



## The Eugenically Driven Female Spirit: Rhetorical Continuity from Margaret Sanger to Today

By Angela Franks

### Sanger's Vision: The Unfit and Fecund Woman

Margaret Sanger (1879-1966), the founder of the Planned Parenthood Federation of America and the International Planned Parenthood Federation, has been hailed as a great feminist foremother, a pioneer in the work of female liberation. Yet her feminism might not be recognizable to women today. Intimately linked with her belief in the goodness and necessity of birth control was a eugenic desire to control the reproduction of the "unfit." Birth control was for "fit" women like herself, who wished to be freed

from the difficulties of childbirth and child rearing in order to pursue a bourgeois, romantic vision of sexual freedom. But it was also for those women who were "unfit," who "recklessly" perpetuated their damaged genetic stock by irresponsibly breeding more children in an already overpopulated world. If the latter did not voluntarily embrace birth control, according to Sanger, it should be forced upon them.

Population control was a natural extension of Sanger's eugenic desire for population "quality, not quantity"; she insisted, "a *qualitative* factor as opposed to a *quantitative* one is of primary importance in dealing with the great masses of humanity."<sup>1</sup> She was one of the first and most influential activists to extend the influence of eugenics by concentrating on population control (that is, concentrating on the "not quantity" side of the eugenic equation), and her organizations made sure she would not be the last. Indeed, scientific demography had its ideological origins in eugenics. Demography's attitude toward

people was also determined by the "quantity vs. quality" dichotomy. Thus, the concern for reducing the number of people born was interwoven with the eugenic desire to reducing the number of "*unfit*" people born.

How could such eugenic sentiments be advanced by a feminist? And how could organizations such as Planned Parenthood, whose ostensible purpose is the promotion of women's rights, support such activities? As surprising as it might be to those unaware of the seriousness of Sanger's commitment to eugenic ideology, many forms of feminism have not been immune to oppressive tendencies and to anti-woman co-optations of the feminist ideal. I will summarize the elements of her rhetoric and then give a few indications as to how it is operative within the contemporary reproductive-rights movement.

We see in Sanger's 1920 book *Woman and the New Race* that, underlying Sanger's promotion of birth control, was her understanding of what she called the "sex servitude" of women.<sup>2</sup> The inferior

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place of woman was caused by her acceptance of the “chains” forged by “the maternal functions of her nature.”<sup>3</sup> When “unenlightened” women participated in what she called the “wickedness of large families,” they foisted upon the world hordes of “cheap” human beings.<sup>4</sup> Note that human beings (and, therefore, women) do not have an innate dignity. They are like a commodity that loses its value when the market is flooded. These worthless people in turn became the ignorant, idle, impoverished class.<sup>5</sup> Thus, “woman has, through her reproductive ability, founded and perpetuated the tyrannies of the Earth.”<sup>6</sup>

If the cause of “war, famine, poverty and oppression of the workers”<sup>7</sup> is to be found in the woman’s womb, then she cannot evade her responsibility: “The task is hers. It cannot be avoided by excuses, nor can it be delegated. It is not enough for woman to point to the self-evident domination of man. Nor does it avail to plead the guilt of rulers and the exploiters of labor...In her submission lies her error and guilt.”<sup>8</sup> As a result, “she incurred a debt to society. Regardless of her own wrongs, regardless of her lack of opportunity and regardless of all other considerations, *she* must pay that debt.”<sup>9</sup> Nor can the payment of this debt be mere palliative action, such as programs of social and political amelioration. No, the fault lies in her womb, and there the price must be paid.<sup>10</sup>

Sanger’s gnostically dualist view of women leads her to this conclusion. In opposition to “the

chains of [woman’s] own reproductivity,” there exists “the feminine spirit”.<sup>11</sup> Woman’s desire for freedom is born of the feminine spirit, which is the absolute, elemental, inner urge of womanhood.”<sup>12</sup> This spirit can be understood as a vitalist, quasi-Hegelian spirit of the race expressing itself within woman. It has as its proximate goal the freedom of individual women but its ultimate goal is “the birth of a new race.”<sup>13</sup> Thus, the feminine spirit can express itself in a specific kind of motherhood that is not slavery, when motherhood is voluntary and produces “fit” children, while the “chief obstacles” to its expression are “the burden of unwanted children.”<sup>14</sup>

