

Investigating the Eugenic Value of the Birth Control Movement: 1910-1930

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15 May 2022

In “The Eugenic Value of Birth Control Propaganda” (1921), Margaret Sanger wrote: “The most urgent problem today is how to limit and discourage the over-fertility of the mentally and physically defective.”<sup>1</sup> Margaret Sanger, the founder of the birth control movement in the US, advanced contraceptive use and technology during first-wave feminism. The narrative of feminist movements in the early twentieth century focused on labor and wage-earning reform, maternalism and feminism, suffrage and war, and the 19th Amendment. In the 1920s and 30s, conservatism and rising concerns over immigration and economic crisis divided the women’s movement. But this is the simplistic story of feminist reformers.

Critical literature on the subject has failed to recognize the unique perspectives of feminist reformers and their influence on eugenics. Margaret Sanger openly wrote about eugenics and formed connections with eugenicists. Yet, mainstream narratives overlook this aspect of the birth control movement during the height of the American eugenics movement. Since the birth control movement fueled second-wave feminism, examining how Margaret Sanger implemented eugenic arguments is essential for understanding how contraceptives both expanded and limited women’s reproductive choices in the twentieth century. This paper challenges traditional narratives of US women’s history by investigating Sanger’s application of eugenics ideology to women’s reproductive rights.

Eugenic thinking originated with Charles Darwin and his theories of natural selection.<sup>2</sup> The biological concept of “survival of the fittest” contributed to social darwinist justifications of imperialism, inequality, and racism. As social darwinism gained popularity in the late nineteenth century, Sir Francis Galton coined the term “eugenics” in 1883, encouraging the genetically advantaged to bear more children. Although Galton focused on increasing desirable traits within

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<sup>1</sup> Margaret Sanger, “The Eugenic Value of Birth Control Propaganda,” *Birth Control Review*, (Oct 1921): 5, Margaret Sanger MicrofilmsS70:913, 2.

<sup>2</sup> Diane B. Paul, *Controlling Human Heredity: 1865 to the Present*, Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2003, 34.

the population, positive eugenics influenced negative eugenics in the US. Based on the belief that undesirable traits could be removed, procedures such as sterilization and selective breeding were used to prevent the procreation of the “unfit.”<sup>3</sup> As eugenics gained popularity in the early twentieth century, Elizabeth Stanton, Charlotte Gilman, Margaret Sanger, and supporters of the free love movement used eugenic science as a platform to obtain their objectives for women’s political and social equality. This project situates Sanger’s advocacy for birth control in the context of feminist eugenics and analyzes her ideological shift towards eugenic feminism.

To detail a more complicated narrative of the type of eugenics Sanger supported, clarifying the difference between eugenic feminism and feminist eugenics is critical. According to Susan Marie Rensing, “eugenic feminism” refers to orthodox eugenicists and anti-feminists who used eugenics to limit feminism to focus on motherhood and reproduction for racial betterment.<sup>4</sup> For example, the 1905 race suicide campaign directly attacked women’s rights by arguing that educated, economically independent women were unfeminine and unable to bear children. Furthermore, during the 1910s, members of the American Breeders Association Eugenics Committee constrained women’s choices to focus on motherhood, arguing that women accommodate themselves to having and raising children rather than advancing any dramatic social restructuring.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, orthodox eugenicists were more politically conservative and used their professional influence to promote discriminatory policies like anti-immigration and sterilization.

Contrastingly, the tradition of “feminist eugenics” describes feminist reformers who advocated for women’s equality and separated sex from motherhood. For instance, proponents of

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<sup>3</sup> Wendy Kline, *Building a Better Race: Gender, Sexuality, and Eugenics from the Turn of the Century to the Baby Boom* (Berkeley, Calif: Univ. of California Press, 2005), 3.

<sup>4</sup> Susan Marie Rensing, “Feminist Eugenics in America: From Free Love to Birth Control, 1880–1930,” Order No. 3220029, University of Minnesota, 2006, 12.

<sup>5</sup> Rensing, “Feminist Eugenics in America,” 118.

feminist eugenics called for women's access to professional and educational opportunities outside of motherhood, arguing that higher education would improve child-rearing. In addition, feminists argued that reproductive rights would give women control over their bodies while serving eugenic interests via population control and improving the quality of the human race.<sup>6</sup> Specifically, feminists were supporters of sex-based eugenics focused on "quality over quantity," placing the woman as the agent of eugenic change. This group was less conservative due to the progressivism of women's rights; however, it was still primarily an upper-middle-class group operating within early twentieth century social standards. Since birth control was designed to assist women's reproductive rights while preventing racial decline, Sanger carried on the tradition of feminist eugenics by combining feminist goals with eugenic reasoning. Despite recent research on feminists and their ties to eugenics, scholars question the conflicting nature of eugenics and feminism operating within the birth control movement.

The historiography of eugenics in the United States has not fully explored how women's rights advocates applied eugenics ideology to their feminist agendas. In addition, literature on the birth control movement has simply contributed to Sanger's reputation as a feminist or a conservative. Although Margaret Sanger is recognized as the founder of the birth control movement, few historical accounts look closely at who Sanger was. For instance, in *Birth Control in America: The Career of Margaret Sanger*, David Kennedy belittles Sanger's importance and argues that persistent emotionalism compromised her effectiveness. Moreover, Linda Gordon's *Woman's Body, Woman's Right*, portrays her unfairly as a conservative and argues that Sanger focused more on eugenics at the expense of women's reproductive rights.

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<sup>6</sup> "Birth Control," The Eugenics Archives, accessed May 6, 2021, <https://eugenicsarchive.ca/discover/connections/535eeaba7095aa0000000211>.

However, Ellen Chesler's *Women of Valor* gives a far richer and fuller recounting of Margaret Sanger's personal life, career, and birth control movement. For instance, Chesler's biography examines the personal and public dimensions of Sanger's life by utilizing the full range of archival materials Sanger assembled during her lifetime of intimate relationships, intellectual, and political pursuits.<sup>7</sup> Although many aspects of Sanger's character were admirable, Chesler scrutinizes her involvement in the eugenics movement and her public writings, which convey blatant instances of racism. Nevertheless, Chesler argues that Sanger believed in women's reproductive rights above all and used eugenic discourse to build credibility among professionals. Overall, Chesler emphasizes the shortcomings of previous biographical works by narrating Sanger's life in great detail while simultaneously showing the evolution of the birth control movement.

Even though Chesler's biography describes Sanger's childhood, intimate relationships, and the evolution of birth control, Wendy Kline's *Building a Better Race* seeks to explain how and why eugenics became an appealing solution to the problem of moral disorder and women's reproduction.<sup>8</sup> By focusing on the emergence and evolution of eugenics, Kline argues that eugenics elicited professional support because it linked two issues of the white middle class: race and gender.<sup>9</sup> For example, Kline explores the white middle-class birthrate decline and the two models of womanhood promoted by eugenicists: the "mother of tomorrow" and the "moron."<sup>10</sup> For instance, the mother of tomorrow represented the ideal of white middle-class womanhood, one supported by suffragettes who argued that responsible women deserve social opportunities and the right to vote. Whereas the moron symbolized the danger of female sexuality if women

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<sup>7</sup> Ellen Chesler, *Woman of Valor: Margaret Sanger and the Birth Control Movement in America* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 1992), 30.

<sup>8</sup> Kline, *Building a Better Race*, 2.

<sup>9</sup> Kline, *Building a Better Race*, 2.

<sup>10</sup> Kline, *Building a Better Race*, 3.

gained control over their bodies. Even though Sanger supported birth control over sterilization, Kline argues that Sanger embraced eugenics as a civilizing force that would further women's rights and better society. For instance, Kline refers to Sanger's definition of birth control as "more children from the fit, less from the unfit"<sup>11</sup> to highlight the role of eugenics at birth control conferences in the early 1920s. Unlike Chesler, who specifically examines Sanger's life and the politics behind birth control, Kline provides a more thorough analysis of the overlap between the ideas and goals of the birth control and eugenics movements. Although Chesler and Kline look at different components of eugenics and gender, this paper evaluates how Sanger bridged eugenics and feminism within the birth control movement.

