

A European Education: Margaret Sanger and the Trans-Atlantic Development Of Birth Control Ideology

Dr. Patricia Walsh*

Abstract:

During the early twentieth century, a myriad of progressive movements would form in the United States to better the social status of women. These movements had rich roots in their European counterparts and often fed off the intellectual fire that permeated progressive causes across the Atlantic. Margaret Sanger was a relentless activist who set out to emancipate women by advocating birth control. She initially promoted the feminist message that called for greater sexual autonomy Sanger's feminist viewpoint would gain strength among the company of European intellectuals who shaped her ideas on both birth control and the importance of personal sexual satisfaction. A close examination of the sexual freedom argument is crucial to discerning Sanger's own feminism within the context of other feminist principles.

Sanger was influenced by a variety of European activists who had a long tradition of arguing against a sexual double standard. Unlike American suffrage associations, British suffragists embraced the critique of sexual oppression. Sanger's own frustration with the American suffrage movement and its lack of interest in reproductive rights possibly stemmed from her knowledge of the British model and British feminist's active campaign for sexual autonomy. In addition, Sanger was also attracted to the writings of a new group forming in the cafes of London, Paris, and Milan known as the "New Moralists." These New Moralists of the early twentieth century had a profound influence on Margaret Sanger and her argument for sexual autonomy. This paper will demonstrate the importance of these European influences on Sanger's feminist advocacy of birth control as a means to achieve both sexual equality and satisfaction.

Key Terms: Margaret Sanger, Feminism, Birth Control, Trans-Atlantic Movements

*Assistant Professor , Beekey Education Center, Kutztown University of Pennsylvania, U

On November 2, 1914, birth control advocate Margaret Sanger set sail for England from Montreal, embarking on an intellectual and sexual journey that helped shape her feminist argument for birth control. Fleeing a federal obscenity charge, Sanger chose England as a refuge in order to prepare a solid defense. She planned to stay until the war was over then return to “fight it out in the courts.”¹ Yet she returned to the United States after only eleven months, energized from the connections she made and more focused on a message of sexual liberation for women through birth control information.

Sanger’s feminist viewpoint gained strength among the company of European intellectuals who shaped her ideas on both birth control and the importance of personal sexual satisfaction. The company she kept and the various relationships she entered into opened the door for her to explore her own sexuality and theories on birth control as a means to achieve sexual equality. Sanger actively sought the company of renowned sex theorists such as Havelock Ellis, Olive Schreiner, and Edward Carpenter to further her knowledge of sexual equality. She engaged in debates with birth control advocates such as Marie Carmichael Stopes to gain an understanding of sex education and birth control techniques.

This article will demonstrate the importance of these European influences on Sanger’s advocacy of birth control as a means to achieve both sexual equality and satisfaction. Throughout her career, Sanger never lost sight of this feminist goal documented in her early writing and publications. Yet this early pro-feminist dogma is often overshadowed by Sanger’s connection to the eugenic and medical communities. This work explores the roots of Sanger’s early message of reproductive self-determinism for the cause of sexual liberation.

Although not completely new territory, this topic has been only vaguely explored by previous Sanger historians.² Historians have analyzed her from a social, political, feminist, and medical standpoint. Yet few books or articles have been published on Sanger since 1994. Moreover, nothing has been written solely analyzing Sanger’s feminist thought and her connection to sex theorists of her time. Most of the existing analysis of Sanger and her European connections focus on her interaction with eugenic communities. However, this current literature is controversial.

¹ Margaret Sanger, *My Fight for Birth Control* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1931), 93.

Eugenics is those who proposed improvement of the human species by encouraging or permitting reproduction of only those people with genetic characteristics judged “desirable”. This ideology has been regarded with disfavor since the Nazi period.

² Linda Gordon writes, “Most historiographical progress-- perhaps most intellectual progress – proceeds by rearranging relationships within old stories, not by writing new stories.” Linda Gordon, “What’s New in Women’s History” in *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies*, ed. Teresa de Laurentis (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 52.

Leading Sanger historians disagree about the influence of her European connections. David Kennedy's *Birth Control in America: The Career of Margaret Sanger* (1970) and Linda Gordon's *Woman's Body, Woman's Right: A Social History of Birth Control in America* (1976) both argue that Sanger's eugenic connection stemmed from a racist ideology. Furthermore, they contend that Sanger aligned the birth control movement with the eugenics movement because she considered limiting "inferior races" as equal in significance to uplifting their quality of life. Yet Sanger vocally opposed the race suicide argument championed by prominent eugenicists of her day. Ellen Chesler's *Woman of Valor: Margaret Sanger and the Birth Control Movement in America* (1992) maintains that Sanger embraced the eugenics movement for more charitable reasons. The reduction of family size among the lower classes and immigrant populations would lead to a better quality of life for these segments of the population.³ Carole McCann's *Birth Control Politics in the United States: 1916-1945* (1994) argues that a savvy Sanger used the rhetoric of the eugenics and medical communities to gain legitimacy for her cause without rejecting her radical roots.⁴ While Sanger adopted the rhetoric of the eugenics movement, she never fully advocated the use of birth control as a means to reduce the numbers among the lower classes. This directly contrasted other British eugenicists such as Marie Stopes, who touted the use of contraceptives to reduce the number among lower classes in Great Britain. Of these historians, McCann presents the strongest evidence that Sanger aligned with the eugenics movement to lend credibility to her cause.⁵

While focusing on the eugenics connections Sanger made in England, these historians give only a brief nod to the influence of sex theorists on her developing feminist thought. Furthermore, none agree what European factors most influenced Sanger's movement. Chesler comments that upon examining material on Sanger she is in disbelief over "how misunderstood and misrepresented" Sanger was among her biographers.⁶ Biographer Emily Taft Douglas *Margaret Sanger: Pioneer of the Future* (1969) refers to Sanger's time in England as building the "background of the movement" and focuses on both the neo-Malthusians and Havelock Ellis as mainly contributing to her social betterment argument. The only credit she gives Ellis in developing a sexual argument for birth control was that Sanger "took home with her his attitudes" on the development of a single standard in

³ Ellen Chesler, *Woman of Valor: Margaret Sanger and the Birth Control Movement in America* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 1992), 195-196.

