

From Women's Liberation to Their Obligation: The Tensions Between Sexuality and Maternity in Early Birth Control Rhetoric

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Abstract: This essay examines discussion of maternity and sexuality in Margaret Sanger's birth control rhetoric during the early twentieth century. Studying the rhetorical relationship between women's maternity and sexuality in arguments for contraception reveals tensions that arise in attempting to create an identity for women distinct from their motherhood. In the case of Sanger's rhetoric, she appears at first to challenge conservative notions regarding women, advocating women's sexual, economic, and personal liberation. Analysis shows that Sanger's arguments also support dominant social strictures, calling for women to fulfill their maternal duty to care for their husbands, children, and nation. In this play between talk of women's liberation and obligation we find maternal themes' potential and liability in feminist rhetoric.

Margaret Sanger received an indictment in August 1914 for mailing materials described in the indictment as "of such vile, obscene, filthy, and indecent character that a further description thereof would defile the records of this court" (Indictment). More to the point, Sanger had violated the Comstock Act of 1873, which made it illegal to distribute through the mails any material that gave instruction or could be used for the purpose of contraception or abortion.¹ On February 18, 1916, Sanger learned she would not have to stand trial for violating federal obscenity laws: the US Attorney's office at New York had filed a *nolle prosequi* dismissing the charges against Sanger, in part because a conviction did not seem certain. The written rationale failed to mention the pertinent information that in the 18 months between her indictment and the government dropping its charges against her, Sanger's five-year old daughter, Peggy, died of pneumonia. The Comstock Act, part of the federal obscenity code, effectively criminalized birth control as an immoral act, corrupting procreative activity with lustful intent (D'Emilio and Freedman 160). Against the image of Sanger as a smut peddling enemy to domesticity, the widely circulated photograph of Sanger with her two sons taken shortly after Peggy Sanger's death evinced a maternal identity that palliated public fears of home wrecking obscenity. As Sanger would write in her *Autobiography*, the photograph "seemed to alter the attitude of a heretofore cynical public" (Sanger 186). It is this play in Sanger's rhetoric between advocate for women's sexuality and preserver of maternal obligations that I explore in this essay.

Sanger's birth control rhetoric demands attention to understand the ways in which an early feminist discourse on women's bodies struggled to empower women as

independent and sexual persons while capitulating to cultural images of women as domestically oriented. In this essay I analyze Sanger's speeches, articles, and pamphlets concentrated over a period of approximately twenty years, primarily from 1914-1937, to reveal a tension in her rhetoric between women's right to liberation and their maternal obligations. I find Sanger arguing that birth control will provide women with personal freedom and sexual liberation even as she articulates contraception as women's maternal obligation to themselves, their children, their husbands, and their nation. In this ironic turn, women's personal interests and needs become submerged under the compulsion to serve and care for others, a decidedly maternal obligation. The resulting tension of simultaneously freeing women and placing obligations upon them presents another example of the struggle that US women face in attempting to escape the normative social discourse of feminine domesticity that seeks to render women's bodies to the service of the family, both personal and national.

Too often we construct nineteenth-century notions of feminine sexuality as summed up in the refrain, "Lie back and think of England." In contrast, late-nineteenth and early twentieth century writing on women's sexuality reveal an appreciation for women's sexual desire but only in terms of domestic relations to either husbands or children. Historian Carl Degler shows that some medical writers felt that frustrating women's sexual gratification brought on illness and defined "mutual pleasure" as "essential to successful marital intercourse" (407-08). Havelock Ellis, a prominent sexologist at the turn of the twentieth century, likewise recognized women as having a sexual impulse comparable to men's and suggested the clitoris as the focus of women's sexual pleasure (*Sexual* 235). Clelia Mosher's late nineteenth-century study of women's personal sex history and attitudes toward sex reveals that among white, generally well-educated women, sex served both men and women's interests and desires. Much of these discourses, however, operates within an androcentric model in which women have the capacity for sexual pleasure but only as it is delivered to them by men. G. J. Barker-Benfield finds nineteenth-century views of feminine sexuality cast woman as like nature itself with hidden precious minerals for man to exploit and express "mastery over his own resources" (382). Taking from Honoré de Balzac's metaphor, Ellis compares the sexual relationship of man and woman to the musician and instrument, with the man carefully playing the instrument for desired harmonic effect (*Sex* 525). The active/passive dichotomy of musician and instrument, one a person the other an object, further demonstrates an ideology in which men bring women

their sexuality. In each of these cases women possess sexual desire, which men must awaken or unearth for them.

