One Rebel Woman's Story: Margaret Sanger and Her Battle for Birth Control

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Birth control is a right women have in the United States, but one right which should not to be taken for granted. Although women in the United States have the freedom to make reproductive choices, the United States Congress and Supreme Court still debate the topic of birth control and abortion. In 2003, President George W. Bush signed the Partial Birth Abortion Ban. In 2005, Governor Owens of Colorado vetoed House Bill 1042 which would have required all hospitals to provide rape victims information about the availability of emergency contraception. Moreover, many other states have made emergency contraception available only by prescription; thereby, denying women its unrestricted access. Organizations such as NARAL, Feminist Majority Foundation, and Planned Parenthood continue to work towards keeping abortion legal while pro-life groups such as American Life League, Feminists for Life, and the National Right to Life committee continually work to overturn *Roe v. Wade*.

Evidently, the topic of women's reproductive rights remains highly contested. As pro-choice and pro-life groups continue to disagree over when a life begins, and Congress and State Legislatures continue to make decisions on what information and/or funding should be made available to women, the right to publicly deliberate on this controversial topic remains unwavering. This right, however, was not always permitted.

This essay examines Margaret Sanger's two part series written for the *New York Call*, and her journal, *The Woman Rebel*, to understand how she introduced the idea for birth control to her readership. These print media were Sanger's first attempts to publish information on reproduction and family planning and Sanger relied on storytelling as a means to challenge federal laws in order to make reproductive rights a public debate.

Preventing Conception

Although birth control practices have been in use for centuries, Coitus interruptus, or withdrawal of the penis, is believed to be one of the first contraceptive methods practiced by the Ancient Hebrews (McFarlane and Meier, 21). Also, Soranus, an ancient Greek physician, is believed to have had thirty formulas containing a mixture of aged oil, honey, cedar gum, alum, and fruit acids to be used as contraceptive medicine. By the middle ages, it is estimated that over two hundred contraceptive and abortion methods were used (McFarlane and Meier, 24). Rock salt was used as a spermicide, condoms were made from tortoise shell and leather, oiled tissue paper was used for diaphragms, and plenty of ineffective potions were created and prescribed.

By the mid-1800s dozens of pamphlets, books, and public lectures provided information on contraception and were made available at local newsstands, by peddlers, or mail order. As the nineteenth century progressed,

additional information on preventing conception emerged. Information on douching, vaginal sponges, diaphragms, cervical caps, and practicing periodic abstinence, were publicized. Although these practices did not guarantee protection, nineteenth century women continued using these devices to avoid unwanted pregnancies. Yet, the practice of controlling fertility caused some to believe moral standards within the U.S. were eroding.

During the early twentieth century, in an effort to prevent social decay, Victorian moralists launched a crusade in hopes of re-establishing a strong and sound sense of family and faith. Anthony Comstock, a member of the Young Men's Christian Association, fought to create laws that supported public morality by condemning contraception, abortion, sterilization, obscenity, and vice. In 1873, the Act for the Suppression of Trade, and Circulation, Obscene Literature and Articles of Immoral Use was passed prohibiting interstate trading of obscene literature and materials, including "any article whatever for the prevention of conception or for causing unlawful abortion" (McFarlane and Meier, 30). The Comstock Act, made it a felony to:

> offer to sell, or lend or give away, or in any manner exhibit . . . publish or offer to publish in any manner, or . . . have in [one's possession], for any purpose or purposes, any obscene book, pamphlet, paper, writing, advertisement, circular, print, picture, drawing or other representation, figure, or image on or of paper or other material, or any cast, instrument or other article of an immoral nature, or any drug or medicine, or any article whatever for the prevention of conception, or for causing unlawful abortion, or . . . advertise same for sale (Tobin 3-4).

Within the next 15 years twenty-two states passed similar legislation known as "little Comstock laws." McFarlane and Meier explain, "fourteen states prohibited the verbal transmission of information about contraception or abortion. Eleven states made possession of instructions for the prevention of pregnancy a criminal offense. Four states authorized the search and seizure of contraceptive instructions" (30). Such laws placed an enormous amount of power in the hands of Anthony Comstock, who had been granted authority by Congress to be a special agent to the Post Office. Comstock had the right "to open any letter or package or pamphlet or book passing through the mails and, if he wished, lay his complaint before the Post Office" (Sanger, "Autobiography," 78). Comstock's word alone was often sufficient enough to censor any material not to his liking, and his abuses of power and authoritarian methods for obtaining "obscene" material often went unchecked. Comstock had the authority to ban literature he deemed vile, to prohibit public conversations on birth control, and demand the arrest of any persons transmitting contraceptives in violation of the Comstock laws.

