

A genealogy of birth control: from Eugenics to Women Empowerment

Kim Ta, U1907156
Word count: 2025

Introduction

This essay explores the history behind birth control and its links to eugenics. This includes ethical and social issues relating to women and exploring if birth control is still viewed as a eugenic technology.

As a multi-disciplinary issue, we explore many areas and aspects of the topic to answer the question above. This essay first explores the definition of birth control and the biological processes involved. We discuss why birth control was introduced, speculations around the reasons and how it affects working-class women. We then follow by looking at societal points of view on women, reproduction and how birth control affects the attitudes towards them. This includes pressure on a woman's choice for birth control and the surrounding stigma, where larger influences were religion and we can relate this to eugenic racism and discrimination.

We acknowledge that there are many other branches of eugenics that are also important however this essay will specifically focus on how birth control relates to eugenics. It must be noted that this essay does not aim to exhaust all facets of the possible intentions behind birth control in history but focuses on the feminist aspects and how it relates to women.

Birth Control

Initially, birth control is viewed as a low-tech (repro) technology, and by definition, is the prevention of pregnancies, the most general method being contraceptives. Take the birth control pill, the pill contains hormones (progestin and/or estrogen) that stop or reduce ovulation, thickens the cervical mucus (stop sperm entering the uterus), and thins the lining of the uterus to reduce the chances of a fertilized egg attaching, and thus preventing pregnancies (Cleveland Clinic, 2020). More unapparent methods include birth control by social pressures, laws and sterilization.

However, in this essay, we discuss birth control as a means of eugenics, and how it was used to change the genetic pool of a population throughout history.

Birth control methods were originally introduced as a solution to problems of family planning and population control when social problems such as poverty and famine were prevalent (Notestein, 1986). It became a matter of controversy when viewed as a means to control women and prevent certain groups of people from reproducing. Historically, birth control was used for eugenic means and represented political power between different social groups, used to reduce certain races or groups of people in different areas (Gordon, 2007).

Thus, we can view birth control as a genetic technology. Genetic technologies are anything to do with understanding or adapting genetic material.

What this has to do with the working-class women

In the nineteenth century, England experienced periods of chronic depression and social crisis, widespread unemployment and prevalent poverty resulted in the discussion of birth control as a means to limit the population to handle the situation (Langer, 1975). Several areas of conflict were highlighted when it was seen that birth control was possibly being used to control and limit fertility between the middle and working-class (McLaren, 1978). This was perceived as both dealing with the problems of wealth and poverty and offering political and economic benefits.

In the nineteen seventies, China was facing rapid population growth and struggling with food shortages and famine (Berenson, 2015). The Chinese government attempted to conquer this problem by introducing a policy to limit couples to one child (China's One-Child Policy) by administering fines to policy breakers and offering longer maternity leave and other benefits to families with one child. This was seen as helping the poorer population as they were less able to maintain larger families however inadvertently discriminated against them as it made it even harder for poorer people to have larger families (Greenhalgh, 2004).

Gender eugenics and society

The exploitation of the one-child policy included preferential treatment against gender in society, there was a cultural preference for sons and it was thus socially acceptable to under provide family resources to female offspring and sex-selective abortion. These distorted gender ratios lead to a population with a female deficit and extended to impacting society in many negative ways (Zhang, Bulte, Heerink, 2010).

Another way society controlled the viewpoint of gender roles was through the Canadian movement in the early nineteenth century, where there were "prevailing ideas on the importance of women in the home, ambivalence toward working women, and an incompletely articulated vision of women's role under socialism" (Kealey, 1984), where fertility was restricted "to ensure the well-being of the individual family". It was stated that "only a reduction in the birth rate could stave off social disorder, implying poverty as the result of personal, rather than social failing" (MacLaren, n.d.).

This shows that birth control was viewed as a result of social and economical inequality, and a detract from class struggle, rather than just an individual's right to control their life and body.

Attitudes towards women

Women's empowerment and individuality originally stemmed from their reproductive role in society, this ideology of such "duties" and mundane roles damped women's social status, where the introduction of contraceptives came with the preserved incentive of coercive power and control over women (Granzow, 2007), however, it could also be seen as a means to prevent abortions, broken marriages and provide a firmer basis for marriage. Nowadays it can be seen as a woman's escape from the binds of birthing and child-rearing, giving women status as autonomous and rational individuals.

