Eugenics* 2, no. 3 [March 1929], pp. 22-24; and Stone, "The Birth Control Clinic of Today and Tomorrow," *Eugenics* 2, no. 5 [May 1929], pp. 9-11).

- Sanger friend and colleague **Dorothy Brush** was on the board of the Brush Foundation, specifically founded for the purpose of pursuing eugenic goals (see Dorothy Brush, "The Brush Foundation (Eugenical Institutions 5)," *Eugenics*, 2, no. 2 [Feb. 1929], pp. 17-19). The Brush Foundation funded Sanger and her groups often (see, for example, Library of Congress Collection, MS to Mrs. Charles Brush, Jr., 6/27/28), and it provided the start-up money for the International Planned Parenthood Federation (Ellen Chesler, *Woman of Valor: Margaret Sanger and the Birth Control Movement in America* [New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992], p. 410).

Sanger on the Burden and Cruelty of Charity

A recurrent theme in Sanger's and in all eugenicists' writings was the perceived burden which the "unfit" put on them, the self-proclaimed "fit." They deeply resented the fertility of the poor and felt that they had to pay for the poor's reproductive "mistakes."

In a chapter in her book *The Pivot of Civilization* entitled "The Cruelty of Charity," Sanger accuses charities of perpetuating the very problems that they try to solve by **enabling the poor to reproduce more**.

- "Organized charity is itself the symptom of a malignant social disease. Those vast, complex, interrelated organizations aiming

to control and to diminish the spread of misery and destitution and all the menacing evils that spring out of this sinisterly fertile soil, are the surest sign that our civilization has bred, is breeding and is perpetuating constantly increasing numbers of defectives, delinquents and dependents. My criticism, therefore, is not directed at the 'failure' of philanthropy, but rather at its success" (*The Pivot of Civilization* [New York: Brentano's, 1922], p. 108).

Sanger's strongest **objection** is that she is expected to help these people:

- "Such philanthropy . . . encourages the healthier and more normal sections of the world to shoulder the burden of unthinking and indiscriminate fecundity of others; which brings with it, as I think the reader must agree, a dead weight of human waste. Instead of decreasing and aiming to eliminate the stocks that are most detrimental to the future of the race and the world, it tends to render them to a menacing degree dominant" (Ibid., pp. 116-117).

Those who would help the poor and unfortunate through charity suffer from excessive **sentimentalism**:

- "...[L]et us not close our eyes to one of the greatest dangers inherent in such warm-hearted humanitarianism. For it is a curious but neglected fact that the very types which in all kindness should be obliterated from the human stock, have been permitted to reproduce themselves and to perpetuate their group, succored by the policy of indiscriminate charity of warm hearts uncontrolled by cool heads" ("The Need of Birth Control in America," *Birth Control: Facts and Responsibilities*, ed. Adolf Meyer [Baltimore: Williams and Wilkins Co., 1925], p. 15).

Sanger on Forced Sterilization

Instead of charity, Sanger believed that one of the only ways to control the alleged over-reproduction of the "unfit" was to

sterilize them, through incentives or through force. She was not alone. In 1927, in the *Buck v. Bell* case, the U.S. Supreme Court determined that the state of Virginia's law allowing the forced sterilization of the inhabitants of its state mental institutions was constitutional. Representing the seven other justices who assented, Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote in the majority opinion, "Three generations of imbeciles are enough." A friend of Holmes, British socialist and jurist Professor Harold Laski, wrote him jovially after the decision, "My love to you both. Get that stomach better, please. Sterilise all the unfit, among whom I include all fundamentalists." From 1907 through 1963, over 63,000 sterilizations in over 30 states occurred in accordance with state eugenic sterilization laws (see *Eugenic Sterilization*, ed. Jonas Robitscher, [Springfield, Ill.: Charles C. Thomas Publisher, 1973]).

According to Sanger, **who** should be sterilized:

- "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 foredoomed 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. . . . 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..." (*Pivot of Civilization*, pp. 101-102).

Her **only objection** to sterilization was its limited efficacy:

- "While I personally believe in the sterilization of the feeble-minded, the insane and the syphilitic [sic], I have not been able to discover that these measures are more than superficial deterrents when applied to the constantly glowing stream of the unfit. They are excellent means of meeting a certain phase of the situation, but I believe in regard to

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these, as in regard to other eugenic means, that they do not go to the bottom of the matter" ("Birth Control and Racial Betterment," *Birth Control Review* [Feb. 1919], p. 12).