She believes, at least in 1920, that free men and women bring forth fit children, while unfree parents can only bring forth the unfit. That is, she has not at this point embraced a full-blown eugenic determinism when it comes to the poor, as she will eventually. In 1939, for example, in a letter to Frederick Osborn, the head of the American Eugenics Society, she insists that the poor as a class should have their fertility controlled; whether or not they are “free” is no longer a consideration.<sup>15</sup> In *Woman and the New Race*, however, it was Sanger’s goal to be more radical than Marx in showing the way toward the emancipation of the working class, here by means of sexual as opposed to economic revolution. Birth control has the power to elevate the unfit to the level of the fit (though still their fertility will be under control). Thus, at least in this work, she is unwilling to call

the underclass (or at least the working class) unfit as a class, although in an article written two years earlier she still held that other groups of people should not reproduce:

*By all means there should be no children when mother (or father) suffers from such diseases as tuberculosis, gonorrhoea, syphilis, cancer, epilepsy [sic], insanity, drunkenness or mental disorders... No more children should be born when the parents, though healthy themselves, find that there children are physically or mentally defective. No matter how much they desire children, no man and woman have a right to bring into the world those who are sure to suffer from mental or physical affliction. It condemns the child to a life of misery and places upon the community the burden of caring for them, probably of their defective descendants for many generations.*<sup>16</sup>

The kind of eugenic mobility made possible by “voluntary motherhood” is still open to the poor in 1920; only later does she doubt that any real improvement is possible.<sup>17</sup>

In *Woman and the New Race*, in contrast to her later letter, Sanger maintains that a motherhood freed from the burden of “enforced maternity” “works in wondrous ways. It refuses to bring forth weaklings...It withholds the unfit, brings forth the fit; brings few children into homes where there is not sufficient to provide for them. Instinctively it avoids all those

things which multiply racial handicaps.”<sup>18</sup> The feminine spirit, Sanger contends, when freed from fear of unwanted children, will naturally channel itself into an appropriately eugenic maternity. This is due to Sanger’s hyper-romantic idea of sexual love in which the free development of the personalities of the lovers always takes precedence over the responsibilities of parenting. Given this narcissism, few children can be accommodated, but after all, eugenic reproduction is by definition a matter of quality, not quantity: “In sharp contrast with these women who ignorantly bring forth large families and who thereby enslave themselves, we find a few women who have one, two or three children or no children at all. These women, with the exception of the childless ones, live full-rounded lives.”<sup>19</sup> What does such a life look like? “Theirs is the opportunity to keep abreast of the times, to make and cultivate a varied circle of friends, to seek amusements as suits their taste and means, to know the meaning of real recreation. All these things remain unrealized desires to the prolific mother.” They are, in other words, “fit mothers of the race, . . . the courted comrades of the men they choose, rather than the ‘slaves of slaves.’”<sup>20</sup>

The woman who does, however, obey the “feminine spirit” by controlling her fertility not only reads more best-sellers. She also, needless to say, has a better sex life, by which Sanger means a promiscuous sex life. Sanger was probably the foremost American representative of eugenic sexology along the lines of that proposed by the Englishman

Havelock Ellis. She promoted a sexuality on the phallogocentric model: pleasures without commitment. This is a sexuality with a very definite socioeconomic positioning, typified in the routines of upper-class adultery, shared with the bohemians and members of the intelligentsia who were the hangers-on of the decadent upper-class. Sanger’s commitment to this kind of sexuality is revealed in her life and words.<sup>21</sup>

Unfortunately, connected to Sanger’s desire for this specific type of bourgeois sexuality is a belief that every woman ought to make the same reproductive choices that she herself had made. Now, this particular patterning of sexual behavior, romanticized sex without committed relationship, harmonizes nicely with the goals of negative eugenics, in that the kind of “freedom” at stake in this sexuality necessitates the reduction of childbirth. More to the point, extension of this specific kind of sexual behavior to the working classes through birth control also advances the negative eugenic goal of reducing the reproduction of the poor. Thus the working classes are pressured to copy the particular reproductive choices of society’s elite.<sup>22</sup>