The lack of public information on reproductive control had many implications, especially for the working class. In addition to facing financial strain with each borne child, many working class parents also suffered the loss of an unhealthy child. By 1918, an estimated one in seven infants died before their first birthday (Katz, 245). Women also faced the possibility of losing their own life in the process of childbirth or abortion. In the early 1900s, an estimated one in three pregnancies ended in abortion (McFarlane and Meier, 36). Yet, by 1910, every state with the exception of Kentucky, had outlawed abortion except in cases that would save the mother's life. With the passage of legislation to criminalize abortion fewer physicians were willing to risk performing the procedure. Many desperate women searched for other means to end an unwanted pregnancy and were willing to take matters into their own hands. Sanger witnessed one patient, Sadie Sachs, die as a result of a failed abortion. The story of Sadie Sachs fueled Sanger's mission for public access to contraceptive information.[1]

The Quest to Uncover and Deliver Information

Margaret Sanger in the early stages of her advocacy for birth control was denied the right to publicly discuss contraception. Thanks to her hard-fought battle to overturn the Comstock Act, which prohibited the dissemination of birth control information, and state and federal laws (such as New York statutes 1142 and 1145 that forbade the open distribution of contraceptive devices), women and men from all walks of life can continue to participate in this public discussion. Margaret Sanger realized the necessity of changing public sentiment on birth control, the laws prohibiting its use, and the medical community's control over the distribution of contraceptives.

The Story of Reproduction: How Six Little Children Were Taught the Truth

In the spring of 1900 Margaret Sanger enrolled in a three-year nursing program at White Plains Hospital, on the outskirts of New York City. During the second year of the program Sanger focused on obstetrical cases. Often Sanger delivered babies when the physicians were unable to arrive on time. A few years later, Margaret along with her husband and their three young children, moved to New York City and joined a local socialist group. Sanger's interest in Socialism and her education and experiences as a nurse made her determined to help women gain knowledge over their bodies.

In 1910 Anita Block, an editor of the woman's page of *The New York Call*, asked Sanger to write a two-part series on sex, hygiene and health for the newspaper. *The Call* was one of America's leading Socialist newspapers and Sanger's experience as a nurse and advocate for sex education made her the perfect person for the job. On October 29, 1911 the *New York Call* printed Sanger's first article in her series titled "How Six Little Children Were Taught the Truth." Three years later Sanger reprinted the articles into a booklet titled, *What Every Mother Should Know*. There, Sanger explained the "articles were put into

story form for the mother so as to enable her to make the truth and facts [about reproduction] just as interesting to a child's imagination as possible" (Sanger 1914, 1). The articles contained the lessons and stories Sanger had created to teach her own son and neighboring children about reproduction. The series included four topics on reproduction in which children should be informed: flowers, frogs, birds, and mammals.

In the first series of stories children learned the lessons of plant and animal reproduction, the importance of providing adequate care during and after reproduction, and the responsibility of parents to care for their offspring. These stories were often shared in order to instruct, guide, or influence an audience. In *The Call* storytelling allowed Sanger to bypass the stigmas associated with openly discussing reproductive health. William Kirkwood explains that "there is nothing inherently religious in the telling of brief narratives to guide or influence listeners" (58-74). The use of "some parables may involve either or both of two strategies: confronting states of awareness and confronting beliefs and attitudes" (Kirkwood 65). Furthermore, "storytelling can briefly override auditors' immediate defenses and introduce views of life which would otherwise have been rejected before they could prompt self-examination in listeners" (Kirkwood, 68).