⁴ Carole McCann, *Birth Control Politics in the United States, 1916 -1945* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1994), 122-123.

⁵ *Ibid*, 100.

⁶ Ellen Chesler, "'Reinterpreting Margaret Sanger: The Biographer's Journey,'" *Revealing Women's Life Stories: Papers from the 50th Anniversary Celebration of the Sophia Smith Collection* (Northampton: Smith College, 1995), 42.

sexual relations.⁷ Lawrence Lader *The Margaret Sanger Story and the Fight for Birth Control* (1955) concentrates solely on the Fabian influence in Sanger's work, reducing her relationship with Ellis to a soap opera and crediting him with little more than introducing her to the reading room of the British Library.⁸ Both of these biographers failed to mention Sanger's association with other noted feminists, sex theorists, or radicals who also formed her social circle in Europe. Unfortunately, these early accounts of Sanger ignore a fundamental element of her European experience.

An examination of the connections Sanger made while in England is crucial to understanding her feminist argument for contraceptives. Although her first contact is with the neo-Malthusian community, prominent sex theorists arguing for sexual equality within marriage and for women's sexual pleasure shaped much of Sanger's enterprise. The relationships she formed in Europe were complex – mixing her growing awareness of a eugenic argument for birth control, the need for clinics to disseminate information, and a call for a release from sexual prudery. However, a closer examination of the sexual freedom argument is crucial to discerning Sanger's own feminism within the context of other feminist principles. Sanger's call for the right of all women to enjoy sex and the sacredness of motherhood is more in line with discussions found in London parlors than in Greenwich Village homes.

English feminists had a long tradition of arguing against a sexual double standard. Victorian campaigns calling for a resistance to marriage are well documented. Although nineteenth century feminists in England saw these movements as counterproductive and detrimental to a woman's sexuality, the movements have a place within the larger context of early movements towards sexual equality and control by women.⁹ The best known of the early feminist campaigns against a sexual double standard was the movement against the Contagious Diseases Act of the 1860s. According to the Act, prostitutes were forced to have compulsory medical exams in an effort to stop the spread of VD. Women across England rallied against the Acts, arguing that they infringed on a woman's civil rights, most importantly, the right to control one's own body.¹⁰ The acts were eventually repealed in 1866, but the movement to end a double standard continued to grow and intensify.

⁷ Emily Taft Douglas, *Margaret Sanger: Pioneer of the Future* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969), 70-78.

⁸ Laurence Lader, *The Margaret Sanger Story and the Fight for Birth Control*, (Garden City, N.Y: Doubleday, 1955), 3.

⁹ Margaret Jackson, *The Real Facts of Life: Feminism and the Politics of Sexuality 1850-1940* (London: Taylor and Francis, 1994), 24-25. For a history of British feminism, see Olive Banks, *Faces of Feminism* (Oxford: Martin Robertson, 1981) and David Mitchell, *Women on the Warpath* (London: Cape, 1966).

¹⁰ Jackson, *The Real Facts of Life*, 25.

Women such as Elisabeth Blackwell and Christabel Pankhurst further argued for sexual equality and were often cited as influential women by Sanger.¹¹ Blackwell, the first woman to become a doctor in England, lobbied against forced examinations of prostitutes and firmly supported sexual autonomy. Most significant, Blackwell believed that the sex impulse in women and “the passion of the sex is as strong a natural force in woman as in man.”¹² Like Sanger, Blackwell believed that ignorance of one’s body led parents to make bad choices in regards to childrearing and spacing. In *The Human Element in Sex*, first published in 1880, Blackwell maintained that sex education and an understanding of human physiology was essential in a relationship. Furthermore, Blackwell argued that the sexual impulse in women as being greater and more complex than in men because of the reproductive structure of their bodies. Finally, she reasoned that passion within women differed from sexual appetite. According to Blackwell, women’s sexual passion was a compilation of mental, moral, and most important, spiritual elements that made them true sexual beings. All elements of Blackwell’s arguments for the sexual nature of women are found in Sanger’s early justification for birth control.

The development of the British suffrage movement also had an effect on Sanger. In October 1905, Christabel Pankhurst and Annie Kenney incited acts of civil disobedience in public for the cause of woman’s suffrage. However, the militant phase of the suffrage movement in England is not significant here. Instead, the blending of the vote in regards to sexuality is of importance. The British suffrage movement spawned two major feminist organizations: the Woman’s Social and Political Union and the Women’s Freedom League. Both organizations published newspapers that regularly discussed the concept of sexuality and male supremacy. Unlike American suffrage associations, British suffragists embraced the critique of sexual oppression. Pankhurst connected the two issues by coining the slogan, “Votes for Women, chastity for men.” This call was a response to the subordination of women through institutionalized prostitution.¹³ Sanger’s own frustration with the American suffrage movement and its lack of interest in reproductive rights possibly stemmed from her knowledge of the British model and the British feminists’ active campaign for sexual autonomy.

In addition to British suffragists, Sanger also found attractive the writings of a new group forming in the cafes of London. Around the time of her 1914 trip to Europe, an innovative concept in sexual autonomy emerged under the name of “The New Morality.” New Moralists argued for a need to

¹¹ Margaret Sanger, “The Militants in England,” *The Woman Rebel*, no. 4(June 1914): 25, 31.