This combination of eugenics with sexual free-thinking can be seen in Sanger’s essay, “The Need of Birth Control in America,” published in *Birth Control: Facts and Responsibilities* and edited by eugenicist and American Birth Control League National Council member Adolf Meyer. There she defines “what we mean by Birth Control today: *hygienic, scientific, and harmless control of procreative*

*powers*. Thus comprehended, Birth Control places in our hands the key to that greatest of all human problems—how to reconcile individual freedom with the necessities of race hygiene.”<sup>23</sup> In one sentence, Sanger links the two ideas—free sex and eugenics—that motivated her agenda, and ties them together with what makes both possible: birth control. Sanger’s brilliance as a strategist reveals itself here: she saw clearly that if women could be made to internalize what she truly believed was sexual freedom (that is, the kind of sexuality described above), this introjected heteronomy would also further eugenic purposes. As we will see in the last chapter, Sanger argued that “liberated” motherhood would “instinctively” avoid “all those things which multiply racial handicaps.”<sup>24</sup> Eugenic unfreedom would feel like liberation.

But what if “individual freedom” refused to be reconciled to the necessities of the race? That is, what if a woman preferred children over the pursuit of bourgeois sexual pleasure? This was indeed a central dilemma for Sanger, and she solved it by determining who was and was not worthy of “individual freedom” in light of the eugenic criterion of what conforms to the race’s needs (bearing in mind that “race” for Sanger meant the human race). This is the fundamental point when it comes to Sanger’s supposed “voluntarism” regarding contraceptive use: as a “controller” (as birth control advocates were called in Sanger’s day by Marie Stopes, the English birth-control activist), she believed that a woman had a right to individual freedom

only when she demonstrated that she was fit to use that freedom appropriately—and the test of fitness was whether or not she recognized her eugenic responsibility.<sup>25</sup> When she did not, more “rational” authorities had to step in.

Sanger’s vision of the life of mothers in large working-class families makes quite clear that she thought that large families make a woman unfit. To return to *Woman and the New Race*, let us examine Sanger’s description of the mother of a large family.

Such a mother is tired, nervous, irritated and ill-tempered; a detriment, often, instead of a help to her children. Motherhood becomes a disaster and childhood a tragedy... She is a breeding machine and a drudge—she is not an asset but a liability to her neighborhood, to her class, to society. She can be nothing as long as she is denied means of limiting her family.”<sup>26</sup>

And such unfit women breed unfit children: “The most immoral practice of the day is breeding too many children... Social workers, physicians and reformers cry out to stop the breeding of these, who must exist in want until they become permanent members of the ranks of the unfit.”<sup>27</sup> As a result, birth control must be aimed at the unfit: “Birth control itself . . . 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 defectives.”<sup>28</sup>

Over and over again, Sanger comes back to the “responsibility” or the “duty” that this situation places upon woman. “Within her is wrapped up the future of the race—it is hers to make or mar.”<sup>29</sup> As a result, birth control is strictly the woman’s burden: “It is woman’s duty as well as her privilege to lay hold of the means of freedom. Whatever men may do, she cannot escape the responsibility.”<sup>30</sup> As she said in the first chapter of the book, woman’s unfreedom is fundamentally caused by her maternal life, and only birth control can bring liberty; all other attempts at restructuring society or male behavior are merely superficial in comparison, including the struggle for suffrage and equal property rights (which she basically dismisses as epiphenomenal window-dressing).<sup>31</sup> Woman must control her fertility for the sake of the race. In compensation, Sanger closely binds the eugenic task to the self-actualization of women: “If we are to make racial progress, the development of womanhood must precede motherhood in every individual woman.”<sup>32</sup> If she suffers want or injustice, she has no one to blame but herself for not freeing her “feminine spirit” by controlling her body.