Though social discourse has increasingly attributed women as possessing a sexuality as legitimate as men's, Western thought has largely denied mothers their sexuality. As Mary Rogers and Susan Chase find, "women's passions and erotic energies are stifled or even denied in the interest (it seems) of attuning them more to men's and children's satisfactions than to their own" (115). In a similar vein, Rachel Maines documents the pervasiveness of pro-natal models of women's sexuality that regard vaginal orgasms—not clitoral—as legitimate. The connection between women's sexual fulfillment and reproductive opportunity represented by vaginal orgasms essentially justifies women's sexual satisfaction: "The persistent association of women's sexuality with their reproduction left them culturally positioned as sexual objects and reproductive instruments rather than as sexual and (sometimes) reproductive agents" (Chase and Rogers 116). The resulting image of a mother's sexuality resides within the confines of her potential for procreating.

The depiction of women's maternity as excluding a self-sufficient sexuality demonstrates what Adrienne Rich, Andrea O'Reilly, and others note as the difference between motherhood and mothering. Defining mothers as those whose sexual energies point to reproduction only demonstrates "motherhood": "The term 'motherhood' refers to the patriarchal institution of motherhood which is male-defined and controlled, and is deeply oppressive to women, while the word 'mothering' refers to women's experiences of mothering which are female-defined and centered" (O'Reilly, Introduction 2). In a writing from 1933 Sanger explains that men have a "wooden image" of women, and men's wooden model of femininity takes precedence over the woman standing before them ("Woman and the Future" 2). This distinction of a real and a wooden woman foreshadows the feminist differentiation between mothering and motherhood. Sanger's rhetoric of birth control begins by speaking of mothering as she discusses the challenges women endure as they seek personal and sexual fulfillment, especially fears of pregnancy and the inability to control their own reproduction. Across time, however, Sanger's discourse increasingly focuses on issues of motherhood, describing mother's instinctive and appropriate behavior to care for their children, husbands, and nation before themselves.

This study focuses on tensions that emerge in Sanger's rhetoric as she argues for women's personal and sexual liberation and the extent to which her attempt to resist dominant discourses succumbs to them. Drawing from Michel Foucault's work on power and resistance, the analysis accepts the premise, "Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power" (95). Thus we can expect that calls for women's personal liberation will likely come imbued with

mandates for women to continue their self-sacrifice for others' gain. As I will show, Sanger's resistant rhetoric, declaring women's right to sexual fulfillment, cedes to men's interests by arguing that female sexual desire will benefit the family at least as much as the women themselves. This does not mean that "resistance is futile" but resistances can only offer minute breaks and shifts that in mass hold the possibility to effect greater change (Foucault 96). In my own study, I consider Sanger discussions of women's sexual desire and freedom against maternal obligations. My analysis demonstrates the inability for one rhetoric of women's liberation to break free from patriarchal motherhood.

A New Deal for Women²

Sanger discussion of birth control's liberating potential focuses upon what birth control can do to personally benefit women by challenging precepts of feminine domesticity. To explain the emancipatory potential of birth control Sanger speaks to social barriers women face. Finding suffrage an empty hope, she discusses the need for women to control their bodies, both in terms of sexuality and reproduction. In this, Sanger identifies the biological burden women face as child bearers and the ability for birth control to provide women personal freedom. In Sanger's 1920 *Woman and the New Race*, she declares, "The basic freedom of the world is woman's freedom" (94). Such a proclamation signals the feminist assault Sanger offers toward patriarchal notions of femininity. A writing from 1933 captures Sanger's frustration with gender politics of the day: "Women have been compelled to be all things in nearly every country of the globe—beasts of burden, pack animals, slaves, servants, instruments of pleasure. . . . Everything has been in terms of the needs of men" ("Woman of the Future" 108). Against men's preconceived expectations for women's behavior, Sanger believes that women's liberation must include the ability for women to fully control their own destiny.