¹² Elizabeth Blackwell, *Rescue Work in Relation to Prostitution and Disease* (London: T. Danks, 1881), 5.

¹³ Jackson, *The Real Facts of Life*, 49.

recognize the spiritual nature of sex in an effort to give women greater control within marriage. Prominent suffragists such as Edith Watson, Kathryn Oliver, and Margaret Hill wrote articles for the feminist publication *The Freewoman*, arguing for divorce rights, sexual freedom, and birth control. Sanger, obviously aware of the publication before her trip, published articles in her journal *The Woman Rebel* (1914) using the same title. Most significantly, new moralist feminists believed in the right to refuse maternity and advocated artificial means if necessary.¹⁴

These New Moralists of the early twentieth century had a profound influence on Margaret Sanger and her argument for sexual autonomy. Although she had argued for birth control and sexual freedom the year before in *The Woman Rebel*, her European counterparts helped to refine her dialogue and supplied the scientific data that gave her message social credibility. Sanger initiated intimate relationships with prominent New Moralists and elicited their work for her later publications. Furthermore, the pro-feminist argument espoused by New Moralists, advocated economic freedom for women, a release from male tyranny within relationships, and the full enjoyment of sex by both partners, is found throughout Sanger's books and journals. Of all the issues addressed by these men and women, the subject of a woman's sexual liberation enticed Sanger the most. "Havelock Ellis, Edward Carpenter, and Ellen Key, three major spokespeople for the "New Morality," historian Linda Gordon argues, "all considered sexual liberation to be primarily dependent on women's sexual liberation, which in turn required women's independence and opportunity to seek full, creative lives."¹⁵ These key players in Sanger's life first introduced her to the idea that sexual pleasure and reproduction could be considered separate from each other and was crucial to her argument for the necessity of birth control.

Sanger's first contacted the British Neo-Malthusian League in England during her exile in 1914. Neo-Malthusianism was a radical version of Thomas Malthus' theories on population. In 1798 Malthus, a British economist and clergyman, published tracts connecting restricted population growth with diminishing food supplies.¹⁶ British Neo-Malthusians used Malthus' theories to justify their belief that population could be controlled and that this control would lead to a utopian society. Malthusian League members, particularly C.V. and Bessie Drysdale, introduced Sanger to prominent sex theorists during her stay in England. The Drysdales were well connected in London and hosted a number of sex theorists of the day,

¹⁴ "The New Feminists," *The Woman Rebel* no. 1 (March 1914), 1-2.

¹⁵ Linda Gordon, *The Moral Property of Women: A History of Birth Control Politics in America* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 126.

¹⁶ Thomas Robert Malthus, *Essay on the Principle of Population* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1959, 1798).

including F.W. Stella Browne, Olive Schreiner, and Edward Carpenter. Upon meeting for tea at the Drysdales, Sanger met Browne - an "ardent Feminist" whom Sanger admired and with whom she formed a rather tumultuous friendship.¹⁷ Coupled with the earlier connections she made when she first arrived in London, this was the start of Sanger's exploration into British sex theory.

No historian writing of Sanger's time in Europe can ignore the lasting presence sexologist Havelock Ellis had upon her life. However, most Sanger biographers concentrate on Ellis as the most influential figure on Sanger's emerging intellectual thought. Upon closer examination, it becomes evident that Sanger drew from prominent European women when forming a sexual argument for birth control. Ellis, on the other hand, guided Sanger's intellectual awakening during her early months in England by introducing her to prominent sex theorists and expanding her literary knowledge. Under his tutelage, Sanger developed an argument for sexual autonomy that differed from Ellis's yet was strongly influenced by his guidance. Upon first contact, Ellis and Sanger formed a friendship based on mutual interests and a shared respect for one another's work. Sanger contacted Ellis on the advice of the Drysdales and F.W. Stella Browne who thought she and Ellis would have common interests. Although the letter was not found, Sanger allegedly related her story to Ellis and praised the ideas found in *The Psychology of Sex* (1896). Ellis responded to Sanger in December 1915, thanking her for relating her experiences "with the relics of so-called Puritanism" and inviting her to his home.¹⁸ Sanger would visit Ellis the following week and both would write of their first encounters. Referring to Ellis as a "tall, lovely, simple man" with "a wonderful mind," Sanger immediately took to the man she would later compare to St. Francis of Assisi.¹⁹ Ellis was also taken with Sanger yet hesitant in outwardly professing affection. He commented in his autobiography that she left a "pleasant impression," referring to her as a "charming and congenial companion."²⁰ They quickly engaged in a short-lived love affair and lifelong friendship.

Ellis's most important role in Sanger's emerging ideology was that of literary mentor and social guide. During her 1915 stay in London, the two met almost daily to discuss literature and theory. At their first meeting, Ellis gave Sanger a copy of his book *Sexual Inversion* (1897) along with his copy of Alice B. Stockham's *Karezza: Ethics of Marriage* (1896). Sanger wrote

¹⁷ Margaret Sanger, *An Autobiography* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 1931), 129.

¹⁸ Havelock Ellis to Margaret Sanger, December 15, 1914. Margaret Sanger Papers, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, box 4.

¹⁹ Sanger describes Ellis in a December 22, 1914 entry in her diary, Margaret Sanger Papers, Library of Congress, reel 1, page 3. The Assisi reference is found in Margaret Sanger's *An Autobiography*, 141.

