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Margaret Sanger: The Fuel of Her Revolution

by Shannon Rohn

(History 1140)

After spending years witnessing the horrors of motherhood on the Lower East side of Manhattan while she was a nurse, Margaret Sanger bitterly resolved that nursing would not help solve the vast tribulations of the floundering society. She wrote about the tragedies that prompted her to become an advocate for the free use of contraceptives in her 1931 autobiography, *My Fight for Birth Control*. After treating a mother who died at age twenty-eight, Sanger exclaimed, “I would never go back again to nurse women’s ailing bodies while their miseries were as vast as the stars” (*Awakening and Revolt* 3). Sanger alluded to the fact that working women’s problems due to excessive reproduction were so great that they were comparable to the cosmos. Thus, Sanger spent the rest of her life seeking to reduce this hardship. Although controversial in her actions and stances on reproductive, racial, and economic views, Sanger nevertheless pioneered the effort to make contraceptives available. Her legacy continues today in the form of the institution she started, Planned Parenthood, amidst endless praises and criticisms. In her autobiography, Sanger exclaims, “Women should have the knowledge of contraception” (*Awakening* 3). Her story serves to remind generations of the hardships women faced in the early 1900s and to voice the still debated opinion that women should have control over their own bodies.

Sanger’s views about the need for contraception were first fueled by her family life. Her mother suffered the toils of excessive motherhood, having had eighteen pregnancies and eleven children (“History & Successes”). She died in 1899 at the age of fifty due to tuberculosis, and Sanger became convinced that the excessive passion of her father led her mother to her grim fate (*Awakening* 1). Although critical of her father, Sanger gained some of political views from him. A political radical himself, Michael Higgins provided his daughter with various books about strong women, which Sanger later described as “ammunition about the historical background of the importance of women” (Galvin). Ironically, Sanger’s father provided her with the tools to become a liberated woman while still portraying a sexist male role in her life.

In Sanger’s professional life as a nurse, she witnessed further tragedies. Sanger claimed, “I have seen groups of fifty to one hundred women going to questionable offices...for cheap abortions” (*Awakening* 1). When such places were not available, Sanger described how women would resort to drastic measures such as “insert[ing] slippery-elm sticks, or knitting needles, or shoe hooks into the uterus” (“Awakening” 2). Sanger even saw some women so desperate that they committed suicide to avoid pregnancy. Such a tragedy occurred when, according to Sanger, “Mrs. Kelly...put her head into the gas oven to end her misery” (*Awakening* 2). Not surprisingly, the state of affairs became a “nightmare” for Sanger (*Awakening* 1).

The desperation of the women resounded in Sanger, and she did her best within the stifling constraints of the law to give them information that would prevent the women from harming themselves. Unfortunately, she was not able to help in any significant way. The Comstock Law of 1873 banned the dissemination of birth control information and devices because they were “obscene” (Maier et al. 561). Even when Sanger tried to pass information through word of mouth, women disregarded her advice out of disbelief (*Awakening* 3).

Sanger also witnessed the discrimination women faced from male doctors. When she went to treat the twenty-eight year old woman, Mrs. Sacks, who suffered after attempting an abortion, Sanger revealed, “Never had I worked so fast, so concentratedly as I did to keep alive that little mother”

(*Awakening 2*). Sanger put forth her best effort, while in contrast the doctor acted coldly. While recovering, Mrs. Sacks expressed her fears about dying should she become pregnant again and the doctor replied, “Any more such capers...and there will be no need to call me” (*Awakening 2*). The doctor bluntly hints at death to Mrs. Sacks in a condescending tone, emphasizing his indifference. When Mrs. Sacks then asks him about the possibility of preventing pregnancy, the doctor said, “Oh ho!...You want your cake while you eat it too don’t you.” Well it can’t be done... I’ll tell you the only sure thing to do. Tell Jake to sleep on the roof!” (qtd. in *Awakening 2*). The doctor’s statement contained two eminently sexist positions. First, he used the metaphor to suggest that Mrs. Sack does not *deserve* to engage in sexual intercourse without getting pregnant. Second, his sarcastic remark about forcing her husband to sleep on the roof suggests that a husband’s passions outweigh the wife’s desires about pregnancy, and in Mrs. Sacks’ case, death. After three months, Mrs. Sacks died because of another home abortion and Sanger’s grief and anger at the original sentiments of the apathetic doctor pushed her to a turning point. She was “stunned and horrified” (Kerber and De Hart 2) and the doctor’s evident lack of compassion. However, Sanger promised never to let herself be part of that kind of indescribably hurtful tragedy again.