Johanna Schoen's *Choice and Coercion: Birth Control, Sterilization, and Abortion in Public Health and Welfare* highlights the double-edged application of reproductive technologies, suggesting that contraceptives could extend reproductive control to women or be used to control women's reproduction.<sup>12</sup> Expanding on Kline's discussion of women's involvement with eugenics, Schoen analyzes how state politics used reproductive methods to expand and limit women's reproductive choices. By utilizing 7,500 case histories of women interacting with clinics and public health, Schoen's research focuses on American women and their experiences with the modern welfare state. More specifically, Schoen depicts the struggle of poor women and racial minorities who had to negotiate and challenge health and welfare officials to gain agency over their reproduction. For example, the papers of the North Carolina Eugenics Board show how sterilization programs overwhelmingly targeted poor and nonwhite communities, but also provided poor women opportunities to receive medical care. Since most health professionals believed that the poor passed on undesirable qualities, eugenicists and birth control advocates

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<sup>11</sup> Kline, *Building a Better Race*, 65.

<sup>12</sup> Johanna Schoen, *Choice & Coercion Birth Control, Sterilization, and Abortion in Public Health and Welfare* (Chapel Hill u.a.: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2005), 3.

geared contraceptive programs to the poor.<sup>13</sup> Due to the movement's slow progress and challenges with conservative medical professionals, Schoen suggests that Sanger's frustration led her to emphasize eugenic and economic arguments to gain support, credibility, and legitimacy for birth control.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, Schoen argues that professionals viewed birth control as a scientific solution to poverty and designed programs for impoverished communities to curb the growth of those considered undesirable.<sup>15</sup>

Unlike these scholars, Susan Rensing's 2006 dissertation "Feminist Eugenics in America: From Free Love to Birth Control, 1880–1930" investigates the tradition of feminist eugenics in the late nineteenth century to trace the appropriation of eugenics by Charlotte Gilman and Margaret Sanger. Placing women activists at the forefront of her research, Rensing shows how feminists used their autonomy to formulate and apply eugenics ideology. While much of the historiography represents Sanger as abandoning her feminism for professional approval, Rensing details a more complicated narrative by explaining what kind of eugenics Sanger supported and how she followed in a tradition of feminist eugenics. For instance, Sanger's *Woman Rebel* continued the "quality vs. quantity" discourse of the Lucifer cohort, portraying women's freedom and birth control as necessary for eugenic progress. However, Sanger did limit the focus of the birth control movement to motherhood and breeding for racial betterment. To understand these aspects of her ideology, Rensing clarifies the difference between "eugenic feminism" and "feminist eugenics." Even though Sanger asserted that birth control was the most truly eugenic method, Rensing does not include evidence of Sanger advocating for better breeding and using contraceptives to eliminate the unfit. However, Rensing suggests that Sanger forfeited feminist eugenics to gain support from orthodox eugenicists, showing a shift from feminist eugenics to

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<sup>13</sup> Schoen, *Choice & Coercion Birth Control*, 23.

<sup>14</sup> Schoen, *Choice & Coercion Birth Control*, 22.

<sup>15</sup> Schoen, *Choice & Coercion Birth Control*, 71.

eugenic feminism.<sup>16</sup> Rensing's research stresses continuity over time to argue that first-wave feminists saw eugenics as a valuable weapon for asserting women's biological importance and the need for women's social reform. Although several historical accounts examine birth control and the eugenics movement, this paper focuses on how Margaret Sanger applied women's reproductive rights to the eugenics movement through feminist eugenics and eugenic feminist arguments.

Despite the general agreement among scholars that Sanger supported eugenics due to political pressure and the need for professional credibility, this research examines the type of eugenic theory Sanger believed and how she applied birth control to feminist eugenics and eugenic feminism. It is challenging to place Sanger in either category since Sanger argued women's reproductive rights were essential for improving the human condition while simultaneously limiting contraceptives to breeding for racial betterment. The main archive of this study is the Margaret Sanger Papers. The source material provided in this archive includes books, articles, manuscripts, speeches, pamphlets, and conference sessions. Another essential publication to this project is the *Birth Control Review* (1917), which discussed birth control and eugenics to attract the support of doctors, legislators, professionals, and middle-class women. To understand components of the eugenics movement, the *Eugenical News* and the *Eugenics Review* situate the overlap of contraception and eugenics.

To investigate Sanger's advocacy for birth control and her application of feminist eugenics and eugenic feminism, three sections will address the following. Section 1 focuses on the tradition of feminist eugenics in the late nineteenth century, including an overview of voluntary motherhood and how Sanger was influenced by earlier discourse of first-wave feminists. Additionally, this section examines feminist eugenic arguments situated in Sanger's

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<sup>16</sup> Rensing, "Feminist Eugenics in America," 173.

primary source material. Section 2 explains the pressures from medical professionals and mainstream eugenicists and why Sanger transitioned her eugenic arguments to focus on population control and the poor. Lastly, section 3 expands on eugenic feminism by emphasizing the elimination of the unfit and feeble-minded, touching on ideas of segregation, sterilization, vasectomy, contraceptive methods, and Sanger's vulgar viewpoint of the feeble-minded.

Eugenics is often associated with the most horrific aspects of history, such as Adolf Hitler's Nazi eugenics and Josef Mengele's racial experimentations during the Holocaust. By only associating eugenics with the negative parts of its history, society is left with a single story of forced sterilization and euthanasia. There is no question that many eugenicists held racist views by the standards of their times.<sup>17</sup> However, we fail to understand the appeal of eugenics to early feminist movements if we hold the assumption that eugenics is absurd. Margaret Sanger openly wrote about eugenics and formed connections with eugenicists, yet mainstream American history often overlooks this aspect of the birth control movement. Today, developments in genetic medicine, including prenatal diagnosis, carrier screening, and predictive genetic tests, are offered and utilized at a significant rate. Since predictive tests create the need to make reproductive choices, genetic tests appear to be eugenics in modern dress. From the late nineteenth century to modern-day, eugenics has meant different things to different groups. Historians have a responsibility to include lesser-known narratives into the larger story of eugenics and women's reproductive rights.

### **Section 1: Feminist Eugenic Arguments**

Sanger's connections with eugenicists were not out of the ordinary. Rather, feminists embraced eugenics and utilized its scientific authority to advance women's political and social

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<sup>17</sup> Paul, *Controlling Human Heredity*, 17.

goals in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.<sup>18</sup> This section analyzes how voluntary motherhood, women's rights to education, and quality over quantity arguments shaped feminist eugenics. Over time, first-wave feminists influenced Sanger's birth control movement to expand the existing tradition of feminist eugenics in the United States.

### *Voluntary Motherhood*

Essential to the concept of feminist eugenics, voluntary motherhood arguments served as the foundation for the birth control movement. The main principle of voluntary motherhood was to give women the right to decide how many children they wanted to bear and when. Feminists who advocated for voluntary motherhood included suffragists, moral reformers, and members of the Free Love Movement. Despite holding similar views on voluntary motherhood, these groups remained politically divided. For instance, suffragists and social purists wanted to win support from conservative and religious groups to maintain social respectability. Contrastingly, free lovers radically dedicated themselves to discussing female sexuality. However, these groups represented white-middle class women who were far from fully progressive. Free lovers and suffragists disapproved of contraceptive devices, grounded in the traditional belief that contraceptives were both unnatural and caused promiscuity among women and men.<sup>19</sup> Although progressive in asserting the legitimacy of female sex drive and rights to voluntary motherhood, feminists remained attached to feminine roles within a patriarchal society.

For instance, women situated the reacceptance of the female sex drive to the natural argument of integrating the body and soul.<sup>20</sup> Since the idea of women lacking female sex drives contributed to the image of a woman giving herself only to please her husband and have

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<sup>18</sup> Rensing, "Feminist Eugenics in America," 2.

<sup>19</sup> Linda Gordon, "Voluntary Motherhood: The Beginnings of Feminist Birth Control Ideas in the United States," *Women's Bodies*, 1993, pp. 213-230, 6.