²⁰ Havelock Ellis, *My Life: Autobiography of Havelock Ellis* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1939), 520.

that they “spoke openly and freely on the subject” and considered this openness “a relief.”²¹ By the last week of December 1915, Ellis and Sanger were meeting regularly at the British Museum. Sanger recalled in her autobiography that Tuesdays and Fridays were Ellis’s days at the Museum where she met him there to discuss books and have lunch. In a 1959 radio interview given ten days after Ellis’s death, Sanger recalled his influence:

“He guided my early studies and directed my reading for a year and a half in that famous historical spot, the British Museum. Regularly each day we met in the reading room, and he mapped out lines of study for me to follow. He believed so strongly in my case that he wanted to see me avoid all possible mistakes. I have never felt about any person as I do about Havelock Ellis. I’d developed a reverence, an affection, and a love which have strengthened with the years. To know him has been a bounteous privilege; to claim him my friend the greatest honor of my life.”²²

He left articles and pamphlets on her chair at the museum along with notes directing her to “books which might assist me in the particular aspect I was then engaged upon.”²³ Ellis wrote her letters suggesting other sexologists she might consider reading and opened his home and library to her for her perusal. More importantly, she engaged in a wider array of literature than just Ellis’s and these particular works had a far reaching effect on her own writing.

Ellis also introduced Sanger to two of the most prominent sex theorists of their time, Edward Carpenter and Olive Schreiner. These experiences expanded her intellectual circle and broadened her understanding of British feminist thought. As early as December 1914, Ellis promised to introduce Sanger to Edward Carpenter, a noted homosexual British writer and Fabian socialist. Carpenter, more than Ellis, wrote of the need to cast off the shackles of Victorian sexual oppression and replace it with a new sexual openness. In *Love’s Coming of Age* (1896), Carpenter wrote of feminist ideals which connected sexual freedom to gender equality. Sanger and Carpenter met on January 30, 1915 in the British Museum. Over lunch, she and Carpenter spoke of her exile and he reassured her in her cause. “From this fine spirit,” she wrote of Carpenter, “I drew confirmation of the purity of my endeavor” and spoke of the need for “the sanction of British public opinion and the approval of their great philosophers” such as Carpenter to further her cause.²⁴

²¹ Sanger, December 22, 1914 diary entry, Margaret Sanger Papers, Library of Congress, reel 1.

²² Taken from a broadcast on WEAFF Radio program "Let's Talk It Over" 1:15-1:30 P.M., July 17, 1939. Interviewing Sanger was longtime friend Dorothy Gordon. The interview was reprinted in “The King and I: Sanger Remembers Havelock Ellis,” *Margaret Sanger Papers Newsletter* 24 (Spring 2000), 1-3.

²³ Sanger, *An Autobiography*, 137.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 130-131.

Ellis also arranged a meeting between Sanger and Olive Schreiner, noted South African novelist and feminist writer. Sanger was already acquainted with Schreiner's work, having read *Woman and Labour* (1911) before leaving the United States. The two women met regularly at Ellis's home in London and formed an easy friendship. Sanger commented that on the day of their final meeting, Schreiner praised her devotion to the birth control cause, commenting, "We may never meet again, but your endeavor is the bright star shining through the black clouds of war."²⁵ The influence of these two writers, particularly Schreiner, is evident in Sanger's rhetoric when discussing the need for an equality of sexual experience. While acting as her cultural guide, Ellis introduced Sanger to the influential literature and people that shaped her intellectual growth.

However, the influence Ellis had upon Sanger's emerging feminism is intricate. Sanger wholeheartedly adopted his line of reasoning pertaining to the sex rights of women. Yet she often contradicted his ideas regarding the role of women as mothers. For example, Ellis contended that women, because of their unique stature as mothers, remained separate from men. He wrote in *Man and Woman* (1894), "The female retains her youthfulness for the sake of possible offspring... Nature has made women more like children in order that they may better understand and care for children."²⁶ Furthermore, Ellis maintained that each sex must adhere to the "laws of its own nature," arguing, "Woman breeds and tends; man provides; it remains so even when the spheres tend to overlap."²⁷ Yet Sanger believed that motherhood, while creating a separate sphere for women, did not diminish their equal status or intelligence. Nor did she believe that a woman's ultimate duty was to breed. This sphere, or "feminine spirit" according to Sanger, was the key to a woman's sexual emancipation. "That spirit," Sanger maintained, "manifests itself most frequently in motherhood, but it is greater than maternity. Woman herself, all that she is, all that she ever has been, all that she may be, is but the outworking of this inner spiritual urge."²⁸ She concluded, "If we are to make racial progress, this development of womanhood must precede motherhood in every single woman."²⁹ To Ellis, motherhood defined the woman while to Sanger a woman must first be defined independently from motherhood.

Sanger's complete devotion and adoration of the man kept her from outwardly acknowledging these differences in opinion and possibly led to an overemphasis by historians on Ellis's influence on her thought. Although

²⁵ Ibid, 140.

²⁶ Havelock Ellis, *Man and Woman: A Study of Human Secondary Sexual Characters* (London: Walter Scott, 1894), 390.

²⁷ Ellis quotes were found in Sheila Rowbotham and Jeffrey Weeks, *Socialism and the New Life: The Personal and Sexual Politics of Edward Carpenter and Havelock Ellis* (London: Pluto Press, 1977), 170-174.

²⁸ Margaret Sanger, *Woman and the New Race* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1920), 10.

²⁹ Ibid, 229.

she adopted a spiritual argument for sex which can be directly credited to Ellis, her later rhetoric on the role of women within a sexual relationship was often contradictory to his writing. The strongest ties between Sanger and Ellis's birth control theories were found in their eugenic rhetoric. Sanger claimed that Ellis's theories shaped her own. Nevertheless, upon closer examination it becomes clear that her brand of sexual feminism more accurately mirrored prominent European women feminists. It was these women --Browne, Key, Schreiner, and Marie Stopes -- who eventually gave Sanger the tools to form her own distinctive views on sex and birth control.