For Sanger, suffrage misses the vital point of self ownership because after a woman casts a ballot she must return to a home where a man controls her daily activity. In 1936, speaking of her experiences in India, Sanger applauds Indian women's recognition—quicker than that of most Western women—to see that "fighting for and obtaining the vote was insignificant as compared with fighting for the knowledge of and freedom of their bodies" ("Mother India" 2). Before the passage of the nineteenth amendment, Sanger writes in a 1918 article for the *Birth Control Review* that birth control is "a more immediate and effective emancipation of woman than suffrage" ("Trapped!" 3). For Sanger the vote serves as a palliative that fails to grant women the basic freedom had by controlling their bodies: "No woman can call herself free who does not own and control her body. No woman can call herself free until she can choose consciously

whether she will or will not be a mother" (*Woman* 94). At the center of Sanger's definition of liberation stands this ability to control one's body and, thus, one's destiny.

Sanger's discussion of contraception and bodily possession goes beyond concerns about preventing pregnancy also to include sexuality. When speaking of sexuality Sanger directs attention to how gender relations restrict women's sexuality, focusing on marital abuse and men's inattentiveness. The arguments Sanger offers here regarding sex abuse in marriage bears note because she goes beyond public concerns of women's equality, such as suffrage, to raise the private issues of sex and power in marriage. In the *Woman Rebel* Sanger declares that, "Marriage laws abrogate the freedom of woman by enforcing upon her a continuous sexual slavery and a compulsory motherhood" ("Marriage" 16). Going further Sanger describes marriage as an institution of "forced prostitution" ("Conventions" 11). Letters from Sanger's 1928 volume *Motherhood in Bondage*, a collection of letters she received from those for contraceptive information, poignantly describes men's sexual abuse of their wives: "He forces me to have intercourse whenever he wishes and will not use contraceptive measures" (281). Sanger ultimately blames the state for presenting women with an impossible choice: "She has her choice between an enforced continence, with its health wrecking consequences and its constant aggravation of domestic discord, and the sort of prostitution legalized by the marriage ceremony" (*Woman* 112). Her point demonstrates that public policy produces private relations: by denying women contraception the laws also empower men with the right to control their wives' bodies.

Though Sanger blames the state for creating tension in marital relations, she also discusses the ways in which men further frustrate women's sexual pleasure. Speaking of women's sex partners strictly in terms of husbands, Sanger characterizes the majority of men as indifferent to women's need for sexual release. In the first 11 editions of Sanger's birth control manual, *Family Limitation*, she bluntly deals with the problem of men meeting their own sexual pleasure without consideration for women: "It is usual for the male to arrive at this stage [climax] earlier than the female, with the consequence that he is further incapacitated to satisfy her desire for some time after" (*Limitation* 1st 11). Denying women orgasms constitutes a problem because it spawns women's revulsion for sex: "Nine times out of ten it is the fault of the man, who through ignorance and selfishness and inconsiderateness, has satisfied his own desire and promptly gone to sleep. The woman in self defense has learned to protect herself from the long hours of sleepless nights and nervous tension by refusing to become interested" (*Limitation* 1st 11). Basing her arguments on medical literature of the time, Sanger argues that women brought to heightened arousal without orgasm may suffer health consequences. By contrast she describes the woman who reaches orgasm as physically better for it: "Her whole being is built up

and beautified through it, her form develops, her eyes become brighter, her health improves, color comes into her cheeks" (*Limitation* 1st 7). In these arguments Sanger supports the idea of men's responsibility for women's orgasms while also confronting the inattentiveness of husbands to their wives' feelings thus demonstrating the imbedded tension between challenging and affirming popular discourses on women's sexuality.