<sup>20</sup> Gordon, "Voluntary Motherhood," 7.

children, acknowledging female sexuality weakened the theory of maternal instinct. Due to women's exclusion from the public sphere, women were strongly linked to desiring sex for the sake of pregnancy. The possibility that women might desire sex without wanting children challenged the assumption of maternal instinct. Even though proponents of voluntary motherhood recommended abstinence or male continence, birth control rested on the acceptance of female sex drive. A woman's right to refuse sex or have sex without risk of pregnancy gave women agency over their bodies, making birth control an extension of voluntary motherhood. For example, Elizabeth Cady Stanton's idea of women owning their bodies focused on "womanhood as the primal fact, wifedom and motherhood as its incidents."<sup>21</sup> Placing womanhood before motherhood reinforced the belief of free love for women's rights advocates who believed that men and women had natural sex drives, thus it was not wrong to have sex without the intention of conceiving children. However, feminists still feared that efficient birth control would increase men's freedom to indulge in prostitution, while women's freedom to engage in extra-marital sex was deemed morally wrong. Therefore, free lovers and suffragists advocated for voluntary motherhood by placing women as the agents for controlling conception to serve eugenic purposes and improve the human condition.

To limit promiscuity and "careless" sex, Sanger extended Stanton's and Victoria Woodhull's feminist eugenic arguments of "fewer children and a healthy, happy maternity."<sup>22</sup> For instance, in "Birth Control and Racial Betterment" (1919), Sanger argued that it was a woman's right to bear children and decide how many children she wanted if she chose to become a mother.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, Sanger stated that "only upon a free, self-determining motherhood can

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<sup>21</sup> Dora Forster, *Sex Radicalism as Seen by an Emancipated Woman of the New Time* (Chicago: M. Harman, 1905), 4.

<sup>22</sup> Elizabeth Cady Stanton to Martha Wright, June 19, 1871, Stanton Mss.

<sup>23</sup> Margaret Sanger, "Birth Control and Racial Betterment," *Birth Control Review*, Volume III, Number 2 (February 1919): 11-12, 12.

rest any unshakable structure of racial betterment.”<sup>24</sup> Sanger believed that women’s reproductive rights promoted race regeneration by emphasizing the need for voluntary motherhood above all else. Therefore, women’s reproductive rights became essential for creating an improved generation that situated women as the focus of birth control to produce eugenic value. In addition, Sanger’s *Woman and the New Race* (1920) asserted feminist eugenics by reiterating prior voluntary motherhood arguments. For example, the book’s title lists women first and foremost, ahead of their eugenic duties to raise better children. According to Sanger, women gain freedom when they hold the opportunity to choose motherhood, holding control over their bodies.<sup>25</sup> Birth control offered women the freedom to acknowledge their sexuality and make conscious decisions about motherhood. Sanger suggested that the quicker women accepted contraceptives as their rights, the quicker society respected motherhood, making the world a more fit place for responsible child-rearing.<sup>26</sup> In “What We Stand For: Principles and Aims of the American Birth Control League” (1921) and “The Morality of Birth Control” (1921), Sanger reiterated the three conditions for creating a race of well-born children through the dignified function of motherhood: “woman should have the right over her own body to decide for a child to be desired, that child should be conceived in love, and should have a heritage of sound health.”<sup>27</sup> Therefore, birth control’s main principles originated with voluntary motherhood arguments to increase future generations’ quality. Within this elevated position of motherhood, women’s access to voluntary motherhood rested on their moral responsibilities and intelligence to bear and raise children.

### *Women’s Intelligence and Access to Education*

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<sup>24</sup> Sanger, “Birth Control and Racial Betterment,” 12.

<sup>25</sup> Margaret Sanger, *Woman and the New Race*, Brentano’s, 1920, 141.

<sup>26</sup> Sanger, *Woman and the New Race*, 149.

<sup>27</sup> Margaret Sanger, “The Morality of Birth Control,” Speech, 1921, 2.

Citing Francis Galton's work on heredity, Elizabeth Cady Stanton correlated the eugenic purpose in advancing the American race to women's political and social conditions. According to Galton's law of cross-heredity, sons were more likely to inherit characteristics of their mothers. Supporting Galton's findings, Stanton suggested that progression in the quality of men depended on women's rights. Furthermore, Stanton claimed that giving women political responsibility, access to education, and social empowerment created a scientifically informed public with the ability to make intelligent reproductive choices.<sup>28</sup> Galton's call for mental stamina to produce an improved race gave Stanton and Sanger the opportunity to stress women's physical and intellectual contributions to eugenics.<sup>29</sup> In line with feminist eugenics, Sanger developed this concept of intelligence in the *Birth Control Review* and "Family Limitation" (1922).

The *Birth Control Review*, published by the American Birth Control League in 1917, educated the public about contraception and advocated for birth control. Volume I through V (1917-1921) contains the subtitle, "Dedicated to the Principle of Intelligent and Voluntary Motherhood."<sup>30</sup> By 1921, the monthly journal became the official organ for the American Birth Control League, which included news about birth control activities, articles by medical professionals, reviews of books and other publications, and discussions about eugenics. Although the earlier volumes discussed how women's rights improved the race, subsequent volumes suggested that feminist agendas became overshadowed to gain acceptance from eugenicists and professionals with greater societal authority.

Published in Volume V, Sanger's "Dedicated to Voluntary Motherhood" (1921) addressed the need for education, political and legislative action, and practical scientific teaching to enforce women's reproductive rights and access to birth control. Sanger emphasized that public interest

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<sup>28</sup> Rensing, "Feminist Eugenics in America," 35.

<sup>29</sup> Rensing, "Feminist Eugenics in America," 36.

<sup>30</sup> "The Birth Control Review. V.1-3 (1917-19)," HathiTrust, 7.

must focus on birth control's pivotal importance through an enlightened understanding of voluntary motherhood to advance the American and global populations.<sup>31</sup> In addition, Sanger called for changes to federal and state laws that restricted the knowledge and practice of birth control. For instance, the Comstock Law (1873) criminalized the mailing and distribution of contraceptives, abortifacients, sex toys, or anything considered obscene by Anthony Comstock. Comstock became well-known for enforcing the law to maintain morality and legitimize traditional gender barriers that restricted women's rights to education and reproductive health. The Comstock Law also prosecuted those who shared information about birth control or contraceptives. In 1916, Sanger opened the first birth control clinic in Brooklyn and was convicted for distributing contraceptive devices and women's sex education. Sanger later faced multiple arrests and charges for violating the Comstock Law. Since most women had limited access to sex education and social hygiene, contraceptive practices allowed women to make informed reproductive decisions. For women to receive practical scientific education, Sanger aimed to inform women who most needed hygienic knowledge.<sup>32</sup>

For example, Margaret Sanger's "Family Limitation" (1922) explained the different types of contraceptive technologies simplistically to educate poor and working-class women who have less access to education and medical resources. Concerning feminist eugenics, this pamphlet gave women the opportunity to learn about their reproductive rights and bodies. For instance, Sanger recommended the douche as a cleanser after using a condom to prevent pregnancy. Sanger suggested safer and more effective ways to prevent conception compared to the common methods of coitus interruptus or withdrawal. She advised that the best contraception method came from the pessary or the rubber womb cap, which is comfortably inserted.<sup>33</sup> By educating

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<sup>31</sup> Margaret Sanger, "Dedicated to Voluntary Motherhood," *Birth Control Review* (March 1921), 3.

<sup>32</sup> Sanger, "Dedicated to Voluntary Motherhood," 3.

<sup>33</sup> Margaret Sanger, "Family Limitation," Internet Archive, 1922, 13.

women on efficient methods, Sanger gave women a space to make informed decisions about motherhood and “create an avenue towards self-development and self-realization.”<sup>34</sup> Therefore, intelligent guidance over reproductive power became central to liberating women’s spirits and promoting a finer population dedicated to quality over quantity.<sup>35</sup>

*Sex-Based Eugenics: Quality over Quantity*

Similar to Stanton’s focus on heredity, Sanger’s argument for birth control is situated under the idea of sex-based eugenics. Unlike race-based eugenics focused on the quantity of inferior and superior races, Sanger considered birth control as the “only possible and practical method of human generation”<sup>36</sup> vital to the quality of the human race. Radicals from the *Lucifer* cohort agreed with feminist eugenics by emphasizing sex-based eugenics intended to improve the quality of future generations; this situated women as the agents of eugenic change.<sup>37</sup> *Lucifer, the Light Bearer* (1883-1907) was a journal dedicated to reform, justice and liberty, anarchism, womanhood, and eugenics. Even though *Lucifer* became the *American Journal of Eugenics*, Moses Harman acted as a proponent for women’s rights and the early eugenics movement. As a supporter of positive eugenics, increasing the quality of the human race by breeding desired characteristics, Harman published articles supporting feminist eugenics and birth control.