The raised issue of family limitation reflected hostility in capitalists towards an encroachment on working-class families. Society's view was that "the essential basis of women's inferiority lies in the immanent nature of childbearing" - Simone de Beauvoir (Granzow, 2007), thus birth control provided an exit from the stigmas attached to a "women's role". It was only in the nineteenth century when attitudes toward conservatives for women's freedom changed. With the birth control act, European women were able to assert their independence and break the association between sex and impregnation (Shorter, 1973).

Women's body and choice

Historically, birth control was a eugenic means to control women, nowadays it is seen as a choice and empowering move, through forms of contraceptives and making it more accessible. Thus, seen as a women's ability to control their reproductive capacity and reproductive freedom (McLaren, 1978).

However, even today a women's decision is highly influenced by surrounding opinions and advice. Choices are distorted by medical establishments that are deeply prejudiced against disabled people if not from their interests, "A woman's 'true' interests and illegitimately help prejudice of wider social origin" (Sharp, Earle, 2002). There were also concerns about the damage it could cause to society from the attitudes towards woman's rights, sex and sexual freedom.

Religion and Churches

Society's view of individuals was highly influenced by religion and churches. There was a stigma around women preserving their innocence and birth control representing a distraught family structure. In the nineteen twenties, Christian Churches spread propaganda around contraception, labelling them as "shameful and intrinsically immoral". There have been clear-cut limitations regarding (marital) reproduction in Christians for centuries, claiming that procreation's sole purpose is the creation of children. In the nineteenth century, the idea of interfering with "God's natural process" was seen as sinful and thus created negativity towards contraceptives (Campbell, 1960). However, regarding religion, things that are "taboo" are associated with almost every type of human activity, such as drinking or sex. A common defence for religious opposition against contraception is the idea of "natural" births and protecting the body (Dunlap, 1923). Despite the restriction of contraceptives, this is still a form of birth control through social control, preventing certain people from having children, including interracial couples.

Laws, Racial Eugenics and Sterilization

Countries practised eugenics as a method of "race improvement". Firstly, the term "illegitimate" references a child born out of wedlock (unmarried women). Highly influenced by religion, society referred to the illegitimates as "bastards", creating negative impressions of these people (Shorter, 1973), this discouraged unmarried couples from having children.

In the United States, a large amount of time and energy was spent trying to prevent interracial marriages: Maryland (1664), marriage was prohibited between "freeborn English women" and "Negro slaves", and New Mexico (1857), marriage between "any women of white race" and any "free negro or mulatto" was prohibited, men were free to marry whomever, emphasising the control of women. Throughout the mid-twentieth century, laws were being implemented to prohibit "miscegenation" and by the late nineteenth century, legal prohibitions were placed on marriage between whites and Chinese, Japanese, and many other races (Pascoe, 1991).

By limiting access to marriage, interracial couples were less likely to have children due to the stigma toward illegitimate children. In Sweden, unmarried women and their illegitimate children were addressed with the term "obemäkt" which means unnoticed or talked about with discretion (Sjoberg, 2022). This created social vulnerability and influenced negative attitudes towards illegitimate children and their mothers, and taking it further, by Sweden Law in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth centuries, extramarital sex was a criminal offence (Sundin, 1992), meaning that having an illegitimate child was proof of criminal acts. This shows society's attempt in reducing the number of interracial children being born.

This idea of "race improvement" could be seen all around the world. In the twentieth century, in South Africa, sterilization was aimed at the "whites", In the Third Reich, sterilization was aimed at the disabled (Levine, Bashford, 2012). Eugenics in a sense, rather than just a projection of racial

nationalism and “racial purity” could be more seen as an objective towards marginalizing individuals who threatened the class ideals.

Birth control in present-day

In the current age, birth control is the choice of the individual, rather than pressure from society through laws and force. Individuals now have access to contraceptives that are effective and more accessible, which shows a great change in historical views. There is still a conflictual sense in using contraceptives, where a women’s choice in contraceptives is limited and the social valuing of a woman as a mother compared to liberated women comes with different impressions and views, however, birth control can now be seen from a feminist point of view, taking back power and control, “women recognize that they cannot take control of their lives, without first taking control of their fertility” (Granzow, 2007).

Contraceptives come with physical consequences. In a study, it was shown for a specific type of contraceptive pill that consequences included the possibility of side effects including reduced libido, nausea, sickness and signs of depression (Grounds, Davies, Mowbray, 1970), where frequent use commonly enhanced negative effects (Dunlap, 1923). Therefore a women’s choice to take contraceptives and deal with the consequences shows responsibility and taking back control.