Precisely because Sanger sees women's general wellness improved by sexual pleasure, she evaluates contraceptives by the extent to which they provide women with the possibility for pleasure. Assuming that strictly intercourse brings about women's orgasms, Sanger harshly condemns "withdrawal," *coitus interruptus* (*Limitation* 1st 6).³ Sanger finds the value of all other contraceptive methods lies in their ability to alleviate women's fear of pregnancy and thereby increase women's sexual pleasure (*Limitation* 10th 22; *Magnetation* 11). In her assessments, Sanger finds condoms especially valuable for both removing women's fear and improving men's sexual performance: "It [the condom] has another value quite apart from prevention in decreasing the tendency in the male to arrive at the climax in the sexual act before the female" (*Limitation* 1st 10). Admittedly, in this example Sanger again subscribes to a model of sexuality that relies upon the man to provide the woman with a vaginal orgasm. Even still, her focus remains on contraceptive measures that can improve women's sexual pleasure.

The discussion Sanger provides of women's subjection to social expectations and women's sexuality meet in her consideration of women's maternal function. Sanger describes the burden of maternity as biologically assigned and socially exacerbated. The distinction of sex and gender has served as the touchstone of gender studies by separating individuals' biology from their performance of femininity and/or masculinity. Likewise, Sanger discusses maternity in such a way that she recognizes the biological ability of childbearing unique to women but separates nature from the social meanings applied to motherhood, that maternity is every woman's destiny. From the first page of the inaugural issue of Sanger's short-lived socialist periodical, *The Woman Rebel*, she addresses the matter of "slavery through motherhood" ("Aim" 1). The slavery of motherhood comes from women's biological designation as the child bearers of the species: "Nature has not been altogether kind to woman in that she has not distributed equally the biological task of child-bearing" ("A New Deal for Women" 1). Though nature gives women the role as child bearers in the species, Sanger explains that society makes the ability to bear children a compulsory obligation for a woman thus limiting her personal freedom: "A woman is to look upon herself merely as a vehicle for the breeding of children. Her mind is of no consequence, her body is the main thing" ("Menace's" 23). The statement serves as an affront to assumptions that women's bodies serve

masculine interests because it opens the possibility of women defining themselves in terms other than their familial relation.

To achieve social liberation from enslaved motherhood women need birth control. Though Sanger argues for women to use birth control as a means of challenging the forgone assumptions of women as inevitable mothers, she refrains from ever telling women they should avoid motherhood altogether. By providing women with the possibility to form an identity outside motherhood Sanger describes birth control as "biological emancipation," "the foundation for a new glorified womanhood," and "for woman the key to the temple of freedom" ("Woman and the Future" 14; *Voluntary* 1; *Woman* 5). Without the ability to control one's own maternal duty "woman can never hope to rise to the heights of her own spiritual destiny" ("Woman of the Future" 108). Though contraception implies the presence of both a man and a woman Sanger writes in, "A Parent's Problem or Woman's?," of "the hard, inescapable fact . . . that man has not only refused any such responsibility but has individually and collectively sought to prevent woman from obtaining knowledge by which she could assume the responsibility for herself" (6).⁴ By assuming for themselves the responsibility of birth control women have the power to "prevent the submergence of womanhood into motherhood" (*Woman* 226). Sanger does not necessarily want women to avoid becoming mothers but to maintain their womanhood independent of motherhood. To this point she specifically discusses issues of marital sex life: "Women who have a knowledge of contraception are not compelled to make the choice between a maternal experience and a marred love life" (*Woman* 55). Here again Sanger places women's sexual happiness as natural to a woman's fulfilled life experience.

Sanger's discussion of women's maternal function draws together her total arguments about the liberating effects of birth control. With regard to women's maternal function, Sanger finds that nature has made women the child bearers and society expects women to serve men in that regard. Women, then, can use birth control to claim the control of their bodies, their identity as women, and their sexual pleasure. Sanger's total argument about the liberatory potential of birth control follows this same line of thinking. Because social constructions of women invoke ideals of women as maternally oriented Sanger must challenge the expectations on women's femininity, the limits of suffrage's effectiveness, the barriers to women's sexuality, and the expectation of women as maternally destined. Sanger sees birth control as the answer to these injustices. Most importantly, birth control, in Sanger's arguments here, enhance women's interests.