Influenced by sex-based eugenics, Charlotte Perkins Gilman continued the quality over quantity discourse of feminist eugenics. She served as a utopian feminist and role model for future feminists due to her advocacy for social reform, birth control, parenthood, and economic independence. Margaret Sanger drew on Gilman’s works and *The Forerunner* (1909-1916) which included essays, opinion pieces, poetry, and fiction about Gilman’s ideas on women’s

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<sup>34</sup> Sanger “The Eugenic Value of Birth Control Propaganda,” 2.

<sup>35</sup> Margaret Sanger, *The Pivot of Civilization*, Pergamon Press, 1922, 13.

<sup>36</sup> Sanger, *The Pivot of Civilization*, 189.

<sup>37</sup> Rensing, “Feminist Eugenics in America,” 109.

issues and eugenic reform. For instance, Gilman proposed two ways eugenically informed mothers could participate in advancing the quality of the race. Gilman suggested that a woman's wise selection of a husband or partner increased the odds of passing down desired traits.<sup>38</sup> Also, women conceived children in better conditions when they controlled selecting a husband for society's good. In addition, Gilman argued mothers contributed to race progress by "improving the environment of young children, both materially and psychologically, by the intelligent coordinated action of mothers."<sup>39</sup> This idea of social parentage was radical at the time, but placed women in a dignified position for having enough intelligence and maternal love to raise their children and other children. Therefore, women's expertise increased the society's quality through this eugenic system of social parentage, which provided the children of unfit parents with additional parents.

While eugenicists focused on race-based eugenics, Sanger argued that birth control developed a "higher standard of motherhood" that enabled "the child to be better born, better cared for in infancy, and better educated."<sup>40</sup> Unlike traditional eugenicists who believed that a woman's first duty was to bear as many children to the state, Sanger claimed that a woman's duty to herself is her duty to the state.<sup>41</sup> Thus, women empowered by voluntary motherhood and birth control became capable of making eugenic choices about their children and families, better controlling their social and economic environments. Like the sex radicals before her, Sanger asserted that birth control and women's reproductive health existed as the "greatest and most truly eugenic method."<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, Sanger's *The Pivot of Civilization* (1922) created a distinction between birth control and questions of population. Sanger defined birth control as an "instrument

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<sup>38</sup> Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Concerning Children* (Boston: Small, Maynard, & Co., 1900), 257.

<sup>39</sup> Gilman, *Concerning Children*, 263-264.

<sup>40</sup> Sanger, "Birth Control and Racial Betterment," 11.

<sup>41</sup> Sanger, "Birth Control and Racial Betterment," 11.

<sup>42</sup> Margaret Sanger, "The Limitation of Eugenics," LCM 130:44.

of liberation and human development”<sup>43</sup> by extending women’s reproductive choices. To promote improved social regeneration, Sanger argued that every potential mother is responsible for recognizing their responsibility of bringing children into the world.<sup>44</sup> Although Sanger expressed concern over poor conditions and the unfit rapidly reproducing, population and economics were not a significant component of the birth control movement at this time. Instead, Sanger reaffirmed quality over quantity arguments within feminist eugenics through her emphasis on a higher standard of motherhood and birth control as the root for improved social change.

Evident by the publications and books written by Margaret Sanger, the birth control movement’s early stage follows the cohesive tradition of feminist eugenics. Feminist advocates for voluntary motherhood, access to education, and sex-based eugenics expanded women’s reproductive opportunities and reinforced the significance of women’s social responsibility to progress the future generation’s quality. However, Sanger’s vision of feminist eugenics clashed with opinions from orthodox eugenicists who questioned the birth control movement’s liberal nature. As the decade progressed, the slow pace of the birth control movement and hesitation from medical professionals influenced Sanger’s involvement with mainstream eugenicists and her advocacy of sterilizing “unfit” people. Therefore, Sanger emphasized eugenic and economic arguments above feminist ones to achieve scientific credibility for birth control. Although she did not sacrifice or repackage her feminist eugenic beliefs, Sanger’s birth control ideology transitioned to eugenic feminism.

## **Section 2: Eugenic Feminist Arguments**

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<sup>43</sup> Sanger, *Pivot of Civilization*, 238.

<sup>44</sup> Sanger, *Pivot of Civilization*, 23.

At the peak of the American Eugenics Movement, women's issues remained distant from the forefront of discussion. Although eugenics and feminism shared decades of ideology, the feminist eugenics tradition slowly faded due to rising conservatism in the 1920s. Focusing on maintaining the patriarchy, eugenicists and medical professionals defined women's duty to society as conceiving children to promote population growth. Viewing women's rights as secondary to eugenics, eugenic feminists used race-based eugenics to shape the scope of birth control. Hampered by conservative medical professionals that deemed birth control immoral, Sanger grew frustrated with the birth control movement's slow progress.<sup>45</sup> To gain broader support from eugenicists, Sanger emphasized eugenic and economic arguments based on negative eugenics; she discouraged and prevented the poor, unfit, and mentally ill from procreating. This section explores the basis of mainstream eugenic ideas and situates the social environment of the early twentieth century. Grounded in scientific racism, it is important to analyze why race-based eugenicists held these beliefs of racial superiority and how this impacted certain groups of people, specifically poor communities. Furthermore, this section highlights how Sanger felt about the poor and unfit through the vulgar references cited in her speeches, books, and articles.

### *Foundation of Race-Based Eugenics*

Applied to human conditions, Darwin's theory on natural selection justified racist sociological thinking in the late nineteenth century, which carried on in the form of eugenics. Experiments and subsequent theories of criminality, feeblemindedness, and population control echoed Darwin's fears that society's worst elements would outbreed the "better" members of society. Before Darwin, Thomas Malthus developed a scarcity model to describe population growth. In *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798), Malthus concluded that population

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<sup>45</sup> Paul, *Controlling Human Heredity*, 22.

growth would exponentially exceed the availability of resources, creating a Malthusian catastrophe where living standards deteriorated until the population died off. Therefore, Malthusianism assumed that individuals failed to use resources at a sustainable rate and thus became responsible for overpopulation linked to poverty. This focus on the individual's irresponsibility resonated with eugenicists who sought to eliminate poor communities prone to criminality and mental disorders based on heredity. Rather than looking at environmental factors and intersectionality, eugenicists relied on the study of heredity to explain the passing of biological traits from one generation to the next.

To increase the prevalence of desirable traits and decrease undesirable traits, Galton explored the “nature versus nurture” dichotomy. For Galton, the question of nature versus nurture developed the understanding of where human traits originated. Galton utilized family studies and twin experimentation to determine whether heredity or environmental impacts contributed to traits like criminality or intelligence.<sup>46</sup> For instance, in *Hereditary Genius*, Galton collected data on generations of respectable people including military officers, judges, and scientists. In addition, Galton's twin studies examined the results of identical twins raised together or apart in comparison to other siblings. The purpose behind this research suggested that nature trumped nurture when it came to passing down traits through families.<sup>47</sup> To justify eugenic interventions, Galton based this scientifically-guided social program on the nature of human heredity. Therefore, more intelligent people felt persuaded to have more children, while criminal people became discouraged from reproducing these undesirable traits.

Despite Galton's extensive findings and eugenic theories, heredity remained widely misunderstood in the nineteenth century. It was commonly believed that physical traits seen in

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<sup>46</sup> James Tabery, “Nature vs Nurture,” The Eugenics Archives, April 29, 2014, <https://eugenicsarchive.ca/discover/connections/535eed0d7095aa0000000241>.

<sup>47</sup> Tabery, “Nature vs Nurture.”

offspring resulted from the blending of parental characteristics. However, the results from Mendel's famous pea plant experiments gained recognition in 1900 and redefined how biological traits were inherited. Mendel concluded that each parent gives a set of genes to their offspring. As a result, the child expresses these genes differently based on recessive and dominant traits. Therefore, Mendelian theory served as an analytical tool for eugenicists who used pedigree analyses to study inheritance patterns. By 1910, Charles Davenport founded the Eugenics Record Office (ERO) in New York, which became a meeting place for eugenicists filled with eugenics research and data. Under Davenport's leadership, the ERO served as a platform for eugenic campaigns, propaganda, and publications that institutionalized the American eugenics movement.<sup>48</sup>

*The Eugenics Record Office and Obtaining Professional Support*

During fears of race suicide, feminist groups and supporters of sex-based eugenics failed to gather a dedicated group of sociologists, economists, physicians, scientists, and medical professionals. However, Davenport's Eugenics Record Office convinced rich, white men to support the study and control of human degeneracy. At the turn of the century, sociologists echoed Malthus and his concerns about the population dying out. Although race-suicide described the consequence of the birth rate dropping below the death rate, this concept intended to raise fears among those from dominant "races" to target the influx of immigrants. At the time, racial categories were more specific and defined groups based on nationalities or ethnicities.<sup>49</sup> Even though race suicide was greatly immersed in racism, supporters referred to the suicide of the "American race." Therefore, immigrants became the scapegoat for Americans worried that

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<sup>48</sup> Michael Billinger, "Heredity," The Eugenics Archives, April 29, 2014, <https://eugenicsarchive.ca/discover/connections/535eec377095aa000000022f>.

