

The Repackaging of Margaret Sanger

By STEVEN W. MOSHER

I was personally offended when Planned Parenthood recently announced plans to give its Margaret Sanger Award to the BBC documentary "The Dying Rooms."

Don't get me wrong: The documentary is a wonderful and courageous piece of work. An undercover camera crew managed to gain entry to China's state-run orphanages and videotape the mistreatment and murder of the girls there. I appeared in the documentary, testifying that this tragedy is a direct consequence of the country's one-child policy.

It was the award, named after Planned Parenthood's founder, to which I objected. For Sanger had little but contempt for the "Asiatic races," as she and her eugenicist friends called them. During her lifetime, she proposed that their numbers be drastically reduced. But Sanger's preferences went beyond race. In her 1922 book "Pivot of Civilization" she unabashedly called for the extirpation of "weeds . . . overrunning the human garden"; for the segregation of "morons, misfits, and the maladjusted"; and for the sterilization of "genetically inferior races." It was later that she singled out the Chinese, writing in her autobiography about "the incessant fertility of [the Chinese] millions spread like a plague."

There can be no doubt that Sanger



Margaret Sanger

would have been wildly enthusiastic over China's one-child policy, for her "Code to Stop the Overproduction of Children," published in 1934, decreed that "no woman shall have a legal right to bear a child without a permit . . . no permit shall be valid for more than one child." As for China's selective elimination of handicapped and abandoned babies, she would have been delighted that Beijing had heeded her decades-long call for exactly such eugenicist policies.

Indeed, Sanger likely would have turned the award on its head, choosing to praise publicly rather than implicitly criticize China's government for its dying rooms. Even the inhuman operators of Chinese orphanages might have gotten an honorable mention, in order to underline the importance of their front-line work in eliminating what she called the "unfit" and "dysgenic." Sanger was not one for subtlety in such matters. She bluntly defined "birth control," a term she coined, as "the process of weeding out the unfit" aimed at "the creation of a superman." She often opined that "the most merciful thing that the large family does to one of its infant members is to kill it," and that "all our problems are the result of overbreeding among the working class."

Sanger frequently featured racists and eugenicists in her magazine, the Birth Control Review. Contributor Lothrop Stoddard, who also served on Sanger's board of directors, wrote in "The Rising Tide of Color Against White World-Supremacy" that "We must resolutely oppose both Asiatic permeation of white race-areas and Asiatic inundation of those non-white, but equally non-Asiatic, regions inhabited by

the really inferior races." Each issue of the Birth Control Review was packed with such ideas. But Sanger was not content merely to publish racist propaganda; the magazine also made concrete policy proposals, such as the creation of "moron communities," the forced production of children by the "fit," and the compulsory sterilization and even elimination of the "unfit."

Sanger's own racist views were scarcely less opprobrious. In 1939 she and Clarence Gamble made an infamous proposal called "Birth Control and the Negro," which asserted that "the poorer areas, particularly in the South . . . are producing alarmingly more than their share

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of future generations." Her "religion of birth control" would, she wrote, "ease the financial load of caring for with public funds . . . children destined to become a burden to themselves, to their family, and ultimately to the nation."

War with Germany, combined with lurid tales of how the Nazis were putting her theories about "human weeds" and "genetically inferior races" into practice, panicked Sanger into changing her organization's name and rhetoric. "Birth control," with its undertone of coercion, became "family planning." The "unfit" and the "dysgenic" became merely "the poor." The American Birth Control League be-

came the Planned Parenthood Federation of America.

Following Sanger's death in 1966, Planned Parenthood felt so confident that it had safely buried her past that it began boasting about "the legacy of Margaret Sanger." And it began handing out cutely named Maggie Awards to innocents who often had no inkling of her real views. The first recipient was Martin Luther King—who clearly had no idea that Sanger had inaugurated a project to set his people free from their progeny. "We do not want word to go out that we want to exterminate the Negro population and the Minister is the man who can straighten out that idea if it ever occurs to any of their more rebellious members," Sanger wrote to Gamble. Had Dr. King known why he may have been chosen to receive the award, he would have recoiled in horror.

The good news is that Sanger's—and Planned Parenthood's—patina of respectability has worn thin in recent years. Last year Congress came within a few votes of cutting a huge chunk of the organization's federal funding. The 1995-96 Planned Parenthood annual report notes that it has closed up shop in Mississippi, and that the number of its staff and volunteers has fallen by 4,000 over the previous year.

Perhaps the next time the Maggie Award is offered to someone of character and integrity—and more than a passing knowledge of Sanger's bigotry—he will raise an indignant cry of refusal. He will have ample grounds.

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