Sanger's introduction to European sexual thought also came from a variety of feminist sources. Through her connections with the Drysdales and Ellis, she made the acquaintance of a host of European feminists arguing against a Victorian double standard. Sanger would take away with her the ideas imparted by these reformers and use them in her own rhetoric. These influences also demonstrate the complexity of Sanger's argument for birth control from a sexual perspective -- many of the theories conflict. Regardless of the differences, each of these early influences found their way into Sanger's feminist sexual argument for birth control and significantly shaped the American movement.

Frances Worsley Stella Browne was a Socialist Feminist, considered by many a sex radical, who campaigned for both women's rights and reproductive control. It was Browne who introduced Sanger to Havelock Ellis a week after their initial meeting at the Drysdales. Browne was an advocate of legalized abortion in England and a firm supporter of woman's sexual exploration. Although her writing is scattered and not widely published, the few items that are on record show the connection the women had when it came to sex rights for women. In a paper given at a meeting of the British Society for the Study of Sex Psychology just one month after Sanger returned to the States, Browne outlined her thoughts on women and sex. She began, "I do not think that any intelligent, humane and self-respecting attitude towards sex is generally possible, without great economic changes; and a responsible education in the laws of sex, and a much wider co-operation and companionship between men and women, wholly apart from erotic relations, are equally necessary."³⁰ Within the speech, she argued against the double standard, railed against Victorian notions that women were void of sexual impulses, and chastised Christian notions that sex was an "unclean" act. Browne further argued the need for sex education so that women can possess the knowledge to better control and understand

³⁰ From a speech given by Stella Browne entitled, "The Sexual Variety and Variability Among Women and Their Bearing Upon Social Re-Construction," given to the British Society for the Study of Sex Psychology, on October 5th, 1915, found on-line at <<http://homepages.primex.co.uk/~lesleyah/variety.htm#The%20sexual%20variety%20and%20variability>> (1 February 2008).

their sexual urges. She maintained the “sexual emotion” of women is not weaker than in men and calls for a greater exploration of emotion. Finally, she commented on the nature of sex and procreation, claiming that “much actual motherhood is unwilling,” leading to an “irremediable wrong” to both the woman and her child. Browne concluded her speech with the strong statement, “Absolute freedom of choice on the woman’s part, and intense desire both for her mate and her child, are the magic forces that will vitalize and transfigure the race.”³¹ Ironically, she cited Sanger’s work in the United States, as early as 1915, as a mother’s rights model for the Eugenics Education Society.

Browne’s rhetoric is echoed throughout the pages of *The Birth Control Review*, Sanger’s main publication upon her return to the States. She wrote Sanger shortly after making the Eugenic Society speech, claiming “It has been one of the biggest and one of the dearest things in my life to have met and known you” and “it is great comfort to me that you say and know I am with you in your joys and sorrows.”³² Browne also served on the editorial board for the publication in 1919. During this time, Browne was a vocal advocate of birth control, arguing the necessity of contraceptives for the betterment of the female race. Browne never shied away from a frank discussion concerning sex, or the more controversial topic of abortion. Like Sanger, she saw birth control as a means of preventing abortions yet stopped short of condemning the practice. Browne spoke strongly in favor of a woman’s right to choose. “Note that I do not defend the destruction of life of the unborn child,” she argued in a 1917 speech, “but... it should be the woman’s absolute right to say whether her incipient burden shall develop or not.”³³ Although the two would have a falling out in 1923, the early influence of Browne upon Sanger is undeniable.

Sanger was familiar with Ellen Key’s and Olive Schreiner’s work before sailing across the Atlantic. Both women were widely quoted in *The Woman Rebel* and touted as revolutionaries for the woman’s movement towards sexual freedom. In William Sanger’s early letters to his wife in 1911, he often paraphrased Key’s ideas on free love in an attempt to relate to her need for affairs. Furthermore, Sanger used many passages from Schreiner’s *Woman and Labour* to make her argument for birth control and sexual discovery. Upon examination of these two women’s feminist arguments, it becomes apparent that Sanger’s ideas were more in line with European feminism than American feminist thought, thus causing her to develop a

³¹ Ibid.

³² Stella Browne to Margaret Sanger, 1915. Letter found in the Margaret Sanger Papers, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, box 1.

³³ Stella Browne, “Women and Birth Control,” *Population and Birth Control: A Symposium*, 1917, found on-line <<http://homepages.primex.co.uk/~lesleyah/womenbc.htm#Women%20and%20birth%20control>> (19 July 2007).

unique feminist argument for birth control based on sexual equality and the unique nature of motherhood.

By the late nineteenth century, feminists began challenging the concept of marriage and its implications on a woman's sexual freedom. American feminist Charlotte Perkins Gilman and her South African counterpart Olive Schreiner argued for a release of sexual slavery from an economic viewpoint. However, Schreiner's theory differed from Gilman's in one significant way: Schreiner did not believe that men, as a sex, kept women from achieving equality. Instead, this inequality was due to upheavals in society and the evolution of the race into a patriarchal model. According to Schreiner, if women became economically independent then patriarchal marriages and the need for prostitution would cease to exist. Schreiner, unlike Gilman, did not see marriage as the cause for women's oppression and this factor alone plays prominently into Sanger's own theory on sex and marriage.³⁴ Like Schreiner, Sanger argued that equality could be found in marriage if a transition in the way couples approached sex was altered.