Sanger experienced a dose of the hopelessness the desperate mothers like Mrs. Sacks felt. Sanger then bitterly came to the conclusion that, “It was the same result, the same story told a thousand times before” (*Awakening 3*). Although the situation appeared hopeless for so many women, Sanger herself reached a turning point after witnessing Mrs. Sack’s death. Sanger vowed, “I would tell the world what was going on in the lives of these poor women. I *would* be heard. No matter what it should cost. *I would be heard...*” (*Awakening 4*)

After that point, Sanger never relinquished her vow. She began her crusade by writing articles about women’s health in the Socialist Party paper *The Call*, and by publishing those articles in two publications: *What Every Girl Should Know* in 1916 and *What Every Mother Should Know* in 1917. Sanger also started her own paper for working class women, *Woman Rebel*, which promoted the female right to sexual freedom and bodily control in 1914 (Galvin). During this period, Sanger made clear many of her radical economic and political views. Her husband was a socialist who had an effect on some of her views (Galvin). Thus, she wrote for *The Call*, joined the Socialist union, Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), and aided in strikes. She voiced an opinion that condemned the capitalist system for manipulating the poor into “producing an endless supply of cheap labor” (Steinem). Sanger further attacked capitalism, and exclaimed, “Is flesh and blood and the virtue of the mother of the future so cheap in this land of plenty that it can be sacrificed for such passing whims?” (*What Every Woman Should Know 17*). Sanger sarcastically mocked the romanticized view of America by pointing out that women have few rights and are considered “cheap” in the eyes of society.

Sanger’s radicalism fueled her desire to change American society. In 1914, she founded the National Birth Control League (Lewis). Soon after, in 1916 she opened her first birth control clinic in Brooklyn, New York (“Censorship”). The clinic’s efforts were aimed at poor, working-class, immigrant women, many of whom lined up hours before the opening (“History & Successes”). Unfortunately, one such client was actually an undercover police officer who arrested Sanger and shut the clinic down (“Censorship”). Nonetheless, when the court required Sanger to serve a thirty day sentence at a workhouse, she managed to further her cause by offering other inmates advice on sexual hygiene while the matrons were out of sight (Kerber and De Hart). In 1923, she furthered her efforts by opening the Birth Control Clinical Research Bureau to disseminate contraceptives and study the safety and effectiveness of such devices (“History & Successes”). In 1936, Sanger encountered further judicial victories when the U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that new information about the dangers of unplanned pregnancy and the usefulness of contraceptives called for a further liberalization of the Comstock Laws (“History & Successes”).

Needless to say, Sanger’s efforts were not universally hailed. The Catholic Church, in

particular, condemned her efforts, and in 1921, Archbishop Patrick Hays even managed to have authorities arrest Sanger before she was supposed to give a speech titled “Birth Control: Is it Moral?” (Galvin). As historian Nancy Cott explained, “While reliable birth control was welcomed by some, others saw it as throwing a tremendous wrench into the social structure” (qtd. in Galvin). Nonetheless, Sanger continued to throw the wrenches. When her movement lost steam after women’s suffrage was obtained, Sanger made a controversial move by appealing to eugenists, claiming that the use of birth control would lower birthrates in working-class and immigrant groups, and would thus “improve the quality of the nation’s population” (Maier et al. 694). It was unclear as to what Sanger’s personal view on eugenics was. Despite her comments, she helped W.E.B. Du Bois and Mary McLeod Bethune open birth control clinics in the South (Steinem). Conversely, some of her comments were used to justify the involuntary sterilization of thousands in twenty states (Steinem; Galvin).

Even through such setbacks and criticisms, Sanger persevered. In 1957, geneticist Gregory Goodwin Pincus finished creating the birth control pill, a term which Sanger coined, and which Pincus called “the product of [Sanger’s] pioneering resolution” (Galvin). After this breakthrough, Sanger witnessed a further triumph a year before her death when in 1965 the Supreme Court ruled in favor of the Planned Parenthood League of Connecticut in the landmark case *Griswold v. Connecticut*. The Court found that married couples had the right to privacy, and thus had the right to seek information, and devices of contraception (“Griswold v. Connecticut”).

In Sanger’s time as a nurse she observed that, “the menace of another pregnancy hung like a sword over the head of every poor woman I came in contact with” (*Awakening* 1). The simile suggests that these women compared pregnancy to death, and thus, these women lived in fear. Sanger saw the agony and angrily concluded that there existed “no right to exhaust women’s vitality and throw them on the scrap-heap before the age of thirty-five” (*Awakening* 1). After seeing such a fate befall Mrs. Sacks, Sanger challenged the sexism, prejudice, and even the institutions of her time. She exclaimed, “Against the State, against the Church, against the silence of the medical profession, against the whole machinery of dead institutions of the past, the woman of today arises” (Lewis). Her radicalism made her extremely biased, her actions made her controversial, but she nevertheless continued the fight for women’s rights. Her story brings understanding to the movement for birth control through the surprising tales of what pregnant women endured. She titled the chapter of her stories as an early nurse “Awakening and Revolt” (*Awakening* 1). No matter what opinions one has of this woman, one cannot deny that once she awoke to the problems of the women of her time, she never stopped her revolution.

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