Solutions

Alternative to birth control, the accessibility to advanced technology in the past few years provides individuals and groups with cost-effective services to screen for abnormalities (Dondorp, Wert, 2015). There are also concerns about these technologies, for example, ethically the screening test may lead to the abortion of a foetus that does not match the parents’ preferences. However, this alternative is still as effective as it allows families to bring a child into the world with all the information they need. Also, note there are limitations, NIPT is only offered for a specific set of conditions, and there is the possibility of additional findings or implications. The accessibility also differs between countries.

The other alternative that is still available is abortion. Abortion controversially can be viewed as exclusively the assertion of a woman’s right to terminate a pregnancy, where grounds of termination are irrelevant (Sharp, Earle, 2002).

Conclusion

Birth control was first introduced as a solution to social problems such as poverty and famine in many areas such as nineteenth-century England and China, however, this led to discrimination against working-class women with a suspected means of restricting reproduction between these classes. This affected how society viewed women and created this distortion in gender in society. Women were viewed as less important and only as of the means of a child-bearer.

The eugenic means of birth control was not limited to women in the working class, around the world it also targeted certain races and groups of people, where part of this was influenced by religion and churches. This was through social exclusion, laws and methods of taking control.

Moving to the present day, birth control can no longer be seen as a eugenic technology, which was a decision made by the institution, it is now a women’s empowerment and emancipation from the social ideals of being a child bearer, where it’s up to the individuals choice.

References

- Bashford, A., 2012. "Epilogue: where did eugenics go?". [online] The Oxford Handbook of the History of Eugenics. Available at: <https://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195373141.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780195373141-e-33>. Accessed: 12. 03. 2022.
- Bashford, A., 2012. "Epilogue: where did eugenics go?". [online] The Oxford Handbook of the History of Eugenics. Available at: <https://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195373141.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780195373141-e-33>. Accessed: 12. 03. 2022.
- Berenson, T., 2015. "Here's How China's One-Child Policy Started in the First Place." [online] Time. Available at: <https://time.com/4092689/china-one-child-policy-history/>. Accessed: 12. 03. 2022.
- Bratter, J. and King, R., 2008. "But Will It Last?": Marital Instability Among Interracial and Same-Race Couples. [online] Wiley Online Library. Available at: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1741-3729.2008.00491.x>. Accessed: 12. 03. 2022.
- Campbell, F. (1960) "Birth control and the christian churches, Population Studies", 131-147. [online] Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00324728.1960.10406044?needAccess=true&journalCode=rpst20>. Accessed: 12. 03. 2022.
- Cleveland Clinic. 2020. "Birth Control Pill: Contraception, The Pill, Effectiveness, Types." [online] Available at: <https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/drugs/3977-birth-control-the-pill>. Accessed: 12. 03. 2022.
- Dunlap, K. (1923). "Psychological factors in birth control". The Journal of Abnormal Psychology and Social Psychology, 17(4), 339-345. [online] Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0067093>. Accessed: 12. 03. 2022.
- Dondorp, W. and Wert, D., 2015. "Non-invasive prenatal testing for aneuploidy and beyond: challenges of responsible innovation in prenatal screening". [online] Nature.com. Available at: <https://www.nature.com/articles/ejhg201556.pdf>. Accessed: 12. 03. 2022.
- Friedman, J. 1987. "Jewish Conversion, the Spanish Pure Blood Laws and Reformation: A Revisionist View of Racial and Religious Antisemitism." The Sixteenth Century Journal, vol. 18, no. 1, 1987, pp. 3-30, [online] Available at: <https://doi.org/10.2307/2540627>. Accessed: 15. 03. 2022.
- Gordon, L., 2007. The moral property of women. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press [book]. Accessed: 15. 03. 2022.
- Granzow, K. (2007) "De-constructing 'choice': The social imperative and women's use of the birth control pill, Culture, Health Sexuality",pp 43-54. [online] Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691050600963948>. Accessed: 15. 03. 2022.
- Greenhalgh, S., 2004. "Science, Modernity, and the Making of China's One-Child Policy." [online] Wiley Online Library. Available at: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1728-4457.2003.00163.x>. Accessed: 15. 03. 2022.
- Grounds, D., Davies, B., Mowbray, R. (1970). "The Contraceptive Pill, Side Effects and Personality: Report of a Controlled Double Blind Trial." British Journal of Psychiatry, 116(531), 169-172. [online] Available at: <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/the-british-journal-of-psychiatry/article/abs/contraceptive-pill-side-effects-and-personality-report-of-a-controlled-double-blind-trial/03683963D7A329E70600933EC34B1AAA>. Accessed: 15. 03. 2022.
- Kealey, L. (1984). "Canadian Socialism and the Woman Question, 1900-1914". Labour/Le Travailleur,

13, pp 77–100. [book]. Accessed: 15. 03. 2022.