<sup>49</sup> Adam Hochman, "Race Suicide," The Eugenics Archives, April 29, 2014, <https://eugenicsarchive.ca/discover/connections/535eedb87095aa0000000250>

immigrants outcompeted and out-bred their “racial betters.”<sup>50</sup> In response to feminist movements, President Theodore Roosevelt blamed women for choosing childlessness and argued that voluntary motherhood contributed to race suicide. For example, Roosevelt attacked college-educated women and contraceptives, calling for white women to bear more children as their duty to the nation. However, feminists emphasized quality over quantity arguments, advocating for smaller families devoted to creating a healthier race.

Operating as a research center for eugenics, heredity, and genetic data, the goals of the Eugenics Record Office were to study human heredity and educate Americans on eugenic policy. Between 1910 and 1924, Davenport taught the principles of genetics to 250 students enrolled in courses.<sup>51</sup> Since women’s duty to society was to have and raise children, women comprised more than 90 percent of the student population. In addition, Davenport felt women were well suited for eugenic fieldwork and increased their professional opportunities. Davenport hired women due to their social and analytic skills for family-study research based on the sexist idea that women existed as natural caregivers and understood the domestic sphere best.<sup>52</sup> Although it seems progressive for men to offer work opportunities to women in “science” and genetics, work could not interfere with childbearing. Women only held employment for three years before resuming their social duties as mothers. Despite the assumption that women distanced themselves from eugenics, women directly or indirectly involved themselves in the ERO. For instance, women studied individual families and gathered information on ability, personality, talent, medical problems, and other traits by giving questionnaires.<sup>53</sup> Over the years, women’s work cataloged thousands of individual characteristics and transferred them into the genetic data bank to analyze

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<sup>50</sup> Hochman, “Race Suicide.”

<sup>51</sup> Paul, *Controlling Human Heredity*, 54.

<sup>52</sup> Paul, *Controlling Human Heredity*, 55.

<sup>53</sup> Erna Kurbegovic, “Eugenics Record Office (ERO),” The Eugenics Archives, September 14, 2013, <https://eugenicsarchive.ca/database/documents/5233cf7b5c2ec500000000ac>.

inheritance patterns. Even though the data collected was subjective, racist, and inaccurate, it reaffirmed twentieth century social beliefs and convinced a broad audience of eugenic ideology.

To reach a larger audience, the Eugenic Records Office published *Eugenical News* (1916-1953), which covered eugenic research, marriage, fertility, the problem of the unfit, and population growth. As the central publication of the American eugenics movement, *Eugenical News* became the most influential eugenics periodical. Furthermore, this publication provided the structure and voice to popularize eugenics among the American public. News of eugenic events and campaigns captured the attention of predominantly white males with the economic and political power to fund and support race-based eugenics. Focused on restricting immigration for the unfit and advocating for sterilization of those deemed undesirable, *Eugenical News* reinforced beliefs about race suicide proponents and conservative professionals. However, race-suicide advocates wanted to stop the detrimental reproduction of inferior people by encouraging fit people to have large families and refrain from birth control. Due to race-suicide being an anti-feminist group, Sanger faced difficulty trying to promote the use of birth control. Race-suicide advanced ideas about positive eugenics due to fears of the superior population dying off, so they wanted American women to produce more children and increase the number of desirable traits. By the 1920s, race-based eugenicists added another component to positive eugenics: discouraging unfit reproduction by sterilization.

Although negative eugenics sought to improve the human race's quality, which Sanger agreed with, eugenicists fixated on how to limit the quantity of the unfit. Birth control appealed to professionals and eugenicists as a means to prevent undesired human populations from reproducing. Birth control gave eugenicists a tool for lowering birth rates specifically among groups prone to mental illness, poverty, crime, and disability. Even though Sanger advocated for

birth control as an extension of women's reproductive rights, the eugenic need for birth control gave Sanger space to forge professional alliances. By gaining scientific credibility and male support from eugenics, the birth control movement emphasized economic and eugenic arguments on the ideal of racial progress and efficiency.<sup>54</sup>

### *Eugenic Feminism and Poverty*

It is essential to understand the overlap between sex and race-based eugenics to differentiate how Margaret Sanger transitioned from the tradition of feminist eugenics to eugenic feminism. Proponents of sex-based eugenics believed that women's right to voluntary motherhood and birth control advanced society's quality through smaller families. Since women held more power and responsibility to decide when and how many children they wanted, women felt less pressure to bear many children. With less children, women physically recovered from fewer pregnancies, able to manage and raise a smaller family prone to success. In the 1920s, race-based eugenics also sought to improve the human race by increasing the number of worthy traits. However, race-based eugenics focused on increasing and decreasing the quantity of specific populations based on genetic fitness. White, non-disabled, intelligent, and wealthy people were encouraged to have children, while immigrants, non-white, disabled, feeble-minded, and poor people were prevented from reproducing. Although Sanger utilized birth control to help improve the quality of society, primary sources reveal that Sanger promoted birth control to restrict impoverished communities from rearing children.

The intersection between economics, class, eugenics, and birth control justified using sterilization and birth control to limit the unfit to improve future living conditions. Most health and welfare professionals shared ideas that the poor were more likely to pass on undesirable qualities to the next generation. Therefore, eugenicists provided a scientific solution to poor

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<sup>54</sup> Schoen, *Choice & Coercion Birth Control*, 22.

health and poverty by limiting the poor populations' reproduction. In addition, birth control advocates specifically distributed contraceptives to impoverished communities to offer social services that sought to save taxpayers' money in the long run.<sup>55</sup> Sharing these views, Sanger's *Woman and the New Race* (1920) blamed large families for increasing misery among themselves and society.<sup>56</sup> For instance, Sanger argued that a family too large to receive adequate care perpetuated the evils of poverty. Sanger suggested that "the most merciful [thing] the large family does to one of its infant members is to kill it."<sup>57</sup> Sanger argued both for the infant to be killed and detailed the horrors in carelessly reproducing. She claimed that more children "undermine the health of the mother, deepen the family's poverty, destroy the happiness of the home, dishearten the father"<sup>58</sup> while creating more competitors in the labor market. As a result of employment competition, Sanger asserted that wages decrease and hours became prolonged, perpetuating the cycle of poverty. Although feminist eugenicists wanted to limit family size for higher quality, Sanger overtly supported eugenic feminism since she believed the "way to get rid of labor problems, unemployment, low wages, the surplus, unwanted population, is to stop breeding."<sup>59</sup>

Furthermore, several articles published in the *Birth Control Review* highlight Sanger's relationship to race-based eugenics. For example, Warren Thompson's "Race Suicide in the United States" (February 1921) reinforced Sanger's bold discussion about large families and the ills they bring to society. Thompson explained that the birth rate of the poor class exceeded that of higher classes because the "poor class will always contain a greater proportion of improvident ne'er-do-wells."<sup>60</sup> Like Sanger's vulgar statements, Thompson asserted that the poor class "will

<sup>55</sup> Schoen, *Choice & Coercion Birth Control*, 23.

<sup>56</sup> Sanger, *Woman and the New Race*, 87.

<sup>57</sup> Sanger, *Woman and the New Race*, 92.

<sup>58</sup> Sanger, *Woman and the New Race*, 206.

<sup>59</sup> Sanger, *Woman and the New Race*, 212.

