

Margaret Sanger and the Nazis: How Many Degrees of Separation?

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One of the more pervasive features of our current political culture is the “Nazification” of one’s political or ideological opponents. It seems scarcely a week goes by when some group isn’t making a concerted effort to demonstrate why its opposition bears more than a passing resemblance to Adolf Hitler or the Nazis. In an era that is increasingly characterized by absolutes, sweeping subjectivity, and an inability or unwillingness to find common ground or engage in critical thought, the tendency to radicalize the opposition naturally leads to the most extreme limits of human behavior.

Among the most frequent targets of this Nazification in recent decades has been Margaret Sanger and, by association, Planned Parenthood. The syllogism that we most often find looks something like this:

- Planned Parenthood was founded and primarily influenced by Margaret Sanger.
- Margaret Sanger was a leading figure in the eugenics movement in the United States.
- The eugenics movement in this country strongly influenced Nazi eugenics, and thus the Holocaust.
- Therefore, a strong association exists between M. Sanger (and therefore Planned Parenthood) and the horrors of Nazism.

Given recent events related to the funding or nonfunding of Planned Parenthood, not only by the federal government, but also by private nonprofits such as the Susan G. Komen fund, as well as the hyperbolic partisan rhetoric that is contextually linked to contemporary presidential politics, this issue is particularly important. This brief commentary breaks down and considers the validity of the syllogism delineated earlier.

MARGARET SANGER AND EUGENICS

There are two important issues that relate to the judgment of M. Sanger as a “eugenicist.” We need to consider, first, her structural role within the movement and, second, her ideological approach to the topic, and how this relates to the thinking of other American eugenicists at the time. The former takes up the question of whether she had any important impact on the course of the movement. We might ask, in other words, whether the eugenic movement in the United States would have evolved differently or had less impact than it did had M. Sanger not been an important social force of the era. The answer to this is a resounding and unqualified “no.” Even a cursory reading of the history of the movement would dispel any notion that M. Sanger played a leadership role within it. She was at best a tangential figure who sought, and largely failed, to co-opt the growing eugenics movement as a means of supporting her efforts to increase support for the birth control movement (Katz, 2003; A. Sanger, 2009). In a movement that was dominated almost exclusively by men, M. Sanger’s influence pales in comparison not only to them, but also to women such as Florence Sherborn, Elizabeth Kite, Florence Danielson, the Canadian physician Helen MacMurchy, and others. M. Sanger was in no way included within the “inner circles” of American eugenic leadership, and most kept her at arms’ length, for reasons described later.

Although M. Sanger was not a leading eugenicist, one could argue that she had an ideological approach that would define her as a “eugenicist.” In a sense, the answer to this question is easier if we split eugenics into its two components, positive and negative eugenics (O’Brien, 2011). The former is simply defined as efforts to encourage presumably fit people to breed to ensure greater

numbers of such people. The latter, conversely, includes any efforts to diminish breeding among those considered to be unfit. In the case of the American eugenics era, this group primarily included "morons," a scapegoat class that generally included a broad range of lower class and presumably immoral and less intelligent people (O'Brien & Bundy, 2009). In the case of negative eugenics, M. Sanger was on the same page as American eugenicists. She felt that morons and their ilk should be forcibly sterilized to ensure that they would not breed and that they could not even be trusted to use voluntary birth control methods (M. Sanger, 1922).

Although M. Sanger used particularly virulent language when it came to such people, it should be added that this was customary for the time, and such language was quite common, even in professional publications (O'Brien, 1999). Moron, imbecile, and idiot, for example, were all medical classifications of the age. This is not to discount M. Sanger's highly pejorative depictions of the potential victims of eugenics. The terminology of the era, however, is frequently used now apart from its proper context, to vilify its users. Furthermore, a large number of even the most famous social workers and other Progressive era reformers either supported or were at least open to forms of negative eugenics (LaPan & Platt, 2005). As Kennedy (2008) wrote, "leaders like Richmond, Addams, Breckinridge and Abbott embraced the language, methods, and public policy solutions of eugenics" (p. 28). Likewise, a rather large contingent of physicians and other professionals (not to mention religious leaders and presidents of the United States such as Roosevelt and Wilson) supported eugenic proposals (Trent, 1994). During the first decades of the century, eugenics was increasingly becoming mainstream and was not by any means a "radical" concept.