To summarize: Sanger’s writings, especially *Woman and the New Race*, present an ideology of womanhood that combines a commitment to a libertine sexuality with a belief that smaller families are eugenically fitter families. The internal force that guides women in these decisions is what she calls the “feminine spirit,” and those who disregard

its eugenic promptings show themselves thereby to be unfit. It should be noted that Sanger was by no means the first nor the last to allude to these themes. However, she popularized her bold combination of eugenics and sexual free-thinking by means of her powerful personality and the institutions she founded (first and foremost, the Planned Parenthood Federation of America and the International Planned Parenthood Federation). No other eugenicist was able to seize the imagination of the public the way Sanger could, and no other vaguely Marxist, bohemian libertine in the 1920s and 30s was able to put such a respectable face on the sexual ideology that would become common coin in the 1960s.

### Contemporary Parallels

It is depressingly easy to find current examples of all of these rhetorical strains, but I will single out just a few of each. It should be noted that a direct line cannot necessarily be drawn from Sanger to each of these speakers, but that does not mean that her influence is not present. Rather, as I have just noted, Sanger’s sedimentation of these various rhetorical elements into a coherent whole has been perpetuated in the language emitting from Planned Parenthood, the oldest reproductive-rights organization in the country (dating from 1916).

The first example I shall inflict upon you comes from the student newspaper of West Virginia University in Morgantown, West Virginia, my hometown. In the April 15, 2004 *Daily Atheneum*, Courtney Balestier, the “city

editor,” wrote a column on John Kerry entitled “Liberals are Allowed to be Catholics too.” Amid much irrational verbiage is tucked away this interesting nugget: “The Catholic Church does not support birth control, premarital sex or abortion—all *women’s rights issues* that I value.”<sup>33</sup> What interests me in this statement is the triad that Balestier sets up; many people would argue, albeit wrongly, that female equality requires fertility control and thus that the latter is a “women’s rights” issue. But “premarital sex”? How is a supposed right to free sex connected to women’s liberation? Balestier has almost certainly never read *Woman and the New Race*, but her leap of logic is derived directly from Margaret Sanger’s ideology of supposedly feminist sexual liberation, which states that the liberated woman is the sexually promiscuous one, who, of course, strictly regulates the possibility of any offspring that might result—hence the need for birth control and abortion, the other two “women’s rights issues” that Balestier cherishes.

Such warmed-over, so-called feminism can be found these days between the covers of any *Cosmopolitan* magazine. But what about the “feminine spirit” mythology? While many on the pro-abortion side are unsentimental pragmatists, many others advocate a kind of neo-pagan mythology that echoes Sanger’s vague spiritualism. For example, the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice offers the following prayer, which comes from their Nebraska affiliate:

Creator God, You are  
the source of our life.  
You are the energy inside  
our spirit...  
You promised that we will  
grow up to be in you.  
Seeds of divinity are planted  
in us...  
We renew our strength.  
We are one with you.  
The world is not yet finished.  
We are co-creators with you.<sup>34</sup>

Many other examples could be quoted. The point is simply that both Sanger and contemporary pro-abortionists defend the decision to live a certain lifestyle (which, for Sanger, was that of sexual liberation and fertility limitation) on the basis of a divine mandate, which takes the form variously of “seeds of the divine” within us, the feminine spirit, or some other pseudo-mystical manifestation.

The last point of Sanger’s rhetoric is perhaps the most contested. How many pro-abortion activists would (openly, at least) advocate eugenics? Surely such a discredited pseudo-science was abandoned with the Nazi’s defeat in World War II. Answering this question thoroughly requires careful historical analysis, a task that cannot be attempted here. From a rhetorical perspective, however, we can find the perpetuation of Sanger’s eugenic construct.