<sup>60</sup> Warren Thompson, "Race Suicide in the United States," *Birth Control Review*, (February 1921), 9.

become the social scum that pollutes the streets and that make up the subterranean life of the underworld; that fill the jails, reformatories, and asylums- if they are unfortunate enough to survive.”<sup>61</sup> Even though Sanger did not write these words, she agreed and promoted Thompson’s message by publishing his work in the *Birth Control Review*, which served as an effective medium to spread birth control information. In addition, Walter Merchant’s “Quality vs. Quantity” (September 1921) referred to poor people as the “greatest enemies of mankind who wantonly destroy or unnecessarily use up Nature’s storehouse.”<sup>62</sup> Although quality over quantity falls under sex-based eugenics, the assumption that impoverished communities use up the world’s resources due to their larger birth rate suggests that limiting these births is essential for social regeneration.

Furthermore, Sanger clarified which women needed birth control in “Dedicated to Voluntary Motherhood” (March 1921). According to Sanger, struggling and suffering women “from the personal and racial point of view, most need it.”<sup>63</sup> Specifically, women with low literacy and physiological peculiarities were diagnosed as “abnormal and submerged.”<sup>64</sup> Even though Sanger sought to make birth control practical and effective for all women, Sanger targeted mentally unfit and poor women with a “high rate of fertility associated with poverty, filth, disease, and feeblemindedness.”<sup>65</sup> In “Social Selection,” Sanger divided 105 million people into groups: the intelligent, professional, artisan class and the poor, ignorant, diseased class. Based on her diction, these categories alone reflect Sanger’s opinions on these two groups. For example, Sanger stated that the intelligent class had a low birth rate despite the health, wealth, leisure, and high living standards. In contrast, she associated the diseased group with poverty,

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<sup>61</sup> Thompson, “Race Suicide in the United States,” 12.

<sup>62</sup> Walter Merchant, “Quality vs. Quantity,” *Birth Control Review*, (September 1921), 10.

<sup>63</sup> Sanger, “Dedicated to Voluntary Motherhood,” 3.

<sup>64</sup> Sanger, “Dedicated to Voluntary Motherhood,” 4.

<sup>65</sup> Sanger, *The Pivot of Civilization*, 47.

ignorance, slums, infant mortality, child labor, and a high birth rate.<sup>66</sup> Sanger's attitude towards the lower class reinforced eugenic images about the poor as unfit by characterizing the poor as degenerates perpetuating misery and poverty from generation to generation. Although Sanger opened clinics and offered birth control programs in impoverished communities with high demand, she carried these beliefs about the poor lacking understanding about careless breeding. Giving poor and immigrant women opportunities to learn about birth control expanded their access to reproductive health. Nonetheless, how Sanger wrote about and blamed reckless procreation on unfit people reflects the alternative side of contraceptives limiting women's reproductive choices.

### **Section 3: Elimination of the Feeble-minded**

Sanger's views about poor families hold no comparison to the blatant disgust she felt toward the feeble-minded and mentally ill. Although Sanger appealed to poor women to reduce the physical and economic burden of having more children, the negative eugenics she promoted for the mentally unfit represented the extreme side of race-based eugenics. Contributing to eugenic feminism, Sanger's focus on eliminating the unfit and feeble-minded moved beyond contraception as the solution. Sanger and eugenicists advanced segregation, sterilization, and vasectomy to eliminate "diseased" people through severe methods. As a result, over 60,000 Americans became victims of involuntary sterilizations across thirty-two states. This section details the social theories about the feeble-minded in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Lastly, analyzing Sanger's tone, diction, and perceptions of the feeble-minded emphasizes eugenic feminist arguments to eliminate unfit people through any contraceptive means, from birth control to sterilization.

#### *Social Theories of Feeble-minded*

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<sup>66</sup> Margaret Sanger, "Social Selection," Margaret Sanger Papers, 76.

In the early stages of eugenics, genetic understanding and measuring intelligence were essential for determining fit and unfit traits. The infamous Jukes and Kallikaks studies reflected eugenic thinking, reiterating the need for preventing defective degenerates from breeding.<sup>67</sup> Although these two studies suggest different attitudes about curing and explaining degeneracy, Richard Dugdale's Jukes and Henry Goddard's Kallikaks provided evidence of disease, immorality, and crime resulting from unfit families. Specifically, hundreds of families like the Jukes and Kallikaks represented a "parasite" to society, spreading harm to others and sucking money from the state. Interested in social betterment and the correctional system, Richard Dugdale investigated inmates in several county jails as a member of the Prison Association of New York. In 1874, Dugdale interviewed Ulster County inmates related by blood or marriage. Although the "Jukes" represented a fictional family, Dugdale found that of twenty-nine males with immediate blood relations, seventeen men had been arrested and fifteen convicted of crimes.<sup>68</sup> He continued collecting interviews and records of inmates at county jails, poorhouses, and courts to expand his genealogical charts based on the idea that criminality is heritable. By 1877, Dugdale published his findings on forty-two families in *The Jukes: A Study in Crime, Pauperism, Disease and Heredity*. According to his charts, disease, poverty, and criminality plagued the family, costing the New York legislature \$1.3 million over several generations.<sup>69</sup> Even though Dugdale concluded that social environments and heredity were equally crucial to the development of degenerates, the Jukes study influenced Goddard's Kallikaks findings focused on feeble-mindedness.

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<sup>67</sup> Paul, *Controlling Human Heredity*, 50.

<sup>68</sup> "The Jukes Family - Dugdale's Study," The Jukes Family - Dugdale's Study | Dugdale Study | Technology Trends, [https://www.primidi.com/the\\_jukes\\_family/dugdales\\_study](https://www.primidi.com/the_jukes_family/dugdales_study).

<sup>69</sup> "Richard Dugdale's the Jukes, Controlling Heredity, Special Collections and Archives," Omeka RSS, accessed April 19, 2022, [https://library.missouri.edu/specialcollections/exhibits/show/controlling-heredity/america/dugdale\\_jukes](https://library.missouri.edu/specialcollections/exhibits/show/controlling-heredity/america/dugdale_jukes).

In the wake of Mendel's laws of gene inheritance, *The Kallikak Family: A Study in the Heredity of Feeble-Mindedness* (1912) became widespread and was one of the most frequently cited works on the heredity of mental defects. As the director of research at New Jersey's Vineland Training School for Feeble-Minded Children, Goddard studied intellectual disabilities but found it challenging to construct family histories. Similar to Charles Davenport, Goddard believed women field workers were most qualified to collect data and diagnose family members' mental, physical, and moral conditions.<sup>70</sup> Therefore, Elizabeth Kite investigated Deborah Kallikak's family since Deborah was classified as a high-grade feebleminded. According to school reports, Deborah's lack of obedience and carelessness in dress defined her behavior as "moronic."<sup>71</sup> However, Deborah's skills improved in a few years and she became a beautiful woman with no apparent defects. Convinced that she carried defective traits, Kite looked into Deborah's family line and found that 143 of the 480 descendants were feebleminded based on instances of infant mortality, pauperism, drunkenness, and sexual immorality. During Kite's fieldwork, she discovered another family under the same name existed as respectable members of society and did not understand how these two families could be related. Goddard concluded that Martin's marriage to a respectable woman resulted in resourceful and intelligent offspring, while his illegitimate child created a race of defective degenerates.<sup>72</sup> Therefore, from this family experiment, Goddard reinforced the idea that feeblemindedness was heredity and caused criminality, prostitution, and poverty. Goddard proposed segregating the feebleminded into institutions to prevent breeding.

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<sup>70</sup> Paul, *Controlling Human Heredity*, 51.

<sup>71</sup> Paul, *Controlling Human Heredity*, 51.

<sup>72</sup> "Henry Goddard's the Kallikak Family, Controlling Heredity, Special Collections and Archives," Omeka RSS, <https://library.missouri.edu/specialcollections/exhibits/show/controlling-heredity/america/kallikaks>.

As a member of the American Eugenics Society (AES), Goddard's Kallikak family case study was prominent in eugenic literature. His "scientific" findings confirmed that feeble-minded people multiply uncontrollably with every generation, causing a burden to societal progression. Influenced by Goddard, writers like Margaret Sanger developed a prejudice against the mentally disabled and advocated for eugenic programs to eliminate these people. For instance, in *Woman and the New Race* (1920), Sanger referred to the "offspring of one feeble-minded man named Jukes that cost the public \$1,800,000 in seventy-five years."<sup>73</sup> She used this finding to question why society supported families who abused public services and welfare by committing crimes and contributing to social ills. To situate Sanger as a product of her time, the Jukes and the Kallikaks served as definitive studies, setting the social acceptance for eugenic programs to legitimize sterilization, segregation, and birth control to better American life.