Woman's Error and Her Debt⁵

Sanger's strident call for women to defy the social compulsion to seek out motherhood as the only means of self-definition becomes co-opted by that very discourse as she articulates birth control's value in improving women's maternal function. In the preceding, Sanger envisions birth control as benefiting women by liberating them from social structures that dominate women; in the examples below she focuses on women's use of birth control as a duty of motherhood. Susan Chase notes that nineteenth century feminists imagined motherhood as extending to the care of husbands, friends, and cultural institutions (5). Likewise, I find in the following discussion of Sanger's rhetoric that she focuses on women's maternal obligation to serve their children, husbands, and nation. These arguments, sometimes placed next to the examples discussed above for challenging maternal expectations, demonstrate the tension of competing discourses as Sanger attempts to create a liberated place for women in society even as she prescribes for women the familiar role of maternal figure, caring for their children, husbands, and nation over themselves.

Sanger's expression of women's duty of motherhood celebrates the role of maternity and describes it as a woman's natural desire, despite having written in 1914 that "Motherhood should not be the highest aim of a girl" ("Class and Character" 36).⁶ Where in 1914 Sanger calls motherhood a form of slavery, by 1922 she describes motherhood as the "most important profession in the world" and "woman's noblest career" (*Pivot* 189; "Family Welfare" 1). Such proclamations celebrate the domestic functions of life that have long been undervalued, largely due to the fact that women perform the tasks. As opposed to describing birth control as controlling maternity, Sanger says it enhances women's maternal function: "Voluntary motherhood is motherhood in its highest and holiest form" (*Woman* 226). Thus Sanger justifies birth control for elevating women's maternity rather than challenging a definition of womanhood dependent on maternal action. Beyond celebrating motherhood, Sanger also depicts it as a natural urge of women's being: "Every normal woman wants children. When she does not want them she should wait until she does" ("Family Planning [I]" 1).⁷ In this instance any woman who does not want children need only wait until her maternal urge develops, as it seems it will. The assumption of an inevitable maternal desire reveals Sanger's teleological vision of women as developing to the state of motherhood, which implies a woman who has no such desire has yet to fully mature.

With an understanding of women's natural inclination for motherhood, Sanger names the errors women have committed in fulfilling their duties/calling. Women bear the responsibility for creating the problems of working class domination and a pending crisis of over population by having too many children. Mothers, consequently, have an obligation to control their

reproductive behaviors to help their children, husbands, and nation. Even as Sanger fights for women's access to birth control she blames women's reproductive nature for "[founding] and [perpetuating] the tyrannies of the Earth" (*Woman* 3).⁸ These "tyrannies" primarily include the abuses by the factory system, such as child labor. As Sanger argues in the article "Woman's Error and Her Debt," that which women have done they must undo: "As she has unconsciously and ignorantly brought about social disaster, so must and will she consciously and intelligently *undo* that disaster and create a new and better order" (7).⁹ By linking women's guilt to problems in both their home and society Sanger makes women responsible for solving both evils. Women's responsibility to repair problems in the home and the nation further ensconces women in their role as the caretaker. The choice to use birth control, then, grows from the supposedly innate desire of women to serve their family and country first and themselves second.

The crises women have created at home and beyond have the same remedy. Sanger finds that women serve their children better when they practice birth control by fighting the class oppression of the factory system and thereby providing a better world for their children. Seeing that children face economic hardships as well as the threat of a world food shortage, in 1920 Sanger calls for all women to engage in a five-year birth strike to give the world a chance to right itself in terms of industrial and financial problems ("Birth Strike" 3; "Preparing" 7).¹⁰ Sanger finds that after only three months of calling for a cessation of births, "women are already beginning to act instinctively upon the principle involved in the suggestion made in these columns" ("Preparing" 8). The suggestion of women's instinctive response implies that women's maternal spirit will naturally direct them in their maternal duty to their children by ceasing to have children. As Sanger writes during this campaign, "No woman with the feelings of a true mother, will bring a child into being at a time like this [when there is disorganization and abuse in the labor system]" ("Women and the Rail" 3). With time Sanger drops the idea of a birth strike but as late as 1942 she encourages women to mind the national scene before having a baby, considering concerns about husbands at war and the possibility of food rationing ("Shall the War" 1). For Sanger, women have the responsibility to save their families from the ruin their own reproductivity harbors.