The role of the federal government:

- "It now remains for the United States government to set a sensible example to the world by offering a bonus or a yearly pension to all obviously unfit parents who allow themselves to be sterilized by harmless and scientific means. In this way the moron and the diseased would have no posterity to inherit their unhappy condition. . . . [A]sk the government to *first* take off the burdens of the insane and feeble-minded from your backs. Sterilization for these is the remedy" ("The Function of Sterilization," *Birth Control Review* [Oct. 1926], p. 299).

- She called for Congress to set up a "Parliament of Population," among whose tasks would include "to apply a stern and rigid policy of sterilization and segregation to

that grade of population whose progeny is already tainted, or whose inheritance is such that objectionable traits may be transmitted to offspring . . . [and] to give certain dysgenic groups in our population their choice of segregation or sterilization" ("A Plan for Peace," *Birth Control Review* [April 1932], p. 107).

Unfortunately, as America's history of sterilization proves, many of Sanger's proposals were carried out. For example, one group which is a frequent ally of Planned Parenthood, the Association for Voluntary Surgical Contraception, was founded in the 1940s as Birthright, Inc. (*not* to be confused with the present-day, pro-life Birthright) and had as its mission the promotion of eugenic sterilization laws in the South. Now it works to promote sterilization abroad and is richly funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development, Office of Population.

Part III of this series will address the errors in Planned Parenthood's defense of Sanger and examine its own history of connections with the eugenicists.

PART III

By Angela Franz

Margaret Sanger & PFFA:

THE EUGENICS CONNECTION

Parts I and II of this series have described and given examples of Margaret Sanger's eugenist outlook, her organizational ties to the eugenics movement, and her beliefs on charity and forced sterilization. This third and final article will focus on her legacy as it is perpetuated by the Planned Parenthood Federation of America (PPFA).

Planned Parenthood and Eugenics

Planned Parenthood marks its founding from the establishment in 1916 of the nation's first birth control clinic, even though the name "Planned Parenthood" was not given to the organization until 1942. The fact that Planned Parenthood owns up to having been in existence throughout Sanger's birth control career means that all of her eugenist statements, made as president of the American Birth Control League (ABCL) and of her other organizations, can be attributed to the president of an early form of PPFA. The organization has gone through many forms and name changes—the American Birth Control League, the Clinical Research Bureau, the National Committee for Federal Legislation for Birth Control, the Birth Control Federation of America—but Sanger made eugenist statements when she was actively running each of them.

As I noted in Part I, the eugenist Brush Foundation put up the seed money for the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF). Other eugenist connections include:

- The first office of the IPPF in London was given free of charge by the Eugenics Education Society, the foremost eugenics group in England.
- Dr. Alan Guttmacher, president of PPFA after Sanger, was a former vice president of the American Eugenics Society.
- PPFA and IPPF have always actively worked with groups that were also founded by eugenists, including the Association for Voluntary Surgical Contraception

(which, as I noted in Part II, was originally founded to promote eugenist sterilization laws in the South).

- Guttmacher once admitted, "As a physician in private practice I have done occasional sterilizations on adolescent females brought to me by their parents for sterilization because of serious mental retardation" (*Eugenics Sterilization* ed. Jonas Robitscher, [Springfield, Ill.: Charles C. Thomas, 1973], p. 54).

Planned Parenthood's Allegations and Some Responses

PPFA claims, despite the overwhelming evidence to the contrary, some of which I have presented in these articles, that "Margaret Sanger was not a . . . eugenist." I will now examine its allegations and respond point by point, omitting claims that I have already answered. (I am responding to a lengthy article, "The Truth About Margaret Sanger," on the PPFA web page.)

- First, the web page quotes the following from an early issue of the *Birth Control Review (BCR)*: "Eugenists imply or insist that a woman's first duty is to the state; we contend that her duty to herself is her first duty to the state. We maintain that a woman possessing an adequate knowledge of her reproductive functions is the best judge of the time and conditions under which her child should be brought into the world. We further maintain that it is her right, regardless of all other considerations, to determine whether she shall bear children or not, and how many children she shall bear if she chooses to become a mother" ("Birth Control and Racial Betterment," *BCR* [Feb. 1919], p. 11).

Sounds "pro-choice," right? Unfortunately, as many women have found out too late, the "choices" that Planned Parenthood tends to promote are "planned" (by them) but have little to do with parenthood. So too the only "choice" Sanger promoted was the one she determined best

for you. The above quote comes in the context of an article on eugenics, the title of which ("Birth Control and Racial Betterment") PPFA neglects to mention, and the whole article makes clear that only the "fit" woman is deemed worthy of making reproductive decisions. As was quoted in Parts I and II, Sanger advocated forced sterilization for the "unfit" just a few paragraphs after the quote given above.

