4-2021

Inside the *Eugenics Quarterly*: American Eugenacists and the Birth Control Movement in 1929

Meg Spaulding

University of California, Santa Cruz

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/aujh>

Part of the [History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Spaulding, Meg (2021) "Inside the *Eugenics Quarterly*: American Eugenacists and the Birth Control Movement in 1929," *Armstrong Undergraduate Journal of History*: Vol. 11 : Iss. 1 , Article 4.

DOI: 10.20429/aujh.2021.110104

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/aujh/vol11/iss1/4>

This article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Digital Commons@Georgia Southern. It has been accepted for inclusion in Armstrong Undergraduate Journal of History by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons@Georgia Southern. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@georgiasouthern.edu.

Inside the *Eugenics Quarterly*:
American Eugenicists and the Birth Control Movement in 1929

Meg Spaulding
University of California, Santa Cruz

Modern arguments about genetic engineering and its offshoots are tinged with the memories of the eugenics movement that took hold around the world in the last century. These memories are easily accessible, as eugenics is a relatively new socially-constructed science. One can easily access the opinions of then-respected and successful scientists who wrote extensively about the positive implications of what they considered to be selective breeding. The intersection of the eugenics movement and the birth control movement complicates these memories, as birth control in essence applies to eugenic practices of selective breeding but makes no mention of this connection or possibility as it exists now. However, when the birth control movement was first looking for support, it could be found among many eugenicists. This is evident in the issues of the *Eugenics Quarterly*, the official scientific journal of the American Eugenics Society. The 1929 issues, released monthly, paint a picture of the meeting of two movements, and demonstrate how eugenics supporters supported birth control, not as a means to empower women and men's sexual freedom and agency, but as a way to promote and further enact eugenic population control with the aim of improving the stock of the human race. Further, they demonstrate how the birth control movement used their space in the *Eugenics Quarterly* to advocate for their own cause, ultimately showing that both movements used each other's authority

to propel their own intentions.

Charles Darwin (1809-1882) unleashed a new approach to understanding the human race when he published “On the Origins of Species” in 1859. His notion of hereditary evolution held that the best traits in a species would determine who from that species lives and who dies, taking the lesser traits to the grave with them. This idea of natural selection was soon implemented into practice, as breeders of plants and animals experimented with creating new versions of species based on preferred traits. These breeders then turned their eyes toward humanity. Francis Galton (1822-1911) coined the term “eugenics” in 1883, understanding it as a moral philosophy which would encourage the best members of a population to produce more children.¹ The social construction of eugenics is evident immediately, as “best” is a subjective term that allows whoever is making the decisions in the scientific world to define what this means. Soon the notion of negative eugenics emerged. Negative eugenics refers to the practice of preventing people from reproducing in order to stop a bad lineage or a specific trait from being carried on to the next generation. In America, this practice culminated in sterilization laws, which called for the compulsory sterilization of “degenerates,” which included convicted criminals and mental patients.² Many members of society were involuntarily sterilized—3,000 by 1924, according to the Eugenics Archive.³ Before World War Two, in which the Nazi government took American eugenic theories to an unprecedented level—sterilizing and murdering thousands of people classified as mentally unsound—these sterilizations were not faced with public outcry. In the 1920s, eugenics was supported by respected scientists, and many average citizens saw eugenics as a way to curb

¹ Elof Carlson ed., “Scientific Origins of Eugenics,” Cold Springs Harbor Laboratory Eugenics Archive, accessed May 2017 <http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/eugenics/list2.pl>.

² Garland E Allen ed., “Social Origins of Eugenics,” Cold Springs Harbor Laboratory Eugenics Archive.