#### *Eugenic Sterilization Laws*

In the nineteenth century, eugenicists and social theorists championed sterilization or segregation as they believed deterioration had gone past the point of repair. Given that contraceptives were seen as immoral and birth control was not yet invented, individuals with "bad" heredity were to be prevented from propagating their degeneracy. For instance, suffragette Victoria Woodhull asserted that "imbeciles, criminals, paupers, and the unfit are undesirable citizens, [that] must not be bred."<sup>74</sup> Sharing this sentiment, Indiana enacted eugenic sterilization legislation in 1907, targeting idiots, criminals, rapists, and imbeciles in state institutions.<sup>75</sup> After a few years, California and Washington created sterilization laws aimed at "mentally retarded" patients in state hospitals, prison inmates, criminals, and men convicted of rape. The Carnegie

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<sup>73</sup> Sanger, *Woman and the New Race*, 116.

<sup>74</sup> Victoria C. Woodhull, *The Rapid Multiplication of the Unfit* (London: World Microfilms Publications, 1891).

<sup>75</sup> Susan Ciancio, "Eugenic Sterilization Laws in the U.S.," Human Life International, December 3, 2020, <https://www.hli.org/resources/eugenic-sterilization/>.

Institution and the Rockefeller Foundation funded research conducted in the Eugenics Record Office to support these programs, legitimizing sterilization as the preferred method of eliminating the unfit.

Assistant director of the ERO, Harry Laughlin, published his Model Eugenic Sterilization Law (1914) for people deemed socially inadequate. Under this law, the feebleminded, insane, epileptic, diseased, blind, deaf, deformed, criminalistic, homeless, ne'er-do-wells, and people needing government assistance became subjected to compulsory sterilization laws.<sup>76</sup> Published in Laughlin's *Eugenical Sterilization in the United States* (1922), he concluded that the most worthless genes from the bottom ten percent of the population could be eliminated within two generations after the law's enactment. Distributing his research specifically to men in government legislatures, many states that passed sterilization laws used Laughlin's sterilization model. Since eugenicists asserted that social mobility indicated genetic fitness, sterilization laws reinforced existing racial and class hierarchies by disproportionately targeting poorer communities with greater non-white and immigrant populations. By 1930, thirty-two states imposed mandatory sterilization of mentally defective citizens and nineteen of those states required sterilization for parents likely to give their children disorders.<sup>77</sup> For example, the Virginia Sterilization Act of 1924 legalized compulsory sterilization of the mentally disabled. Although the act never mentioned eugenics, the law took an economic approach, stating that Virginia lost money due to the overcrowding of asylums and public institutions. Therefore, sterilization of feebleminded and defective populations would help the economy and alleviate the welfare demand.

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<sup>76</sup> Ciancio, "Eugenic Sterilization Laws in the U.S."

<sup>77</sup> Ciancio, "Eugenic Sterilization Laws in the U.S."

Challenged by Carrie Buck, a 17-year-old pregnant mother living in foster care, Virginia's Sterilization Act went to the Supreme Court in the case of *Buck v. Bell* (1927). Carrie's foster family said they could not control her and sent her to the same mental institute as her mother. She was raped and impregnated by her foster mother's nephew, but the baby was taken away from Carrie and given to the foster family.<sup>78</sup> Since Carrie and her mother were both institutionalized, the court proved their feeble-mindedness and found the child was not a normal baby.<sup>79</sup> The Supreme Court ordered Carrie to be sterilized and upheld eugenical sterilization in an eight-to-one decision. Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes infamously wrote: "It is better for all the world if, instead of waiting to execute degenerate offspring for crime, or let them starve for their imbecility, society can prevent those who are manifestly unfit from continuing their kind... Three generations of imbeciles is enough."<sup>80</sup> After the ruling, sterilization became extensively practiced. In three years, twelve states enacted new laws or revised existing statutes. Therefore, *Buck v. Bell* set a precedent for legally sterilizing people with hereditary defects, not in violation of the due process clause of the 14th Amendment.<sup>81</sup> Repealed in 1974, the time it took for Virginia to stop voluntary and involuntary sterilization practices suggests the firm social belief and broad support of sterilization across groups, including eugenicists and feminists.

*Sanger's Perceptions of the Feeble-minded*

In 1921, eugenicists exhibited charts on the dysgenic heritage of the Jukes and Kallikak families at conferences run by the American Birth Control League. Even though eugenicists played a significant role in lending support and credibility to Sanger's birth control conferences, Sanger was the only female honored guest at the Fifth International Neo-Malthusian and Birth

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<sup>78</sup> Ciancio, "Eugenic Sterilization Laws in the U.S."

<sup>79</sup> Ciancio, "Eugenic Sterilization Laws in the U.S."

<sup>80</sup> Paul Lombardo, *Eugenic Sterilization in Virginia: Aubrey Strode and the Case of Buck v. Bell*. Ph.D. diss., University of Virginia, 1982.

<sup>81</sup> Ciancio, "Eugenic Sterilization Laws in the U.S."

Control Conference (1922).<sup>82</sup> Not a single panel was dedicated to birth control as a woman's right but rather as a means to control the reproduction of the unfit. In addition, the American Birth Control League focused on the detrimental effect of careless breeding in its programs dedicated to promoting sterilization and racial progress. According to historian Linda Gordon, a content analysis of *Birth Control Review* publications in the 1920s suggests only 4.9 percent of its articles exhibited concern with women's self-determination and feminist eugenics.<sup>83</sup> Furthermore, March 1928 and April 1933 issues in the *Birth Control Review* focused on birth control and sterilization as essential methods to control the feeble-minded birth rate.<sup>84</sup> Impacted by politics and association with white male eugenicists, the birth control movement's focus shifted. However, Sanger believed in eliminating unfit people, namely the feeble-minded.

For example, in "Birth Control and Racial Betterment" (1919), Sanger combined the goals of eugenics and birth control in "seeking to assist the race toward the elimination of the unfit."<sup>85</sup> Unlike eugenicists who wanted to halt the reproduction of the unfit, Sanger stated that birth control advocates wanted to stop "all production when there is not an economic means of providing proper care for those who are born in health."<sup>86</sup> Even if the child was healthy at birth, Sanger viewed this as a waste of time and resources since she believed the child was destined to fail and carry on unfit, poor genes. Sanger "personally believe[d] in the sterilization of the feeble-minded, the insane and syphilitic,"<sup>87</sup> highlighting her commitment to sterilizing the mentally and physically defective. Regardless of whether the parents wanted to have children,

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<sup>82</sup> Linda Gordon, *The Moral Property of Women: A History of Birth Control Politics in America*, University of Illinois Press, 2007, 197.

<sup>83</sup> Gordon, *The Moral Property of Women*, 197.

<sup>84</sup> Beth Widmaier Capo, "Reading the Body, Controlling the Race: Birth Control and the Eugenic Impetus of the 1920s and 1930s," In *Textual Contraception Birth Control and Modern American Fiction* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2007), 123.

<sup>85</sup> Sanger, "Birth Control and Racial Betterment," 11.

<sup>86</sup> Sanger, "Birth Control and Racial Betterment," 11.

<sup>87</sup> Sanger, "Birth Control and Racial Betterment," 12.

“no man and woman have a right to bring into the world those who are to suffer from mental or physical affliction.”<sup>88</sup> Thus, Sanger disputed her own argument for women’s access to voluntary motherhood as she believed unfit women should not be allowed to have children.

Like social theories, Sanger blamed the feeble-minded for condemning a child to misery while placing the burden on society for generations to come. Although Sanger viewed sterilization as the most effective method of addressing this issue, she asserted birth control was “nothing more or less than the facilitation of weeding out the unfit, or preventing the birth of defectives or of those who will become defectives.”<sup>89</sup> Sanger’s speech on “The Morality of Birth Control” expanded on this argument by dividing society into three groups. Unlike the first and second groups of intelligent and responsible people, Sanger defined the third group as reckless people unable to support themselves. Since the feeble-minded were incapable of caring for themselves, Sanger argued that the “procreation of this group should be stopped...[and] certainly not be allowed to bring offspring into this world for others to look after.”<sup>90</sup>

Advancing this discussion in the *Birth Control Review*, Rowell Johnson’s “Eugenic Aspect of Birth Control” (1922) and Norman Haire’s “Sterilization of the Unfit” (1922) emphasized the importance of negative eugenics. For instance, Johnson discussed the alarmingly low birth rate of intellectually superior people and voiced his concerns about the excessive population of mentally inferior people.<sup>91</sup> To increase the birth rate of the superiors and decrease the rate of unfit people, Johnson suggested birth control and sterilization as the only solutions to this pressing problem. Furthermore, Haire offered a detailed perspective on sterilization and defended its use in cases of mental disease. According to Haire, the feeble-minded required an

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<sup>88</sup> Sanger, *Woman and the New Race*, 133.