Women's responsibility to their family also includes a sensitivity to and respect for their husbands' needs. Sanger argues that women must use birth control to better meet men's sexual needs and limit reproduction to husbands' financial abilities. In the typical image of the mother who must clean up her family's messes, Sanger finds that women must solve the problems that men have created: "Only thus can she free her mate from the bondage which he wrought for himself when he wrought hers" ("Parent's" 7).¹¹ Further, women must use birth

control to maintain their husbands' fidelity. Sanger finds that a woman without birth control who must then maintain abstinence "drives her husband to prostitution" (*Woman* 83). The troubling phrasing makes clear that the woman's lack of sexual availability causes the husband's infidelity. By using birth control women regain sexual intercourse in their marriage but, here, to preserve husbands' morality not wives' pleasure. Making women responsible for men's sexual behavior reifies notions of women as more sexually pure than men and, therefore, responsible for maintaining proper sexual behavior. Such an assignment replicates androcentric notions of women's sexuality as for men's use.

The concern for the husband extends from his sexual wants to his financial planning. As Sanger argues women must make themselves subject to their husband's decisions for the family's future. While meeting with Mahatma Gandhi in 1936, Sanger disagrees with his view that women have all the decision making in a marriage when it comes to having children. Sanger argues, "The woman should say 'when' and the man should say 'how many,' as he has to support them" ("Mother" 15). The stress that women should submit their reproductive decisions to the will of their husbands finds its strongest articulation when Sanger discusses men's role in contraceptive decisions in conjunction with women's concern for their personal health: "I believe that every married man should know about birth control so that he can plan for his family as he plans for his business or his job, so that he can equate his income and his expenses and give his children the best possible chance in life" ("Family Welfare" 4).¹² The example places women's healthy bodies at the control of their husbands' business-like decision about the family. The supremacy of women's interests expressed elsewhere by Sanger goes mute in these examples as women must show a deference for men's decisions.

Just as a woman must use birth control to put the interests of her children and husband first, so too must she concern herself with national interests. Sanger argues that by practicing birth control women can improve the nation and the world by putting an end to factory system abuses and a possible world famine. Working from the established premise that women naturally seek to serve the family, Sanger sets the task of national improvement before women by depicting the nation as the macroscopic family: "For society basically is the family unit, gigantically multiplied" ("Christmas" 3). For this reason "women must put the national house in order" ("Put" 3). Extrapolating from the duties of "every good housewife" to plan "for the comfort of her household" Sanger finds that women must plan "for the security of the family and the security of the nation" (Family Planning [II] 1). These examples make national and world salvation an extension of women's typical domestic responsibilities. With the power of birth control, Sanger declares, "[Woman] will not stop at patching up the world; she will remake it"

(*Woman* 8).¹³ Her statement here and similar utterances create a conflict that demonstrates resistance's limits to challenging power. Declaring women's ability to remake the world depicts women as powerful, capable of shaping the world. At the same time, Sanger sets this as an obligation before women in much the same way as preparing meals and mending clothes.

This line of reasoning creates another problem found in the whole of Sanger's arguments on birth control as obligation. Even though laws prohibit women's access to contraception Sanger blames women for having too many children and obliges them to serve their families and the nation better. As Sanger explains it, women have created or allowed problems to perpetuate in the US economic and class system. The responsibility women must take for neglecting problems created by men but growing around women, creates as much obligation to fix those problems as the ones perpetuated by women having too many children. The ensuing duty of women to repair the damage done emanates from a problem instigated by men, like Anthony Comstock, who put in place laws preventing women from practicing birth control. In this way the article titled "Woman's Error and Her Debt" might better read "Man's Error and Woman's Burden." Either way, this discussion of women's responsibility bears little resemblance to Sanger's alternate discussion of birth control as personally enhancing to women.