³ Lombardo, Paul ed., “Eugenic Sterilization Laws,” Cold Springs Harbor Laboratory Eugenics Archive.

public spending on mental institutions and prisons, which had increased in their eyes since the post-war immigration boom beginning in 1919.⁴

The 1920s in America was marked by economic growth after the first World War, resulting in a shift in attitudes toward leisure and personal freedom. This would not come to an end until August 1929, when the value of stocks started declining rapidly. All of the articles discussed in the 1929 *Eugenics Quarterly* were written before the stock market crash of October 1929, which would in fact bolster the cause of both the eugenics movement and the birth control movement into World War Two.⁵ During the decade of the 1920s, women's movements emerged, leading to the popularization of the birth control movement. This movement advocated for the right of women to have the ability to have sex without getting pregnant. The modern birth control pill and the modern intrauterine device were not created until the 1960s, but women in the 1920s had other methods of preventing pregnancy.⁶ "Birth control" in the 1920s could refer to planning around a woman's ovulation cycle, using condoms or diaphragms coated with spermicide, and other options.⁷ However, the federal Comstock Laws of 1873 made it illegal to discuss or give away "obscene literature and articles of immoral use," which included contraceptives.⁸ This, along with the social factors that contributed to this law, might explain why no author in the *Eugenics Quarterly* ever mentions any actual form of birth control. Similarly, articles in the

⁴ Allen, "Social Origins of Eugenics."

⁵ "American Eugenics Research—Racism Masquerading as 'Science'," Alliance for Human Research Protection, accessed May 2017, <http://ahrp.org/1913-u-s-eugenics-research-association/>

⁶ Linda Gordon and Bonnie Mass, "Woman's Body, Woman's Right: A Social History of Birth Control in America," *Science and Society* 42 no. 3 (1978): 347-350, <https://philpapers.org/rec/GORWBW>.

⁷ Gordon and Mass, "Woman's Body, Woman's Right," 347-350.

⁸ Joseph H Bragdon, "'Momma's Got the Pill': How Anthony Comstock and *Griswold v. Connecticut* Shaped US Childbearing," *The American Economic Review* 100 no. 1 (March 2010): 98-129, <http://www.ingentaconnect.com/content/aea/aer/2010/00000100/00000001/art00004>.

Eugenics Quarterly that support birth control rarely mention a woman's sexual freedom as an aspect or positive result of birth control. Despite the freedom gained during the 1920s, the subject of birth control was still not completely socially acceptable.

Women in the birth control movement appealed to readers of the *Eugenics Quarterly* by highlighting the practical eugenic application of birth control. The *Eugenics Quarterly* used the authoritative voices of these women, earned by their actions in the fight for birth control, to convince their readers, and perhaps themselves, why birth control and eugenics went well together. In the May 1929 issue birth control is given more attention, as this issue's theme is "Birth Regulation."⁹ In an article in this issue titled "The Birth Control Clinic" Hannah M. Stone (1894-1941) argues that birth control clinics of the future will include a "marriage advice station" which would combine the biological and eugenic sides of birth control, offering advice concerning the "racial aspects of reproduction," and where the emphasis would be placed "not merely upon family limitation, but upon family regulation in the interest of the patient, the offspring, and the race."¹⁰ Dr. Stone, when writing this article in 1929, was the director of the Birth Control Clinical Research Bureau in New York City, which could inform upon her appeal to the eugenics movement for support of birth control clinics.¹¹ Putting aside her possible motivations of writing in an attempt to gain support for her clinic, and instead taking her words at face value, she appears to be an enthusiastic supporter of eugenics, as she writes consistently about bettering the human race with the union of birth control and eugenic practices.

Despite her frequent contributions to the *Eugenics Quarterly* and her sixteen years as

⁹ *Eugenics Quarterly* 2 no. 5, (May 1929): 1.

¹⁰ Hannah M. Stone, "The Birth Control Clinic," *Eugenics Quarterly* 2 no. 5, (May 1929): 11.