Recall that she claimed that birth control would produce eugenically fit families, because it would automatically allow only really wanted and really fit children to be conceived and born. Without using the clearly eugenic

language of “fitness,” many pro-abortion advocates echo this language. See, for example, the article by the Rev. Nancy Rockwell, published by the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice in its Educational Series; in it, she argues that the Bible:

repeatedly offers a clear and consistent declaration of free choice for women... Women who will be called blessed by their children—and excellent by the men in their lives—are likely to be women of prudence and planning who manage their difficulties and the survival of their households well.<sup>35</sup>

Such housewifery entails determining which children will be allowed to survive, based on criteria that sound suspiciously like Sanger’s in *Woman and the New Race*. After quoting Proverbs 31 (“Her children rise up and call her blessed, her husband also...”), she argues:

The children who will rise up and call their mothers blessed are unlikely to be the unwanted children of enforced pregnancies and shotgun weddings. Nor are admiring husbands likely to be those who are angered by the birth of unwanted children, decreased prosperity, and a sense of curse rather than blessing in their sexual and family lives.<sup>36</sup>

Just as Sanger assumes that large families are a hindrance to culture and almost inevitably prove to be dysgenic, so too does Rockwell equate fertility with

lowered status, and clearly values the latter over the former.

As with the other contemporary examples we have examined, Rockwell (despite her degree from Harvard Divinity School) is unlikely to have read Sanger's works. But she has completely bought into the lie, perpetuated by Sanger's institutions, that female liberation requires the suppression of female fertility. The last source we shall examine, however, without a doubt is drawing consciously from Margaret Sanger's works. Let us turn briefly to the arguments found in Alexander Sanger's book, just published in 2004, *Beyond Choice: Reproductive Freedom in the 21st Century*.

Alexander is Margaret's grandson, and as an undergraduate he wrote his thesis on her early activism. *Woman and the New Race* falls into this period, and Alexander has read the work. Though denying that he is promoting eugenics, because he thinks that would entail the use of force in promoting or preventing reproduction, Alexander promotes eugenics nonetheless. He just calls it "biology" instead: "All of humanity has benefited when individuals have control of their reproduction. This is a biological statement, not a eugenic one."<sup>37</sup> The difference between the "biological" needs of the race, as proven (he believes) by evolutionary and sociobiology, and eugenics is simply that the former express the innate drive within each person to reproduce successfully, while the latter mandates certain reproductive decisions. Left to themselves,

he believes, women will reproduce eugenically.<sup>38</sup> This is a direct echo of the rhetoric of his grandmother (to whom he devotes considerable space in his book).

Sanger's analysis of the history of eugenics seeks to exculpate his argument from any eugenic taint. It doesn't quite work, however, because he makes several assumptions that cannot be supported historically. For example, he argues that Margaret Sanger's association with eugenics was fundamentally pragmatic, not ideological, but she never renounced (and frequently affirmed) the eugenic philosophy of *Woman and the New Race*. Also, he presents eugenics as a giant scientific scam perpetuated on the world by a handful of quacks. Yet almost all the prominent scientific minds of the 1920s and 1930s were proponents of one form of eugenics or another, and many of their claims (although refined) have been given new currency since the success of the Human Genome Project. For this reason, declarations of support for a "new eugenics" have been common in the last decade. Eugenics need not be unscientific, as long as there is some basis for arguing for the heredity of certain traits. Eugenics need not be openly coercive, either: the most prominent American eugenicist for fifty years in America, Frederick Osborn, popularized the "eugenic hypothesis," which argued that human beings naturally will choose eugenic reproduction when allowed to do so.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, Alexander Sanger winds up unknowingly parroting Osborn's hypothesis. The former thus claims to avoid making eugenic

claims, while the central argument of his book is identical to that made by America's premier eugenicist.

A kind of "pro-family" argument has been making the rounds recently (see the April 22, 2004 article by William Saletan in slate.com, for example, that argues that teenagers, the poor, and mothers of disabled fetuses are all more likely to have healthy babies later, when they are better able to), but Sanger is one of the few to frame it in explicitly biological and evolutionary terms. The leap, however, from pro-choice/pro-family rhetoric to eugenics is not so difficult, as *Woman and the New Race* showed us. Rockwell, Saletan, and Sanger all argue that abortion serves the goal of healthy families, and it is easy to see how disabled babies would be considered manifestly "unhealthy," both in themselves and also for their families. Sanger makes the clear jump from the issue of individual health to the health of the race, and it is here that the discussion becomes explicitly eugenic; Rockwell and Saletan might well protest that they intend no such move. But their rhetoric provides no protection against this easy move from a kind of socially concerned libertarianism to eugenics—indeed their rhetoric promotes such a progression. After all, if something is unhealthy for a family, surely it is unhealthy for society as a whole, and therefore, if you take a long view, for the human race or the human gene pool as a whole. As Margaret Sanger observed, if you accept that "unfit" offspring are the reliable result of certain situations (such

as poverty), you have to accept that this kind of reproduction has repercussions for society. Alexander Sanger relies on her argument when he takes the language of Rockwell and Saletan to its logical evolutionary and eugenic conclusion.

