A Life of Passion: Progressive Eugenics and Planned Parenthood

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A new biography of Margaret Sanger fails to confront the Planned Parenthood founder’s ideological commitment to eugenics and population control.

Herman Cain’s remarks concerning Planned Parenthood’s promotion of abortion to blacks thrust the organization and its founder once more into the spotlight. Congressional attempts to defund Planned Parenthood had already generated publicity. When Hillary Clinton received Planned Parenthood’s Margaret Sanger Award in 2009, she was prompted to make an apologia for accepting the award because of questions raised at a House committee hearing. In each of these cases, the controversy centered on the eugenic beliefs of Margaret Sanger (1879–1966), Planned Parenthood’s founder.

To a Sanger supporter, the accusation of eugenics touches a nerve. To understand this, one must grasp the subconscious syllogism underlying the emotional reaction: Margaret Sanger and Planned Parenthood are progressive feminist institutions. Progressive feminism cannot coexist with eugenics, which is a malady of the right-wing. Therefore, Margaret Sanger and Planned Parenthood are free of eugenic contamination. QED.

Something new has happened over the last ten years, however, that challenges such easy assumptions, and both Cain’s and Clinton’s language reflected it. No one with any command of the facts can deny any more that Sanger was in some way a eugenicist.

First, scholars of women’s history have begun examining the feminist movement with more objectivity, producing a new literature that is less afraid to detail the unsavory aspects of feminist history. Historical work on eugenics has also begun to
Historians of the subject have long recognized Sanger’s involvement in eugenics, but had not sufficiently acknowledged her importance for the movement.

Second, as positive as these improvements in scholarship are, probably the most crucial factor in bringing about a more realistic and balanced assessment of Sanger and eugenics has been the internet. Sanger’s own words are more accessible than ever (a process aided by the multivolume edition of The Selected Papers of Margaret Sanger). Planned Parenthood is simply unable to deny convincingly the truth about its founder.

And what is that truth? Margaret Sanger was many things admirable: a vibrant personality, a brilliant organizer, a canny reader of the temperature of the times, a woman who built powerful institutions in a man’s world. But she was also many things ugly and even despicable: an egotist who frequently clashed with others; a free-love advocate who had a dizzying number of affairs and who hurt many men as a result; and a eugenicist who argued that “birth control is nothing more or less than the facilitation of the process of weeding out the unfit, of preventing the birth of defectives or of those who will become defective.”

In light of this reality, Jean H. Baker’s book, Margaret Sanger: A Life of Passion, is a bit of a scholarly throwback. While it is readable, lively, and in many ways realistic about its subject, it is deeply unsatisfying as an ideological analysis.

Even Planned Parenthood has had to drop the denials of Sanger’s commitment to eugenics and now urges us all instead to avoid judging those of another historical era. After all, as Hillary Clinton basically said in 2009, Thomas Jefferson owned slaves, and he still did some pretty nifty things. Take what you like and leave the rest, that’s the new approach to Sanger.

So Baker cannot simply ignore the fact of Sanger’s eugenic preoccupation, but she doesn’t seem to feel obliged to try to make much sense of it. Instead, she seeks that convenient refuge of the relativist: “nuance.” Critics of Sanger (this reviewer included) are chastised for not having “a more nuanced view of her perspectives
and the reasons she accepted aspects of a mainstream movement dedicated to improving human beings.”

Well, fine. While it’s hard to find “nuance” in a worldview that calls organized charity “a malignant social disease,” it would at least be entertaining to read someone trying to do so. Instead, regarding eugenics, what we get with Baker is an exhortation to nuance (in the Introduction) and then an avoidance of the issue for most of the remaining 300 pages. When she does address eugenics, she does so superficially. She acknowledges that Sanger was a “promoter” of eugenics, yet, in describing her motivation, the most she can muster is a variation of the mere-pragmatics defense: “In an effort to gain support, [Sanger] signed on to negative eugenics.”

Baker further tries her hand at nuance by claiming that Sanger rejected the “standard eugenic proposition that heredity was absolute.” Unfortunately for Baker, there was no such standard eugenic line. Only the most unsophisticated eugenicist would have claimed such a thing, while most scholarly eugenicists (such as Frederick Osborn) knew very well by the 1920s that nature and nurture interacted in the production of human traits. Ironically, in her Introduction, Baker accuses Sanger’s critics of an inadequate knowledge of the eugenics of Sanger’s day, a defect that she herself exhibits in spades.