Sanger's readers were primarily literate women who were uncomfortable, uninformed, and desperately in need of culturally appropriate means via which to educate their children on the topic of reproduction. Sanger began informing these mothers of the reproductive story by way of the story of Bobby:

> Little 5-year-old Bobby sat playing in the sand pile one lovely afternoon in May, and, judging by the glimpses his mother had of him through the open door of their cottage, his mind was to all appearances intent on making a sand fish perfect. For in and out the damp sand was thrown from the pile to the fish mold many times, until at last being perfect, at least to his satisfaction, he got up and ran to find his mother, who was busy within the small two-room shack where they were living for the summer. He caught hold of her apron to attract her attention, and said: 'Mother, where did I come from?' Needless to say, his mother was greatly surprised at this question, just at that time, for she had not the faintest idea that his thoughts were on anything but the perfection of that sand fish. However, she quickly recovered from her surprise and taking his little face between her hands, said: 'Bobby, dear, that is the most wonderful secret in all the world, and if you are quite sure you can keep this secret and only talk about it to father and mother, I'll tell you all about it (Sanger, "How Six Little Children Were Taught the Truth, 7).

The story of Bobby portrayed a young child innocently questioning his mother about reproduction and the mother's acknowledgement of the "secrecy" behind the answer. The emphasis on the secretiveness behind the facts of reproduction was two-fold: First, children were asked to keep the secrets of reproduction among the family so as to make sure no false tales of reproduction were told through conversations with adolescent friends. Second, Sanger's repetitive focus on the "secrets" of reproduction foreshadowed her later argument that dominant groups, such as the medical community and state, needed to publicly reveal these very secrets.

To begin informing children on the topic of reproduction, Sanger suggested using the story of "Mr. and Mrs. Buttercup" to explain the reproductive organs of flowers: "The pistils we called the 'mothers' because at the bottom of the thin tube are the ovules or seeds. The pistils were examined carefully [by the children] and the very top or stamen was found to be very sticky" (Sanger, "How Six Little Children Were Taught the Truth," Part II). Eventually the children were informed that the "pollen from the stamen, or father, must get into the pistil or mother, and reach the ovules or seeds, or the seeds cannot grow and develop into new plants" (Sanger, "How Six Little Children Were Taught the Truth," Part II). Throughout each story children learned the importance of caretaking during and after the reproductive process. Once children understood how to care for flowers, and the basics of plant pollination, the stories became more complex, each expanding upon the previous:

> Like Mrs. Buttercup, Mrs. Toad has within her body a little nest where little seeds or eggs have been kept and have been growing, and now that the time has come when they need awakening to a new life, they need life from the Father Frog just as the buttercup needed pollen from the stamen. Mr. Toad (or Frog), too, is stirred by this new and wonderful life giving desire within him, and when Mrs. Toad (or Frog) feels the eggs are to be expelled, he comes very close to her, and in order to fertilize every egg before it goes into the water, he holds her fast behind the arm, and as they are expelled he pours over them his life giving fluid, which enters every tiny egg and gives it life—a new life (Sanger, "How Six Little Children Were Taught the Truth," Part IV).

The next article contained the lesson of birds and again focused on the role of the father: "all father creatures on up the scale of development use greater care to fertilize the egg than either Mr. Buttercup, Mr. Fish, Mr. Toad, or Mr. Frog. For, instead of fertilizing it in the water, or with the help of the insects or wind, the egg of the higher creatures is fertilized while still in the mother's body" (Sanger, "How Six Little Children Were Taught the Truth," Part V). The lesson explained

the responsibility of procreation, and the need to care for and protect one's offspring after creation (Sanger, "How Six Little Children Were Taught the Truth," Part V).

The final lesson in the first series included information on mammal growth and development. Children were told that "as the mammal grows and develops within the body of the mother her shape becomes changed—becomes larger in the region where the new life lies. . . . Every mother needs protection from worry, excitement, cruelty, overwork, starvation at such a period; she needed kindness, rest, good food, sunshine, in order that she give the little ones strength and health" (Sanger, "How Six Little Children Were Taught the Truth," Part V). Although Sanger provided information on the importance of properly caring for a pregnant mother she refrained from imparting information on human sexuality.