<sup>89</sup> Sanger, *Woman and the New Race*, 229.

<sup>90</sup> Sanger, “The Morality of Birth Control,” 2.

<sup>91</sup> Rowell Johnson, “Eugenic Aspect of Birth Control,” *Birth Control Review*, (January 1922), 16.

invasive method due to failure to avoid conception. Haire reasoned that indifference and lack of intelligence brought a “new generation of human beings handicapped by a woefully small mental bank balance, who becomes bankrupt if too great a demand is made on their poor resources.”<sup>92</sup> To prevent the mentally ill from procreating, Haire described the safe and easy sterilization procedure. He claimed that surgical sterilization is far less painful and more convenient than nine months of pregnancy.<sup>93</sup> These articles thus support and reflect Sanger’s belief of sterilizing men and women considered insane or feebleminded.

Lastly, Sanger’s references to the feebleminded in *The Pivot of Civilization* (1922) and “The Unfit” show her disgust and extreme opinions that extend beyond the birth control movement. Addressing studies that indicate “insanity, epilepsy, criminality, prostitution, pauperism, and mental defect, are all organically bound together,”<sup>94</sup> Sanger believed feeblemindedness in one generation led to insanity in subsequent generations. Using evidence from reports of family histories, Sanger associated the feebleminded and their children with overwhelming social agencies, including “alms-houses, courts, penal institutions, charities, shelters, and asylums”<sup>95</sup> funded by “normal” people. Specifically, Sanger attacked feebleminded women for constituting a “permanent menace to the race”<sup>96</sup> and asserted that every feebleminded girl “should be segregated during the reproductive period.”<sup>97</sup> If an unfit woman was allowed to conceive, “she [was] certain to bear imbecile children, who in turn breed other defectives.”<sup>98</sup> Even with segregation carried out for two generations, Sanger believed this was not enough to control the fertility of the unfit. Instead, the “undeniably feeble-minded should not only be

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<sup>92</sup> Norman Haire, “Sterilization of the Unfit,” *Birth Control Review*, (February 1922), 10.

<sup>93</sup> Haire, “Sterilization of the Unfit,” 11.

<sup>94</sup> Sanger, *The Pivot of Civilization*, 82.

<sup>95</sup> Sanger, *The Pivot of Civilization*, 84.

<sup>96</sup> Sanger, *The Pivot of Civilization*, 87.

<sup>97</sup> Sanger, *The Pivot of Civilization*, 101.

<sup>98</sup> Sanger, *The Pivot of Civilization*, 101.

discouraged but prevented from propagating their kind.”<sup>99</sup> Sanger’s “The Unfit” clarified how the feeble-minded and the insane should be prevented from creating their “diseased and demented progeny.”<sup>100</sup> To “cleanse and regenerate the race,” Sanger suggested that pensions be offered to the feeble-minded for complying with sterilization.<sup>101</sup> Since the feeble-minded acted as an “absolute dead weight on the race...a deteriorating poison [that] depreciates the whole quality of people,”<sup>102</sup> Sanger viewed sterilization as the best solution to progress society by preventing race deterioration.

## Conclusion

The birth control movement set the stage for expanding women’s rights during second-wave feminism in the 1960s and 1970s. The birth control pill was released in 1960 and impacted various aspects of women’s social lives. For instance, oral contraception made birth control easy, accessible, and safe for women. Today, the pill’s contraceptive efficacy provides health benefits to women and is widespread. Although specific states have stricter health guidelines and nineteen million women lack access to healthcare that offers a range of contraceptive services, nearly two-thirds of women use birth control in the United States. Margaret Sanger was the progressive feminist responsible for societal change regarding women’s reproductive rights and contraceptives. She was also responsible for supporting sterilization laws which led to the sterilization of over 60,000 Americans from 1909 to 2013. In thirty-two states, eugenics and compulsory sterilization laws from the 1920s to 1970s legally targeted unmarried women, African Americans, immigrants, and children from low-income families.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Sanger, *The Pivot of Civilization*, 181.

<sup>100</sup> Margaret Sanger, “The Unfit,” Margaret Sanger Papers, Date unknown, 100.

<sup>101</sup> Sanger, “The Unfit,” 96.

<sup>102</sup> Sanger, “The Unfit,” 96.

<sup>103</sup> “President Signs Tillis-Carper Eugenics Compensation Legislation into Law,” Thom Tillis, U.S. Senator for North Carolina, October 23, 2016, <https://www.tillis.senate.gov/2016/10/president-signs-tillis-carper-eugenics-compensation-legislation-into-law>.

With the completion of the Human Genome Project and advances in genomic screening technologies, ethical concerns arise. Genetic enhancements, manipulation of embryos, prenatal diagnosis, carrier screening, sex-selection abortion, and In Vitro Fertilization allows parents and doctors to decide whether to terminate a pregnancy. According to the Centers for Disease Control in 2020, approximately 75% to 88% of medically insured pregnant women were screened for HIV, HBV, HCV, and syphilis.<sup>104</sup> A 2014 study on prenatal testing in the US estimated that 75% of pregnant women were screened for Down Syndrome.<sup>105</sup> In response to modern eugenic concerns, the National Human Genome Research Institute founded the Ethical, Legal, and Societal Implications Research Program to investigate the legacies of eugenics and scientific racism in emerging genomic technologies.<sup>106</sup> This organization develops an inclusive and ethical community by engaging with the history of eugenics to combat present-day manifestations. However, the parent's decision to terminate a pregnancy is not under government control to improve the qualities of future generations through eugenic measures.<sup>107</sup> With recent Supreme Court developments, state control over abortion complicates this story. Although several states have made abortion illegal, it is difficult to compare this to sterilization as eugenicists targeted marginalized groups from having children. Governmental control over women's reproductive health reflects the connection between sterilization and abortion laws in the past and present.

Feminism and eugenics are contradictory terms and often not associated with one another. The broad scope of this paper identified the lesser-known intersections of the eugenics

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<sup>104</sup> "Screening Recommendations," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, June 12, 2020), <https://www.cdc.gov/nchhstp/pregnancy/screening/index.html>.

<sup>105</sup> "Down Syndrome Prenatal Testing," Down Syndrome Prenatal Testing, accessed April 28, 2022, <http://www.downsyndromeprenataltesting.com/>.

<sup>106</sup> "Eugenics and Scientific Racism," Genome.gov, accessed April 28, 2022, <https://www.genome.gov/about-genomics/fact-sheets/Eugenics-and-Scientific-Racism>.

<sup>107</sup> Douglas Wahlsten, "Prenatal Testing," The Eugenics Archives, April 29, 2014, <https://eugenicsarchive.ca/discover/connections/53602b577095aa000000049b>.

movement and the birth control movement. Specifically, this research explored what eugenic ideologies Sanger supported as a leading feminist. Through extensive research on eugenic theory, this paper clarifies the tradition of feminist eugenics and the subsequent transition toward eugenic feminism. As indicated in the various primary sources, Sanger's advocacy for women's rights and sterilization of the unfit co-existed within her works.

Today, Planned Parenthood, originally the American Birth Control League founded by Sanger, acknowledges her involvement in eugenics and her racist beliefs. Considering this paper did not focus on Sanger's views on race, further research on the intent behind the Negro Project and her international advocacy for birth control is necessary to understand her impact on eugenics abroad and reinforcement of social hierarchies. It is critical to remember that the social environment of the nineteenth and twentieth century influenced Sanger's perspectives, which differs greatly from contemporary understandings of race and science. It is important to recognize these distinctions to avoid defending or critiquing Margaret Sanger for what she believed in. Focusing on her ideologies through primary sources allows historians to more objectively understand Margaret Sanger as a feminist and eugenicist.

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