Against Sanger's previously discussed arguments that women serve their personal interests by using birth control, we find an emphasis upon birth control as an outgrowth of women's supposed innate desire to serve their families, both personal and national. Specifically Sanger contrasts her call for women to define themselves in terms other than mother with the supposition that motherhood represents women's greatest potential and inherent desire. Despite Sanger's call for women's sexual liberation she also presents the case for birth control that women might better maintain their husbands' sexual fidelity, and thereby morality. Collectively these points come together in Sanger's contrast between describing birth control as personally liberating to women and a necessary service to the nation.

Conclusions: Resisting and Reifying Maternity

For all her fervor against social norms that constrict women's personhood and sexuality, Margaret Sanger seems unable to resist the familiar terms of motherhood that have culturally defined women for so long. The play in Sanger's rhetoric between framing women's use of birth control as self-liberation and women's use of birth control as a maternal obligation demonstrates the susceptibility of resistance to popular ideals. Even as Sanger argues for women's use of birth control as a break from popular definitions of women, which constrain them to the role of care taking, she invokes that same idea of women's primary function as mothers. Taking Sanger's

rhetorical themes in perspective reveals the later trends in her rhetoric as emerging from those that had proceeded. Put another way, within Sanger's early resistance lie the seeds of its own limitation. Sanger expressed reservation regarding the hope placed in women's suffrage as it did not free women from unwanted pregnancy. Later Sanger pays no attention to women's personal liberation for birth control instead emphasizing that through birth control women would free men and children from the hardships created by female fecundity. Likewise, Sanger's concern over women's burden as child bearers also comes to manifest itself in her rhetoric as woman's error of contraceptive ignorance leading to familial and national strain. Even women's personal benefit of sexual pleasure, which Sanger promises contraception can enhance, later manifests itself in Sanger's rhetoric as safeguarding husbands' sexual fidelity. Collectively Sanger's call for women to claim for themselves some role other than mother falls to her appeals that women better perform that very function, expanding women's responsibility (or burden) beyond their own home to the nation and world.

Sanger's negotiation between arguing for women's personal benefit and their maternal obligations demonstrates the contemporary discussion among feminists regarding rhetorical strategies that invoke women's capacity for mothering as the impetus for social change. The present critique of Sanger's turn toward maternal themes recognizes the importance of mothering as impetus for political action: "Women's work as mothers and other care-givers shapes women's perspective as to what are the most pressing problems requiring political solutions, what are the most clear and convincing terms in which to articulate these problems, and what are the best strategies for developing and implementing solutions" (DiQuinzio 59). The concern surrounding Sanger's rhetoric, of course, stems from a maternally-motivated political action emerging at the expense of women's claims to sexual pleasure and self-possession. The exclusionary practice of discussing women as either mothers or autonomous individuals continues through the end of the twentieth century. Some fifty years after Sanger began her appeals to women's sense of personal freedoms, Betty Friedan's 1963 *The Feminine Mystique* proclaims women's need to separate themselves from their family. As Ann Snitow notes, in 1981 Friedan apologizes for the claims she made eighteen years earlier even though Friedan's earlier work "says nothing most feminists wouldn't agree with today" (33). Snitow describes feminist literature in the years following *The Feminine Mystique* as committed to motherhood first and foremost and pulling back when accused of being anti-family (35).