Sanger's stories of animal reproduction began her journey to present information in a public forum and instruct a reading public of women on reproduction and sex education. These stories created awareness on the importance of sex education, as well as confronted the readers' beliefs regarding their inability, or the inappropriateness, of teaching children about reproduction. As Sanger continued to write articles for the newspaper to reveal injustices against the working class's lack of information on reproductive health, storytelling seemed to be the most practical way for Sanger to make connections with her readers. Sanger often relied on her own experiences as a nurse and the experiences of her working class clientele to influence audience members, particularly those in decision-making roles, who may not have understood the realities of parents struggling to feed and clothe their large families. As Sanger oscillated between audiences of varying socioeconomic positions, storytelling became the thread that helped women make sense of their reproductive needs and limited contraceptive choices.[2]

What Every Girl Should Know

The second series Sanger created continued with the story; however, this time Sanger expanded her rhetorical options and began sharing her own stories, primarily drawn from her experiences as a nurse, to explain the injustices women faced due to dominant public opinions that restricted information on reproductive control. Sanger identified the victims of the story (working class women) and blamed the medical community for being the villains withholding the "secret" of contraception. On November 17, 1912, Sanger published the first article in her second series titled, "What Every Girl Should Know." This series focused on female bodies and human reproduction. According to Sanger, teaching women about sexual hygiene and reproduction would either prevent them from entering prostitution, or would reduce the rates of sexually transmitted diseases.

As a nurse, Sanger's stories illustrated the seriousness of venereal diseases, as well as, proved instrumental in creating a credible narrative voice. Sanger stated, "take, for example, the story of a girl who came under my care some years ago, after having suffered three years with the [venereal] disease . . . When I saw her all her hair, eyebrows and eyelashes were gone, her nose and upper lip were eaten almost entirely away, most of her teeth were gone—in fact, to try to describe her condition would be almost impossible" (Sanger, "What Every Girl Should Know," Part III). The use of stories based on Sanger's personal experiences illustrated the harsh realities of sexually transmitted diseases, and supported her argument for public information and education of such diseases. Furthermore, factual narratives of sexually transmitted diseases and their effects were difficult to disprove; thus, creating a coherent and meaningful story which the audience could accept as an important one to publicize.

Anecdotes also appeared in the series. The discussion of venereal diseases continued via the story "of a French nobleman whose son was about to leave his home to live in a big city. Said the father to the son: 'If you are not afraid of God, fear at least syphilis.' This advice might be applied today, for if boys or girls knew, or could see the appalling results of syphilis, they would surely fear it, for it is humanity's most deadly foe" (Sanger, "What Every Girl Should Know," Part III). Additionally, stories and anecdotes illustrated the need for the medical community to willingly protect women against contracting sexually transmitted diseases. One woman's struggle with gonorrhea informed readers of the devastating effects that resulted from the lack of public information on sexual health. The story described how a woman contracted gonorrhea through marriage, and ultimately underwent operations to help heal her uterus, cervix, appendix, inflamed ovaries and tubes. Sanger explained, "she convalesced beautifully, and had no bad or unusual symptoms for six months, at which time she returned with a renewed infection. Careful questioning extracted from the husband the confession that he had been 'out with the boys,' and had had a recurrence of gonorrhea" (Sanger, "What Every Girl Should Know," Part II).

The stories of women suffering from venereal diseases (as a result of a husband committing adultery) supported Sanger's argument that women deserved information from the medical community to protect their bodies, their health, and their lives: "It is the ignorance of parents, together with the silence of the medical profession, which is largely responsible for the terrible spread of venereal diseases which exists today" (Sanger, "What Every Girl Should Know," Part I).

The information provided in the series caught the attention of many readers, including Anthony Comstock, who eventually banned one of the columns for containing the words gonorrhea and syphilis, which he argued violated the Comstock Law of 1873 (Sanger, "An Autobiography," 77). Comstock altered the article to read, "What Every Girl Should Know—Nothing; by order of the U.S. Post Office." Citing First Amendment rights, *The Call* supported

Sanger's article and subsequently published it a few weeks later.

Although there were no political ramifications as a result of the series, nevertheless, Sanger began the story of reproductive health and brought the private conversations of sex, health, and reproduction into a public space. Ellen Chesler explains, "for a woman to write about sex was especially provocative. To tackle such subjects as pregnancy and abortion, masturbation, menstruation, and defloration . . . demanded considerable courage" (66). The articles written in *The Call* were mainly circulated and read by local women's groups around New York State. Sanger wanted to expand her readership and continue to publicize the reproductive concerns and experiences of many working class women.