Langer, William L. (1975) .“The Origins of the Birth Control Movement in England in the Early Nineteenth Century.” *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, pp. 669–86, [online] Available <https://doi.org/10.2307/202864>. Accessed: 15. 03. 2022.

Lerner, P. Friedlander, H.(1997). “The origins of Nazi genocide: From euthanasia to the final solution, Chapel Hill and London, University of North Carolina Press”, pp 395-396. *Medical History*. [online] Available at:<https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/medical-history/article/henry-friedlander-the-origins-of-nazi-genocide-from-euthanasia-to-the-final-solution-chapel-hill-and-london-university-of-north-carolina-press-1995-p-xxiii-421-3495-0807822086/95438A91C44C3357327EA34DF323E77C>. Accessed: 22. 03. 2022.

Levine, P. and Bashford, A., 2012. “Introduction: Eugenics and the Modern World.” [online] *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Eugenics*. Available at: <https://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195373141.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780195373141-e-1>. Accessed: 22. 03. 2022.

MacLaren, A., n.d. ”What has this to do with working class women?. Ottawa, pp 444. [online] Available at:<https://hssh.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/hssh/article/view/38098/34489> . Accessed: 22. 03. 2022.

McLaren, A. (1978). “Birth Control in Nineteenth-Century England” (1st ed.). Routledge., pp 263. [online] Available at: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003294573>. Accessed: 22. 03. 2022.

Notestein, F., 1986. “Poverty and Population.” [online] Proquest.com. Available at: <https://www.proquest.com/openview/3c5b99cb00933a939095a52ab7d83c72/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=24597>. Accessed: 01. 04. 2022.

Pascoe, P. 1991. “Race, Gender, and Intercultural Relations: The Case of Interracial Marriage.” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, vol. 12, no. 1, pp. 5–18, [online] Available at: <https://doi.org/10.2307/3346572>. Accessed: 01. 04. 2022.

Sharp. K, Earle. S, (2002). “Feminism, Abortion and Disability: Irreconcilable differences?, *Disability Society*”,pp 137-145. [online] Available at:<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09687590120122297>. Accessed: 01. 04. 2022.

Shorter,E. 1973. “Female Emancipation, Birth Control, and Fertility in European History.” *The American Historical Review*, vol. 78, no. 3, pp. 605–40, [online] Available at: <https://doi.org/10.2307/1847657>. Accessed: 01. 04. 2022.

Sjoberg, J. 2022. “Selling Anonymity: The Market for Secrecy Around Illegitimate Births.” [online] Available at: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/03631990221079774>. Accessed: 01. 04. 2022.

Sofair, A. and Kaldjian, M., 2000. “Eugenic Sterilization and a Qualified Nazi Analogy: The United States and Germany, 1930-1945 — *Annals of Internal Medicine*.” [online] *Annals of Internal Medicine*. Available at: <https://www.acpjournals.org/doi/abs/10.7326/0003-4819-132-4-200002150-00010?journalCode=aim>. Accessed: 12. 04. 2022.

Sundin, J. (1992). “Sinful Sex: Legal Prosecution of Extramarital Sex in Preindustrial Sweden. *Social Science History*”, pp 99-128. [online] Available at: <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/social-science-history/article/abs/sinful-sex-legal-prosecution-of-extramartial-sex-in-preindustrial-sweden/E373E21E78845D6B15D6F2D711BBD194>. Accessed: 12. 04. 2022.

Zhang, X., Bulte, E. and Heerink, N., 2010. “China’s One-Child Policy and ‘the Mystery of Missing

Women': Ethnic Minorities and Male-Biased Sex Ratios." [online] Wiley Online Library. Available at: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1468-0084.2010.00601.x>. Accessed: 12. 04. 2022.