In Sanger's own career we see just such a trend: claiming women's right to possess their body and sexuality before turning to a rhetoric of motherhood in which birth control serves the family before the woman. Such an approach apologizes for seeking women's rights

and justifies such a goal only as a service to others. Recent studies have noted the radical potential of maternal rhetoric despite concerns about women relying too heavily upon familial definitions. Mari Boor Tonn uses the case of Mary Harris "Mother" Jones to argue that maternal themes can empower audiences and female rhetors, in part, through eroding the separation of public and private spheres (18). Likewise, Sara Hayden finds that the Million Mom March provoked change and progressive gender relations by drawing upon the prevalence of family themes in creating national identity and women's subsequent centrality (211). O'Reilly expresses concern about such strategies for de-centering women's interests: "I still wonder and worry why the rhetoric of rationalization has become the strategy of choice among feminist activists and scholars today and why our campaigns for social change centre on children, and not on ourselves as mothers" ("Between the Baby" 328). Where Tonn and Hayden demonstrate the maternal image's political utility for effecting social change, Sanger's rhetoric demonstrates its inherent constraints. In Sanger's case we see women's interests sold short as the maternal image constrains women to serving others at the expense of themselves. Thus, maternity's political efficacy carries the danger of eliding women's extra-domestic goals and sexual desire.

Patrice DiQuinzio, as well as others, expresses concern for messages like Sanger's that speak to women's needs as a function of serving others. DiQuinzio, however, takes a stringent position against rhetorical turns like Sanger's that seek women's rights as a means to benefiting others: "A mothers' movement that relies on images and rhetoric that might undermine or delegitimize women's claims on their own behalf can't be a feminist movement" (DiQuinzio 64). Such a stand would exclude Sanger's work toward birth control as feminist. While Sanger employed problematic arguments discussed here—as well as those endorsing eugenic practices—her long term goal and success in affecting laws against birth control serve feminist ends. Dismissing Sanger, then, as a non-feminist seems too harsh considering the ends met. What is more, though her call for women's sexual emancipation became submerged under talk of their maternal responsibilities, Sanger's later arguments do not necessarily limit women's orgasmic potential once they, literally, possess the means of contraception.

The quandary that Sanger's rhetoric raises is the expense women can afford by engaging a rhetoric of good motherhood as a means to gaining freedoms that carry personal benefit. The maternal themes Sanger uses temper an otherwise dramatic reordering of women's status in society, yet the challenges to restrictions on birth control remain alive and well. Snitow asks the million-dollar question, "Do we want this presently capacious identity, mother, to expand or contract? . . . In other words, what does feminism gain by the privileging of motherhood?" (40). To answer such a question requires considering the

benefits women have gained at the expense of rhetorical identities that simultaneously weaken their claim to personal liberties. While the debate over cost and benefit—means and end—continues, Sanger's arguments, though dated, remind us of the work yet to be done. Specifically, we need a women's rhetorical identity that enables women to engage politically with the agency of a mother without compromising or denying women's character as sexual agents—not sexual objects for their husbands nor as reproducing bodies—as bodies desiring pleasure for their own sake.

Notes

- 1 As of 2007 the latter point remains part of the US Criminal Code.
- 2 The heading comes from the title of Sanger's 1933 manuscript.
- 3 This condemnation continues in the first 11 editions of *Limitation*. Sanger's condemnation of withdrawal lightens in the 12th and subsequent editions. Freudian explanations of female sexuality support Sanger's view on the relation of women's sexual fulfillment and physical health. As Maines shows, the medical field once endorsed clitoral massage therapies to stave off hysteria (113-14).
- 4 See *Woman and the New Race* for a similar statement of birth control as women's responsibility (100).
- 5 The title comes from one of Sanger's 1921 articles in the *Birth Control Review*.
- 6 Also see "Woman of the Future" (109) and "Motherhood—or Destruction" (22).
- 7 Also see "Family Welfare Through Birth Control" (1).
- 8 This identical argument appears in "Woman's Error and Her Debt" (7).
- 9 The argument appears in identical form in both the *Birth Control Review* and *Woman and the New Race* (6-7).
- 10 For other examples of Sanger's explicit call for a five-year birth strike see "The Call to Women" and "Put Your House in Order."
- 11 The same appears in *Woman and the New Race* (99).
- 12 For similar examples see "Family Planning [II]" (1) and "Brownsville" (6).
- 13 This also appears in "Woman's Error and Her Debt" (8). Similar statements appear in "A Birth Strike to Avert World Famine" (3), "The Call to Women" (4), and "The Social and Individual Need of Birth Control" (11).

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