One Rebel Woman and a Story Title

In 1914, Sanger conducted research on family planning methods at the medical library in Boston, the Library of Congress, the New York Academy of Medicine, and Boston Public Library. Here Sanger concluded, "there was no practical medical information on contraception available in America" (Sanger, "*My* Fight for Birth Control," 60). Hence, she set sail to Europe with her first husband and three children. There, Sanger was able to find information linking contraceptive use to low birthrates. This discovery reconfirmed her commitment to help women understand the process of reproduction and ultimately control their fertility. To begin her quest, Sanger returned to the United States and began a monthly journal titled, *Woman Rebel*, which she hoped would stimulate working women to demand information on birth control.

The Woman Rebel was the beginning of Sanger's crusade to secure reproductive information for women. The journal discussed a variety of topics, many pertaining to concerns of the working class: wage-slavery, poverty, prostitution, labor unions, marriage slavery, as well as the need for contraceptive information. One argument, however, woven throughout the journal claimed that women "must assume control over her own body that she alone shall decide her needs and if motherhood is among them—let her accept it, but if not—then let her reject it at any cost" (Sanger, "Mother-or Destruction"). Sanger pledged to provide readers information on contraception; yet, it was never discussed in detail. Instead, she introduced the concept of birth control and demanded that women have the right to choose motherhood.

The *Woman Rebel* contained stories arguing for a woman's right to contraceptive information. However, instead of using storytelling as a means to inform women on reproduction (as she did in the two-part series for *The Call*), Sanger's stories functioned to agitate her readers, raise consciousness, and confront dominant forces such as the Church, State, and Comstock himself. The story of Mary Minora, a 14-year old girl who worked to support her young baby, and the story of a woman trying to sell her baby because she already had three that she could not support, illustrated cases that resulted from the established laws preventing birth control information (Sanger, "Mary, Mother Mary"). These

stories shared in common accounts of oppression and also functioned as exemplars of overcoming challenges and injustice. Here, Sanger moved from one victim's story to another in order to illustrate the need to challenge the perpetrator and to challenge authority.

Each issue of *The Woman Rebel* also contained stories of other historical rebel women whose courage advanced the rights and opportunities for women. One "great rebel" was Mary Wollstonecraft, who "refused to obey the laws of her age, or to curtsey as she was bidden" (Sanger, "A Great Rebel"). Wollstonecraft, a pioneer of women's rights, believed women deserved the same rights as men, primarily the rights to an education and recognition of their intellectual capabilities. Louise Michel was discussed as "one of those fiery, rebellious spirits that no law could tame" for her courageous acts during the siege of Paris in 1870 (Sanger, "The Red Virgin"). Cleopatra was featured for her brave acts in ruling Egypt. Additionally, Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst's stories were told to illustrate their struggles to achieve the right to vote in England.

The story of women rebels, past and present, functioned as paradigms designed to establish a connection with the readers' experiences, as well as to motivate them to take public action against specialized communities dominated by male authorities and demand information on family planning. As Walter Fisher argued, "from the narrative paradigm view, the experts are the storytellers and the audience is not a group of observers but are active participants in the meaning-formation of the stories" (13). This is especially true of Sanger's audience, many of whom related to the stories and felt a sense of urgency to make their own stories public.

After Sanger published and mailed the first edition of *Woman Rebel*, she received notice from the Postmaster that her journal was unmailable for violating "section 211 of the Criminal Code." Part of this suppression was the result of the article titled, "The Prevention of Conception," which did not include any specific information on contraceptives. Sanger saw this censorship as an opportunity to publicly and politically challenge the Comstock laws. In the subsequent issues, Sanger called for direct action on behalf of her readers to stand up and challenge the laws and dominant authorities which oppressed them. Sanger's readers supported her and acknowledged, "It is highest [sic] time some American woman took up the cudgels against these damned hypocritical laws on the prevention of conception" (Sanger, "What They Say"). Sanger's voice seemed angry as it denounced those responsible for the working class struggles, and turned sympathetic when discussing the unnecessary suffering of the working class.[3] Yet, Sanger's narrative alone would not win the fight for reproductive freedom. It would take a national effort to challenge the laws that restricted the information necessary to limit family size.