The complexity of Schreiner's argument is not unlike Sanger's own fluctuating arguments for sexual equality. On the one hand, Schreiner spoke of the spirituality of sex. "The New Woman's conception of love between the sexes," she wrote in *Woman and Labour*, "is one more largely psychic and intellectual than crudely and purely physical."³⁵ At the same time, she wrote of the "primordial" aspect of sex and its reliance on animal instinct. In addition, she argued that sex does not need to be tied to reproduction while simultaneously calling for women to be mothers, even if they were over thirty years of age and single.

Sanger's developing feminism echoed many of Schreiner's own thoughts on women, labor, and motherhood. This duality of thought in regards to sex and motherhood is found throughout Sanger's writing. Before traveling to England, Sanger quoted Schreiner throughout the pages of *The Woman Rebel*, particularly passages from *Woman and Labour*. *Woman and Labour* was Schreiner's comment on the female situation and often referred to as her "sex paper."³⁶ Schreiner argued against the "sex parasitism" that existed in modern society – the concept that women were kept from work because of their unique status as mothers, thus causing a drain on society. Because of this conscious attempt to keep them from the workforce, women were relegated to passive sexual slaves within their marriages and served no use to the greater advancement of society. Schreiner called for women to

³⁴ See Charlotte Perkins Gilman *Women and Economics: The Economic Factor between Men and Women as a Factor in social Revolution* (New York: Harper and Row, 1911) and Olive Schreiner *Women and Labour* (London: Virago, 1911).

³⁵ Schreiner, *Women and Labour*, 259.

³⁶ Ruth First & Ann Scott, *Olive Schreiner: A Biography* (New York: Schocken Books, 1980), 265.

recognize their potential for work as a way to raise their status in society, arguing, “We have the blood of a womanhood that was never bought and never sold; that wore no veil, and had no foot bound; whose realized ideal of marriage was sexual companionship and an equality in duty and labour.”³⁷ This “Rebel Thought,” as subtitled in *The Woman Rebel*, demonstrates Sanger’s adherence to Schreiner’s working class argument for the respect of women’s labor as a social condition, not a condition put upon them by men. Furthermore, Schreiner believed, as Nancy Cott would comment, that “economic freedom went hand in glove with heterosexual attraction and intimacy.”³⁸ Like Schreiner, Sanger argued that for women to achieve true economic equality, they needed to be treated as equals within their sexual relationships.

Sanger’s argument for the unique status of mothers had its roots in Swedish-born Ellen Key’s early writing. One of the complexities of Sanger’s feminist argument was her insistence upon the unique status of women as mothers and their need to be exalted for this status. American feminists of her day often rejected this argument, instead arguing that motherhood often hindered the cause of equality. Key argued that motherhood is one of the finest roles a woman can play in life and calls for the state subsidy of single mothers. The pages of *The Woman Rebel* echo Key’s argument from *The Century of the Child* (1909) in regards to feminism and motherhood. Key explained that the “older advocates” of the women’s movement call for a complete equality between men and women, thus diminishing their status as mothers. By arguing that women have the same right to work as men, economic feminists are ignoring the delicate nature of motherhood and the need to foster a separate working culture for them. Future mothers, according to Key, should not be forced to “sacrifice the capacities for life and work of an unborn generation, in such a way that she will bring into the world weak, invalid, or physically incapable children, who will later on be neglected.”³⁹ The demand for women’s equality was, in essence, an argument against motherhood. “Equality,” according to Key, “is not justice.”⁴⁰ Sanger, unlike many other feminists of her day, never argued for a woman’s right to work. Instead, she argued that women had a right to decide whether they became mothers and if they did choose motherhood, the state should recognize their special status. The crux of Sanger’s argument for birth control lies in her belief that women should have the right to choose whether or not they became mothers. Long before she met Ellis and

³⁷ Schreiner from *Woman and Labour* reprinted in *The Woman Rebel* 1, no. 3 (May 1914): 19.

³⁸ Nancy Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 41.

³⁹ Ellen Key, *The Century of the Child* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1909), 76.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 77.

traveled in British circles, Sanger was using the rhetoric of European feminist radicals in her own argument for birth control.⁴¹

Sanger's argument that women should have both a fulfilling sex life as well as a satisfying motherhood mirrors Key's arguments. Although Sanger apparently was not in contact with Key directly, she knew of her work and was familiar with Key's ideas through her relationship with Ellis. As early as 1915, Sanger's argument for birth control echoed Key's sentiments. In a pamphlet written as a supplement for *Family Limitation* entitled "English Methods of Birth Control," Sanger explained, "There has been among men a common idea that woman had little or no sex desire or interest, and that marriage was sanctioned a union which made woman a recipient but not a mutual partner in the sex life. Fortunately, this idea is giving way..."⁴² When Sanger advised husbands in *Happiness in Marriage* (1928) that, "above all other things, keep alive the bride in your wife" by reawakening "her ardor, her desire, her love of life" while simultaneously establishing an "adequate allowance for the wife's personal needs," she is presenting a feminist argument based on sexual, if not economic equality.⁴³

The influence of sex theorists on Sanger's argument for birth control is best examined through an analysis of a speech she gave in London before returning to the States. The speech was an attempt by Sanger to outline her work through *The Woman Rebel* and "explain my private and personal conception of what feminism should mean; women should first free themselves from biological slavery, which could be best accomplished through birth control."⁴⁴ Given at the Fabian Society Hall in London in July 5, 1915, Sanger addressed a crowd of Socialists "from every social and civic organization in London" and was pleased with the audience's level of intelligence, commenting they "preferred to listen to principles and theories" more than their American counterparts.⁴⁵ Her rhetoric demonstrated the influence sex theorists had on Sanger's own budding sexual philosophy.