The book’s treatment of the population-control movement reveals a similar failure to understand the history of eugenics. Baker writes that by the late 1920s, Sanger “had determined that population experts, like eugenicists, were emerging as an expanding pool of potential supporters.” In fact, population experts were eugenicists, plain and simple. **Beginning with the first to use the term “eugenics,”** Francis Galton (1822–1911), down through the eugenicists with whom Sanger worked in the 1920s through the 1960s, all early population “experts” were eugenicists. The discipline of demography was shot through with eugenic assumptions. As feminist and Marxist historian Linda Gordon observed, “The eugenics people slid into the population control movement gracefully, naturally, imperceptibly … There was
nothing to separate the two movements because there was no tension between their two sorts of goals.”

Why were the two movements so closely aligned? The key can be found in a popular slogan of the eugenics/population-control crowd: “Quality, not quantity.” Eugenicists believed that, in order to improve the race, fewer people (only the so-called “fit”) should reproduce. In its 1927 *Buck v. Bell* decision, written by Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., the Supreme Court ruled that compulsory sterilization of the “unfit” was allowable under the Constitution, enabling American states to sterilize, on a far greater scale, those citizens deemed unfit, without their consent and sometimes even without their knowledge. (In the end, a majority of states allowed for involuntary sterilization, leading to over 60,000 sterilizations by 1967.) Between birth control and involuntary sterilization, the eugenics movement had a plan for dealing with the “unfit” in America.

But what to do about the great mass of people outside her borders? As Sanger confided in a letter to Clarence Gamble in 1940, India was “a bottomless sink … They need birth control on a large scale and it should be continually prodded into the national consciousness daily, hourly, for at least five years.” The Rockefeller family, deeply immersed in eugenics, financially supported the earliest eugenic population-control organizations, such as the Population Council. This was done quietly, however; as Frances Hand Ferguson, a former president of Planned Parenthood in America, observed, “Certainly the Rockefellers didn’t want to be known as a family who was telling little brown Indians not to have babies.” Population control was a gussied-up eugenics—with a passport.

Baker’s neglect of this history makes her treatment of eugenics and population control relentlessly shallow and unreflectively ideological. For example, she states confidently that “too large a population blocked opportunities for growth and stalled industrialization in what was now dubbed ‘the Third World.’” This is the language of someone who takes the formulations of eugenic demographers at face value instead of questioning how their ideological agenda might have compromised their scientific endeavors. In fact, as recent articles in *Public Discourse* have observed, the world is well able to absorb its roughly seven billion people. Economists such as Julian Simon have argued that the healthy population growth of India is one reason why its economic growth has been so robust. Of
course, the point of Margaret Sanger: A Life of Passion is not to give a course on contemporary theories of population economics, but a nod of acknowledgment toward these larger issues would have greatly deepened the book’s analysis.

**Disappointing as these defects are to the informed reader, the most unsatisfying aspect of the book is its naïveté about Sanger’s model of sexual liberation.** Baker, who earned her B.A. in 1960, has ideas about sexuality that seem not to have budged from a sunny, 1960s-era cluelessness about the glories of uncommitted sex. This, despite the divorce revolution, HIV/AIDS, pornification, the sexualization and abuse of children: in short, the sum total of physical and emotional devastation wrought by the sexual revolution. Instead, the reader gets platitudes about Sanger’s affairs as a “life-affirming inspiration” or as “spontaneous, self-affirming alliances with men.” Baker is too good a historian to overlook the heartache that such behavior caused Sanger’s two husbands, but she seems unable to grasp how promiscuity harmed Margaret Sanger herself. The lonely woman at the end of her life, addicted to Demerol and resentful of the loss of celebrity, is the result of a life spent using people and, in turn, being used.

In sum, Baker cannot think outside the liberal academic box. She makes the utterly conventional assumption that eugenics was not what it in fact was: a progressive movement through and through. She does not understand that eugenics is all about one thing: control, the control of benighted masses by an enlightened elite. As Baker correctly emphasizes (but does not understand), Sanger insisted that contraception be called not family planning but *birth control*. Margaret Sanger’s was an ideology of control: birth control (bailed with promiscuity), enabling a eugenic control of population—the progressive application of biopower. It is an ideology that tempts totalitarian elites—wherever they might be found on the political spectrum.
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