A Public Response

Whether used to inform her audience on how to deliver sex education to a young child, or to inform adolescent girls about their bodies, reproduction, and disease, the use of stories, anecdotes, and personal experiences helped carry these private issues into the public sphere. Furthermore, many readers found the stories to be coherent and like their own experiences; they requested more information on the topic and encouraged Sanger to continue sharing her story on reproductive health. After the post office censored one of the articles printed in the second series, "many hundreds of letters, pleas, and petitions from a public genuinely concerned to know [about sexual health], poured in upon Mrs. Sanger that she had her articles published in book form" (Eastman, "Is the Truth Obscene?"). Soon after requests for multiple translations were made. One letter written to Sanger commented:

> I think that your book, 'What Every Mother Should Know' should be placed in the every mothers hands. To see this carried through I should like to do my share in placing some in the hands of the Lithuanian-speaking women. I am quite sure that the Lithuanian Women's Progressive Association would be glad to translate and circulate some, and if they would not, I should like to undertake the translation and distribution myself, with your kind permission (Rice-Nerwan, Letter to Sanger).

Evidently, the story of reproduction and hygiene created in *The Call* resonated with its readers. Some readers were even willing to take their own risks in distributing information censored under the Comstock act.

The idea of sex education was slowly filtering into a space occupied mainly by socialists and anarchists. In her publication, *The Woman Rebel,* Sanger continued to tell the story of reproductive health; this time, she challenged those responsible for banning her writing from print media. As a result Sanger's publication helped place the taboo topic of birth control in the public sphere.

The censoring of *The Woman Rebel*[4] provided additional publicity to her cause, and information pertaining to her arrest made headlines in several mainstream newspapers. Ironically, as officials attempted to suppress Sanger's story via an indictment the press coverage of the indictment provided Sanger with greater publicity for her stories on reproductive health and made these available to a much wider audience. Sanger's audience expanded from socialists and working class readers, to men and women from all walks of life. Sanger received tremendous public support for both her journal and her trial for violating the Comstock Act. Letters were written to the trial judge, U.S. District Attorney, and even the President of the United States requested that Sanger be acquitted of all the charges brought against her. One supporter's letter written to President

Woodrow Wilson declared, "I also respectfully call your attention to the support which this subject [Sanger's trial] has been given on the editorial pages of the best New York newspapers. I myself would be strongly against the discussion of this subject if I was not confident it was for the betterment of humanity."[5] When Sanger returned to the United States to face her trial she recalled stepping off the ship and reading the headlines of local papers—'What Shall We Do About Birth Control?' appeared on the cover of the *Pictorial Review*" (Sanger, "An Autobiography," 180). The term she helped coin was no longer a phrase used by her supporters alone, but a phrase which gained enough publicity to appear in the headlines of newspapers. Sanger had accomplished one of her missions: to make birth control a household topic. Sanger continued to receive public support for her cause and witnessed supporters taking action to secure their rights to information free from censorship.

By the seventh and final issue of *The Woman Rebel*, Sanger had expanded a space she had constituted, not only in her journal, but in other publications.[6] Discussions of birth control were transforming reproductive rights. As more citizens participated in the discussion of birth control, the idea became more publicly salient. Reed explained, "despite the entrenched conservatism of church and government and the disdain of the medical establishment, the middle and upper classes were coming out in favor of birth control or at least in favor of debating it heatedly" (70).

Storytelling: To Inform, Agitate, and Motivate

Margaret Sanger relied on storytelling as the means to inform her predominantly female working class audience on the facts of reproduction. As Sanger's goals shifted from informing the working class to agitating them, and challenging public policy, her rhetorical strategy also shifted and storytelling became the means to express hostility toward the dominant forces of the time. In doing so, Sanger's use of tropes, narrative strategies and conventional storytelling to confront dominant publics ultimately assisted in the creation of a public space that challenged those laws that prohibited open discussion on sex and reproduction.

Margaret Sanger's early struggle to provide women with contraceptive information undoubtedly sparked a half-century debate over access to birth control. What began as her attempt to assist the working class with controlling their fertility rates turned into a complicated relationship with the eugenics movement.[7] While doctors and reformers began to push for eugenics legislation that would allow for the sterilization of criminals, imbeciles, and rapists, Sanger supported the eugenics argument to advance her desire to make motherhood a choice.