The quote PPFA pulls is in the context of eugenists encouraging "fit" women to bear more children (the sentences immediately before read: "The eugenist also believes that a woman should bear as many healthy children as possible as a duty to the state. We hold that the world is already overpopulated" [Ibid.]), something which Sanger put in the class of "positive eugenics" and always repudiated (see Part I). As far as "negative eugenics" (the elimination of reproduction of the "unfit") was concerned, she was an enthusiastic supporter.

- Secondly, PPFA says that the phrase "To create a race of thoroughbreds" was used as a banner on the cover of the November 1921 issue of the *Birth Control Review*. PPFA claims that the remark, originally attributed to Dr. Edward A. Kempf, was pulled by Sanger from a paragraph by Dr. Kempf concerning the need for maternal and infant care clinics and "how environment may improve human excellence," and she used it with this in mind.

PPFA's interpretation gets points for originality but demerits for untruthfulness. Again they neglect the larger context of her writings. Sanger consistently used metaphors of plant and animal culture and applied them to humans; see, for example, Part I and the following: "Nature eliminates the weeds, but we turn them into parasites and allow them to reproduce. Could any business maintain itself with the burden of such an 'overhead'? Could any breeder of livestock conduct his enterprise on such a basis? I do not think so" ("Is Race Suicide Probable?" *Collier's*, 76

[8/15/25], p. 25). In addition, Sanger had an unpublished article entitled "We Must Breed a Race of Thoroughbreds" that advocated giving birth control to various categories of the "unfit," such as those with transmissible disease, "where the children already born are subnormal or feeble-minded," and so forth (Library of Congress Collection, unpublished manuscript, 1929). Clearly, Sanger used this phrase with a eugenist intent.

- Sanger's quote, "The most merciful thing that the large family does to one of its infant members is to kill it" (*Woman and the New Race* [New York: Brentano's, 1920], p. 63), was "taken out of context," according to PPFA. "Sanger was making an ironic comment—not a prescriptive one—about the horrifying rate of infant mortality among large families of early 20th-century urban America."

PPFA's interpretation seems ludicrous to me. While there may be no way to prove irony or the lack thereof, there is a decided absence of humor in all of Sanger's writings. Sanger elsewhere speaks of people "who never should have been born" (see Parts I and II), and she also frequently refers to infanticide as a primitive form of birth control. "The earliest methods of primitive society have been infanticide . . . ; the abandonment of babies; and feticide or abortion. . ." ("The Need of Birth Control in America," *Birth Control: Facts and Responsibilities*, ed. Adolf Meyer, [Baltimore: Williams and Wilkins Co., 1925], p. 12). Rather than decrying these methods, Sanger says that "all true aristocracies, whether of politics or of genius, are the products of such control" (Ibid.).

- *The Rising Tide of Color Against White World Supremacy* is the title of a book mistakenly attributed to Sanger. PPFA claims that the book, written by noted racist Lothrop Stoddard, was reviewed by Havelock Ellis in the October 1920 issue of the *Birth Control Review* and criticized because it advocated "distinctions based on race or ethnicity alone."

The book was indeed *not* written by Sanger. Stoddard, however, was not such an unpopular person as PPFA would have you believe. Rather, he was one of the

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many eugenists on her ABCL National Council and published eugenist articles in the *Review* (for example, in the December 1921 issue). PPFA is correct that all of Stoddard's views (i.e., racism) cannot be assumed to be shared by Sanger, but he is one more tie that Sanger had to the eugenics movement, and she certainly expressed similar eugenical statements. It is a small step from her elitist and eugenic bigotry to racism, because one must only shift one's scapegoat from the "feeble-minded" to "blacks" or "Jews."

PPFA maintains that we should not judge its early 20th-century foundress with our "late 20th-century values," but the situation is not as simple as that. Many people, mostly those *not* part of the social and economic elite, challenged Sanger at the time—thereby showing that our supposed

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"late 20th-century values" are actually enduring and eternal ones—and challenge PPFA today. Would PPFA suggest that we not judge the Nazi eugenists (who borrowed their sterilization law from the "model law" written here in America) because their bigotry was popular and culturally conditioned?

The continuation of eugenic bigotry persists with PPFA and IPPF but with a semantic shift. Instead of calling women to their "racial responsibility," Planned Parenthood reminds them of their "responsibility to the environment." Instead of calling poor women "unfit," they name them "disadvantaged" and continue to deny them real choices. It is time for America to atone for its history of eugenics and for the propagation of that doctrine throughout developing countries by rejecting Planned Parenthood and its bigoted philosophy.

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