It was in her views of positive eugenics where M. Sanger fundamentally parted ways with the American eugenicists. She believed that all women should have the ability to control their procreation, and that limiting family size would benefit all mothers in numerous ways, as well as control overpopulation. Eugenicists, however, felt that "fit" mothers should be encouraged to have as many children as possible and that anything that stood in the way of this (including the dissemination of birth control information or devices) should be

ferverly opposed (M. Sanger, 1919, 1920). Although M. Sanger attempted to join ranks with the eugenicists as a tactic for gaining support for the birth control movement, most American eugenicists opposed any such collaboration, fearing that greater access to birth control would principally limit births among the "desirable classes," and thus augment race suicide. As the movement evolved, however, increasing numbers of eugenicists came to support birth control as a eugenic method, especially because they realized that the "desirable" segments of the population were already using it and that this trend would certainly continue (Chesler, 1992; Fairchild, 1935).

One might, therefore, properly refer to M. Sanger as a quasi-eugenicist. In addition to their differing views on positive eugenics, moreover, M. Sanger parted ways with the leaders of the American movement in another important way. She believed that, with few exceptions (such as "morons" and others who could not be counted on to make good decisions), decisions related to procreation should be left up to individual women or couples. On the contrary, many eugenicists in the United States, and even more so in Nazi Germany, believed that because the entire nation had a stake in the future quality of its population, such decisions could be dictated by the state. There was little love lost between M. Sanger and leading Nazis, and it is not surprising that they burned her books (Jewish Virtual Library, 1998). As large as the gap was between M. Sanger and the American eugenicists when it came to positive eugenics, it was even wider in relation to German eugenicists. The latter viewed Aryan women as little more than breeders who should in no way limit their procreative output. In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler (1925/1971) decried the fact that "every drug store and our very street peddlers offer the means for the prevention of births for sale even to the healthiest parents" (p. 402). When Hitler took control of Germany a decade later, Aryan women's fertility was no longer a personal matter but, rather, a state concern, and their value to the nation was inextricably tied to their ability to breed the next generation of soldiers.

Although there is much discussion these days about the Nazi view of various forms of eugenic control, including abortion, birth control, sterilization, and even infanticide, the issue is really nambiguous and exceedingly simple. To the Nazi eugenicists,

procedures mattered little and could not be judged morally unless one knew who was to be subjected to them. The procedures or processes were simply tools, and, if used in a presumably eugenic fashion (and particularly if they were cost-effective), they constituted the height of morality and the bridge to a better future for the Volk. If used dysgenically, they were not only immoral, but also treasonous.

Although my contention is that the syllogism I started with breaks down in linking M. Sanger to either the American or German eugenics movement, it also falls apart somewhat when attempting to link the two movements together. Although Kühl (1994) and others delineated the connections between American and German eugenics, other authors of secondary works on eugenics have rightly pointed out that the primary reason for the ideological proximity of the two movements relates largely to the evolution of the American movement from 1910 into the 1930s, during which time a brand of race-based eugenics came to be increasingly embraced (Ludmerer, 1972). Many eugenicists who did not support the exploitation of the movement to manipulate the racial or ethnic construction of the population had distanced themselves from it prior to the Great Depression. To presume that any supporter of certain eugenic policies at some point in its history must have also supported the race-based use of such policies, either in the United States or Germany, is simply inaccurate. To imply that all supporters of some forms of eugenics can be vilified as pseudo-Nazis is a vast oversimplification. To make the larger leap and say that professional programs that such people were associated with 50 or 100 years ago are therefore irreparably tarnished today because of this connection is nothing less than absurd.

A final point is that a major concern regarding the Nazification of M. Sanger relates less to our professional obligations to critically analyze historical facts, and more with the place of such Nazification within the larger context of the sociopolitical culture within which we live. I believe that the incredible horrors of the Holocaust are diminished, and the suffering of its victims demeaned, when we consistently invoke them to support our personal political agendas, when we stretch ever-increasing lengths to bring opponents under the "Nazi umbrella," and when we caricature all opposition leaders as being yet another Hitler. Our professional responsibility to support social justice

necessitates that we not trivialize social injustice. This is especially true when speaking of the gravest injustices. **SW**

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