Known as a radical activist during the early 20th century, Sanger fought against the capitalist economic system that she believed created poor living

conditions, poor health, lack of education, and poverty for many working class and immigrant families. Sanger "believed that women wanted their children to be free of poverty and disease, that women were *natural eugenicists*, and that birth control, which could limit the number of children and improve their quality of life, was the panacea to accomplish that" [emphasis added] (Sanger, "Eugenic, Race, and Margaret Sanger Revisited," 213). Although her involvement with the eugenics movement has created a shadow over her accomplishments, it is undeniable that Sanger helped shape public opinion on reproductive rights.

On January 8, 1918, Sanger and her supporters witnessed the story of reproductive control change political legislation. The *Crane decision* allowed physicians to provide information on contraception with married patients whose health required such information. Eventually, the *One Package* (1936) ruling allowed physicians to transport, prescribe, and provide contraception to their patients. Sanger's legacy will continue through the commitments of Planned Parenthood and other pro-choice organizations. In the end, Margaret Sanger assisted in changing laws to provide women a greater degree of rights over their bodies, and their choice for motherhood.

End Notes

1. Esther Katz, in the book, *The Selected Papers of Margaret Sanger Volume 1: The Woman Rebel, 1900-1928*, (Chicago: The University of Illinois Press, 2003), 185, states that the story of Sadie Sachs has never been confirmed and may have been a composite of several cases that Sanger put together for dramatic effect.
2. Margaret Sanger began her early advocacy for birth control by defending the rights of immigrant, working women and opposing women of higher social and economic statuses; however, after she returned from exile in Europe, many middle and upper class women supported Sanger both publicly and financially, and helped raise money for Sanger's federal trial. Sanger soon realized the educated classes possessed the most political influence and began to work with those who could help raise money for the cause. Eventually, Sanger would argue for the necessity of birth control to limit the reproduction rates of the "feeble-minded." She outlined this divide in her speech "The Children's Era" located at http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/margaretsanger.html.
3. The change in the tone of Sanger's voice is supported by feminist theories, which suggest writing should promote the "plurality of voices (rather than consistency of a dominant voice), a dialogic rather than monologic model" (Porter, 55).
4. After reviewing the first issue of *The Woman Rebel* Anthony Comstock put pressure on Postmaster General S. Marshall Snowden to ban the paper from being mailed. Citing the whole paper as indecent, lewd, lascivious and obscene, the first issue of *The Woman Rebel* was barred from the federal mail. By the publication of the sixth issue, Sanger received an indictment on three counts—two for publication of lewd and indecent articles and one for incitement to murder and riot, which came from the [July] issue. For more information see Madeline Gray, *Margaret Sanger: A Biography of the Champion for Birth Control* (New York: Richard Marek Publishers, 1979), 76.
5. The idea that birth control could be used for the "betterment of humanity" coincided with the eugenics movement that emerged in the late nineteenth century by Francis Galton. Eugenics proponents believed that biology, heredity, environmental conditions, and a social hygiene program could prevent the spread of social ills while simultaneously improving the biological characteristics of humanity. Many supporters of a eugenics program failed to see the discriminatory nature of the program for members of various ethnic, racial, class, and physically (dis)abled communities. In 1918, Margaret Sanger publicly supported the eugenics movement. Sanger argued that birth control provided the means necessary for social change. She believed many women, including uneducated

and impoverished women, would willingly accept the responsibility to control reproduction if given the choice. Yet, not all eugenics advocates welcomed Sanger's support. Charles Davenport, head of a eugenics research laboratory at Cold Spring Harbor, New York, opposed birth control because he believed it would undermine other eugenic-related scientific discoveries. By the end of the 1920s, the popularity of the eugenics movement declined. In 1928, the American Birth Control League publicly distanced itself from the American Eugenics Movement. However, the controversy surrounding the eugenics movement, and Sanger's public support for it, led many to consider Sanger a racist.

6. *The Evening Sun, The Mathusian,* and *The Masses* all echoed and supported Sanger's quest for open discussion on contraception.

7. Margaret Sanger's grandson, Alexander Sanger, discusses the many "misattributions, misunderstandings, and outright falsehoods about eugenics, race, and Margaret Sanger [that] have too often been the norm in the twentieth and now the twenty-first centuries" (210). To read more about the eugenics argument and the aspects which Sanger both supported and challenged, see "Eugenics, Race, and Margaret Sanger Revisited: Reproductive Freedom for All?" by Alexander Sanger, *Hypatia,* 22 no.2 (2007): 210-217.

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