The speech was sponsored by the Fabian Society, the oldest Socialist organization in England concerned with the research, discussion, and publication of socialist ideas. It was fitting for Sanger to speak to the Society, having been active in the Socialist Party at home. When Sanger first left for England, she carried with her a letter of introduction to the Liverpool branch of the Fabian Society. Her first evening in Liverpool was spent attending a Fabian lecture on World War I. Furthermore, the Society had a strong women's group that organized itself around two basic

⁴¹ Alixe Humane, "Ellen Key's Ideal of Woman," *The Woman Rebel* 3(May 1914), 18.

⁴² Margaret Sanger, "Are Preventative Methods injurious to Health?" from *English Methods of Birth Control*, page 6, released in February 1915.

⁴³ Margaret Sanger, *Happiness in Marriage* (New York: Brentano's, Inc., 1926), 228, 230.

⁴⁴ Sanger, *An Autobiography*, 171.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 170.

principles: economic independence for women and equality in citizenship. Prominent Fabians such as Ellis and H.G. Wells guided Sanger's intellectual, as well as sexual, development. Although the speech is a poor public attempt to outline her early justification for birth control in America, it does serve as an important document outlining the influence of European theorists on Sanger's thinking.

Sanger began by claiming there has occurred a "tremendous awakening" among women of civilized nations to overthrow "the old regulations of society."⁴⁶ She then quickly separated this awakening into two categories: women who desire political freedom as opposed to women who want control over their bodies. Speaking of American feminism, Sanger was highly critical of those who concentrate on votes and economic independence, characterizing their movements as "Feminism in name only" and reproaching them for ignoring the plight of working women. This rhetoric was not new; she was referring to the "Feminist Mass Meeting" sponsored by Greenwich Village Heterodoxy members in New York in 1914.⁴⁷ Reaffirming Key's theories, Sanger continued by asserting that "blue stocking prudes" were shocked when she "suggested that the basis of feminism was a woman's right to be an unmarried mother."⁴⁸ Sanger concluded by stating, "So much for the feminists whose program has no place for the working woman's development, or no thought of her emancipation..."⁴⁹ By unabashedly criticizing other feminist groups for their class-based disregard for working women, Sanger developed an alternative feminist argument for birth control centered upon sexual theory.

Sanger next outlined the core of her argument – reproductive self-determinism. "Just as the working woman must fight for this right to retain her own morality and psychology – so must she fight for the right to own

⁴⁶ Margaret Sanger, "Fabian Hall Speech," July 5, 1915, Margaret Sanger Papers, Library of Congress C, box 129.

⁴⁷ At the 1914 Feminist Mass Meeting, twelve speakers argued the importance of feminist thought and gave different views on what exactly the term *feminism* meant. Armed with leaflets calling for contributors to her newest publication, *The Woman Rebel*, Sanger reached out to Village feminists such as Heterodoxy members because they seemed to be her "natural allies." Yet she was disillusioned with their narrow view of women's issues, claiming, "It seemed unbelievable they could be serious in occupying themselves with what I regarded as trivialities when mothers within a stone's throw of their meetings were dying shocking deaths. Who cared whether a woman kept her Christian name – Mary Smith instead of Mrs. John Jones? Who cared whether she wore her wedding ring? Who cared about her demand for the right to work? Hundreds of thousands of laundresses, cloakmakers, scrub women, servants, telephone girls, shop workers would gladly have changed places with the Feminists in return for the right to have leisure, to be lazy a little now and then. When I suggested the basis of Feminism might be the right to be a mother regardless of church or state, their inherited prejudices were instantly aroused. They were still subject to the age-old, masculine atmosphere compounded of protection and dominance," Sanger, *An Autobiography*, 108.

⁴⁸ Sanger, Fabian Hall Speech.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

and control her own body, for the ownership of her body to do with it as she desires - & its no ones business what those desires might be.”⁵⁰ To obtain this right, women needed to be educated to the ways of preventing conception. Like Schreiner, Sanger argued that women could facilitate a change in their economic situation when they demand change in class-based social constructs. Like Browne, she contends that choice is a crucial concept within a relationship. Like fellow neo-Malthusians, she called for the limitation of offspring not as a tool of control but a means to a better quality of life. Like Key and Ellis, she maintained that women of all classes have a right to sexual desires equal to men.

In Fabian Hall that evening was a young paleontologist, Marie Stopes, who was also interested in birth control rights. At the end of the Fabian Hall meeting, Stopes invited Sanger to her home to discuss their common views on marriage and contraception. Sanger accepted her invitation to tea in a letter the next day, thanking Stopes for a “jolly talk” and commenting that she “felt there was after all a real human being in England.”⁵¹ Sanger also sent forward a copy of what she referred to as “the naughty pamphlet,” *Family Limitation*, for Stopes to read before the tea.⁵² “We talked freely and intimately on that eventful afternoon,” Sanger wrote of the meeting. “She was then writing a book, ‘Married Love,’ ... She expected it to ‘electrify England’.”⁵³ This meeting initiated a long and tumultuous relationship between the two women which aided in changing the way people in the United States and Great Britain viewed women and their sexual role in society.

The two women shared common interests, characteristics, and a mutual respect for one another. Two weeks after meeting, Sanger wrote to Stopes thanking her for an evening that was a “delight” and noting, “It simply thrills me to meet a woman who has energy, control decisions and courage and such an abundance of strong characteristics and uses them. Your book will be a success in America no doubt.”⁵⁴ When writing President Wilson in support of Sanger’s trial upon her return, Stopes called Sanger “a noble-minded and public spirited woman” and commends her for “giving information such as is freely circulated in this country.”⁵⁵

It is remarkable how similar *Family Limitation* and *Married Love* (1918) are in content regarding sex. Both women address the issue of “sex

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Margaret Sanger to Marie Stopes, London, July 6 or 7th, 1915, British Library – Marie Stopes Collection.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Sanger, *My Fight for Birth Control*, 104.