## Conclusion

The Canadian biochemist and bioethicist Greg Wolbring has observed, “With genetic selection, the mother becomes the quality control gatekeeper of the gene pool. This is not really choice, it’s eugenics. We can’t kill imperfect people, like the Nazis did, so we do it more subtly by preventing their birth.”<sup>40</sup> Wolbring is a paraplegic, so he has an acute sense of the anti-disability bias that drives most eugenic proposals. He also has seen that eugenics invariably has negative effects on women, because the pressure to become the eugenic gatekeepers is frequently too much to withstand and obviates any supposed “choice” in the matter of bringing a disabled child to birth. Sanger not only foresaw this situation, she welcomed it. “The task is hers,” as she said; women bear the responsibility of controlling their fertility in order to bring forth only the eugenically fit. If someone whom our society does not consider “fit” is born, the results that Rev. Rockwell predicted come into play: the husband is “angered” and feels that their marital fertility is a “curse.” Instead of critiquing the sexism that burdens women with the unnecessary burden of determining who is fit enough to live and instead of working

for a more just society in which all life is welcomed, Sanger, Rockwell, and the others capitulate: Rockwell praises only that supposedly wise woman of “prudence and planning” who calculates just how far she is willing to give of herself—and who refuses to be stretched to a greater degree of self-sacrifice. Rockwell implicitly approves of the judgmental husband who refuses to welcome the child who is expensive, unattractive, or inconvenient. And all this in the name of the Bible.

Surely it is not a feminist solution (much less “pro-family”) to argue that if problems arise in the family, it is female fertility that is at fault. Yet that is the message that the pro-abortion side is left with at the end of the day. After the Courtney Balestier’s have had their fun (and pimped out more than a few of their coed peers in the process) and then find themselves pregnant, they are offered the impossible “liberation” of killing their own child, in obedience to their inner woman-spirit and its eugenic promptings. After all, they can always have their healthy, fit children later . . . can’t they? Well, maybe, if their cervix will allow for another pregnancy and if the emotional devastation wrought by the abortion will allow for anything resembling a functional relationship. All in all, an uncertain plan for happiness that has been foisted upon the world’s women. In the end, what the eugenic rhetoric that Margaret Sanger has bequeathed to us has given us not the liberation of women but

the sexual wounding of untold people, the scapegoating of female fertility, and the death of many millions of children.

*Angela Franks’s book, Margaret Sanger’s Eugenic Legacy: The Control of Female Fertility, has just been published by McFarland. Portions of this paper are taken from that work. For more information on the book and on Sanger, visit [www.AngelaFranks.com](http://www.AngelaFranks.com).*



## References

- 1 Margaret Sanger, *The Pivot of Civilization* (New York: Brentano's, 1922), 22.
- 2 Margaret Sanger, *Women and the New Race* (New York: Blue Ribbon Books, 1920) 1.,
- 3 Ibid., 2.
- 4 Ibid., 57, 3.
- 5 Ibid., 3.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Ibid., 7.
- 8 Ibid., 6.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 For similar eugenic philosophies found in other feminists of the time, see Angelique Richardson, "Biology and Feminism," *Critical Quarterly* 42 (3, 2000): 35-63.
- 11 Sanger, 1920, 9-12
- 12 Ibid., 27-28.
- 13 Ibid., 226.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 This letter is discussed in more detail in Angela Franks, *Margaret Sanger's Eugenic Legacy: The Control of Female Fertility* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2005), 11-12, 17.
- 16 Margaret Sanger, "When Should a Woman Avoid Having Children?" *Birth Control Review*, November 1918, 6-7.
- 17 In addition to the letter to Frederick Osborn cited above, see her Lasker Foundation Award Speech, October 25, 1950, in MSP-LC, quoted in Franks, op. cit., 54. When scholars such as Linda Gordon and Angela Y. Davis claim a shift from an early radical/socialist commitment to a later eugenic one, they perhaps have in mind this movement in Sanger's thought, which basically consigned the poor to the class of the "unfit" by the late 1920s. What they do not see, however, is that Sanger's commitment to eugenic birth control dates from her "education" in England in 1914 and 1915 with Havelock Ellis and the other Neo-Malthusians. In other words, her basic eugenic attitude perdures through the evolution in her thought about poverty.
- 18 Sanger, 1920, 45.
- 19 Ibid., 53.
- 20 Ibid., 55.
- 21 Sanger's many relationships, frequently with British bohemians, and the emotional romanticism that accompanied these entanglements are on frequent display throughout her letters.
- 22 Even before Sanger's activism, the wealthy tended to have fewer children than the poor. See Andrea Tone, *Devices and Desires: A History of Contraceptives in America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001) for a history of the contraceptive black-market.
- 23 Sanger, 1925, 13-14, italics hers. In this essay, the meaning of "individual freedom" is obscure: freedom for what or for whom? The surrounding text gives a Neo-Malthusian reading of the increasing rationalization of eugenic control down through history, moving from the savage methods of infanticide to the civilized means of birth control, with an allusion to the uncontrollable "reproductive instinct" (14). Later statements refer to the sexual drive as "one of the strongest forces in Nature" (42). These hints, combined with the other preoccupations that come through in her writings as a whole, clarify that "freedom" means primarily the freedom to engage in sexual activity without having to have recourse to brutal eugenic controls.
- 24 Sanger, 1920, 45.
- 25 McCann claims that Sanger was guided fundamentally by voluntarism (see Carole R. McCann, *Birth Control Politics in the United States, 1916-1945* [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1944] 119), but this claim can be made only when one chooses to ignore the many passages in Sanger that put definite limits on the "freedom" being advocated. In the end, McCann does not take Sanger's own words sufficiently seriously.
- 26 Sanger, 1920, 53.
- 27 Ibid., 57.
- 28 Ibid., 229.
- 29 Ibid., 93. See also 185: "When women have raised the standards of sex ideals and purged the human mind of its unclean conception of sex, the fountain of the race will have been cleansed. Mothers will bring forth, in purity and in joy, a race that is morally and spiritually free." Or 233: "This is the dawn. Womanhood shakes off its bondage. It asserts its right to be free. In its freedom, its thoughts turn to the race. Like begets like. We gather perfect fruit from perfect trees. The race is but the amplification of its mother body, the multiplication of flesh habitations— beautified and perfected for souls akin to the mother soul."
- 30 Ibid.
- 31 Ibid., 2.
- 32 Ibid., 229.
- 33 Courtney Balestier, "Liberals are Allowed to be Catholics too," *Daily Atheneum*, April 15, 2004, 4, italics mine.
- 34 Nebraska Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice, "A Woman's Prayer," [www.rcrc.org/resources/sermons\\_prayers/womans\\_prayer.htm](http://www.rcrc.org/resources/sermons_prayers/womans_prayer.htm), accessed June 20, 2004.
- 35 Rev. Nancy Rockwell, "How Good Women Make Wise Choices," Educational Series no. 7, Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice (Washington, DC), n.d., 1, 4.
- 36 Ibid., 4.
- 37 Alexander Sanger, *Beyond Choice: Reproductive Freedom in the 21st Century* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2004), 69.
- 38 "Humans know what is best for them when they reproduce. Humans haven't needed any social engineering from government or reformers to make them reproduce better" (ibid.).
- 39 See the helpful synopsis by Frederick Osborn and Carl Jay Bajema, "The Eugenic Hypothesis," *Social Biology* 19 (4, 1972): 337-45.
- 40 Quoted in Judy Rebick, "Body Politics: Attack of the Tomato People," *Herizons* 15 (2), Oct. 31, 2001, 47.