⁵⁴ Margaret Sanger to Marie Stopes, London, July 16, 1915, British Library – Marie Stopes Collection.

⁵⁵ Marie Stopes to Mr. Schreiner, September 14, 1915, British Library – Marie Stopes collection.

difficulties” while educating the reader to the functions of the sex act and hygiene. Moreover, both write on the importance of sexual fulfillment for the woman’s well being; Stopes referring to sexual satisfaction through the enhancement of the “sweetly coloured flesh” while Sanger referred to how a woman’s “eyes become brighter, her health improves” and “color comes into her cheeks.”⁵⁶ They also address the topic of female frigidity and the need for men to be patient and understanding within the relationship. The basic message of the two works is the same: the importance of sex education and mutual respect and satisfaction between both the woman and the man.

Stopes was adamant in her concern for the spiritual side of sex and the importance of a transcendent sexual union. This message was not new: Ellis, Carpenter, and psychiatrist August Forel had all written on the subject prior to *Married Love*. Stopes, like Sanger, went to the British Library and read the popular sexual theories of the day. She was influenced by Carpenter’s writing, especially his thoughts on the “nature-sex mysticism” of relationships.⁵⁷ Yet it was Ellis’s work that most influenced her own. Stopes, being a scientist, was attracted to Ellis’s justification for certain sexual functions based on scientific reasoning. She was particularly interested in the physiological benefits of bodily secretions during sex through the mystical practice of Karezza, a concept introduced to her by Ellis through the writing of Alice B. Stockham.⁵⁸ Like Ellis, Stopes was concerned with the “art” behind lovemaking, claiming that “the great majority of people in our country have no glimmering of the supreme human art, the art of love.”⁵⁹ Although Ellis is primarily cited as the influence for introducing Sanger to these theories, Stopes’s application of these concepts had the greatest impact on Sanger’s later speeches and writing.

Stopes’s romanticized and somewhat mystical notion of sexuality had a profound impact on Sanger’s later sexual feminism. Prior to meeting Stopes, Sanger’s argument for sexual autonomy was centered on a militant dialogue discussing an equality of experience. Yet after leaving London, Sanger’s writing echoed Stopes in that she infuses this mystical need for mutual satisfaction into her argument. What makes this infusion based on Stopes’s writing rather than Ellis or Carpenter’s work is that both Sanger and Stopes argue from a truly egalitarian standpoint. Critics of Ellis argue that although he wrote throughout his work of the need of women to enjoy sex, he consistently presented women as needing to take a passive role in sex. Furthermore, where Ellis justified the abuse of women in relationships as being a variation of normal male sexual behavior, Stopes denounced

⁵⁶ Stopes, *Married Love: A New Contribution to the Solution of Sex Difficulties* (London: The Eugenics Publishing Company, Inc, 1918), 8. See also Margaret Sanger, *Family Limitation* (New York, 1914), 7.

⁵⁷ Ruth Hall, *Marie Stopes: A Biography* (London: Virago, 1978), 89.

⁵⁸ Karezza, also known as “coitus reservatus,” is the practice of delaying seminal ejaculation as long as possible to prolong sexual pleasure.

⁵⁹ Marie Stopes, *Marriage in My Time* (London: Rich and Cowan, 1935), 44.

physical force and encourages the rights of women to refuse their husbands in bed.⁶⁰ When Sanger wrote that a young husband must “avoid violence” and the young wife “must remember that hers is to be no mere passive part in the final enactment of love,” she is referencing Stopes’s sexual feminism.⁶¹

Despite later personal differences leading to a public split in 1921, Sanger and Stopes recognized the valuable impact each had made in their countries on the birth control movement. While Sanger denounced Stopes’s arrogance in letters to her British friends, she publicly praised Stopes’s work in *The Birth Control Review*. She compliments Stopes in her 1959 autobiography, writing “For over forty years...brave women fought valiantly and consistently to inculcate the idea of family limitation into the minds of a generation of English people. It needed only a new voice, articulate and clear as Dr. Stopes’ voice certainly was, to gain momentum.”⁶² Stopes was not as generous in her writing, criticizing Sanger’s tactics in her book *Contraception* (1926).⁶³ However, when Sanger was put on trial for violating the Comstock laws in New York, Stopes and her husband were on hand for the trial and wrote letters of support to the magistrate.⁶⁴ The complex nature of their relationship makes it difficult to specify whether or not the two women liked one another. However, it is evident that they respected the other’s dedication to the cause.

On September 18, 1915, Margaret Sanger set sail for home, armed with a cadre of material gathered throughout England and Europe. Upon the dismissal of her case, Sanger would embark on a lecture circuit, start the first birth control clinic in New York, and write prolifically on the subject of contraceptives and sexuality. Apparent in all her writing and speeches was the ideology she formulated in England – birth control was a necessary right for women to enjoy full sexual autonomy. Sanger’s European-influenced feminism infused her writing and speeches throughout the following decade.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Margaret Sanger, *Happiness in Marriage* (New York: Brentano’s, Inc., 1926), 123, 132.

⁶² Sanger, *My Fight for Birth Control*, 105.

⁶³ Marie Stopes, *Contraception: It’s theory, History and Practice* (London: John Bale, Sons & Daniellson, Ltd., 1929), 361 and *Mother England*

⁶⁴ Margaret Sanger to Marie Stopes, New York City, 11 October 1915, British Library – Marie Stopes Collection. See footnote #1 for letter in Esther Katz, ed., *Selected Papers of Margaret Sanger, Volume 1: The Woman Rebel, 1900-1928* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 165.

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