¹¹ "Hannah Stone: The Madonna of the Clinic," *The Margaret Sanger Papers Project*, New York University Newsletter #9, (1994), https://www.nyu.edu/projects/sanger/articles/hannah_stone.php.

director of the Birth Control Clinical Research Bureau, Dr. Stone has been overshadowed by her boss, Margaret Sanger (1879-1966).¹² Sanger, widely considered the founder of the birth control movement, has faced criticism for her possible racist and eugenic sentiments.¹³ Since Sanger is more well-known, her viewpoints are more contested., Today they are often used by anti-abortion advocates citing her racism as grounds for the illegitimacy or immorality of the birth control movement.¹⁴ Still, defendants of Sanger argue that she had to use eugenic rhetoric in order to appeal to eugenicists, who were often well-respected men in the scientific community, and could offer legitimacy to the birth control cause .¹⁵ Either way, her language in her short statement in *Eugenics Quarterly* echoes the same psychiatric language of the eugenicists. She writes that “little as we still know about genius, or about men and women of exceptional talents, we do know that they do not come into this world with hereditary backgrounds of imbecility, or feeble-mindedness.”¹⁶ The fact that she only contributes once could mean that she was less interested in or supportive of the eugenics cause than Dr. Stone. Still, her rhetoric is available for anyone to try to justify the sentiment behind it however they fit.

Readers and the editors of the *Quarterly* had concerns about contraceptives, not from any

¹² “Hannah Stone: The Madonna of the Clinic,” *The Margaret Sanger Papers Project*, New York University Newsletter #9, (1994), https://www.nyu.edu/projects/sanger/articles/hannah_stone.php.

¹³ Samantha Schmidt, “Planned Parenthood to Remove Margaret Sanger’s Name from N.Y. Clinic over Views on Eugenics,” *Washington Post*, July 21, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/history/2020/07/21/margaret-sanger-planned-parenthood-eugenics/>.

¹⁴ “The Negro Project,” which was launched in 1939, was an attempt made by Sanger to distribute birth control to poor black communities in the South. Arguments have been made as to whether this had racist and eugenic motivations or was simply part of the paternal racism unknowingly exercised by many social reformers of the era.

¹⁵ “Birth Control or Race Control? Sanger and the Negro Project,” *The Margaret Sanger Papers Project*, New York University Newsletter #28 (2001), https://www.nyu.edu/projects/sanger/articles/bc_or_race_control.php.

¹⁶ Margaret Sanger, “The Reproduction Rate of Genius: Will Birth Control Diminish It?” *Eugenics Quarterly* 2 no. 3 (March 1929): 23.

moral standpoint (as much of the nation did) but from a eugenic standpoint. In the March 1929 issue a “symposium” was published in which various writers answered the question, “The Reproduction Rate of Genius: Will Birth Control Diminish It?” This discussion was inspired by the words of a priest, Father John A. McClorey, who publicly responded to statements made in a press interview by eugenicist C.C. Little (1888-1971). In his original statement Father McClorey argued that “birth control runs the risk of excluding from life geniuses as well as defectives.”¹⁷ C.C. Little provides a short response, which is backed up by birth control advocates including Stone and Sanger, who all argue that any form of birth control, including the priest’s preferred method of abstinence, will reduce the rate of genius the same way modern contraceptives would.¹⁸ Stone goes further, arguing that uncontrolled fertility will lead to larger families, which will reduce the chances of a child becoming a “genius,” since statistically geniuses come from smaller families.¹⁹ McClorey uses his space in the symposium to argue that “saints as well as sinners have sprung from vicious forbearers,” and to further state that many geniuses, including Julius Caesar, Napoleon, and Charles Darwin, all had hereditary diseases which would have caused eugenicists to label them as “imbeciles.”²⁰ Although more pro-birth control statements are made than anti-birth control, it is clear that eugenicists were grappling with this issue, since a second round of responses was featured in a later issue.

This question of whether genius would be diminished by birth control emerges again in May 1929. Five men take on the question, this time in a more direct response to Father

¹⁷ John A. McClorey, “The Reproduction Rate of Genius: Will Birth Control Diminish It?” *Eugenics Quarterly* 2 no. 3 (March 1929): 22.

¹⁸ C.C. Little, “The Reproduction Rate of Genius: Will Birth Control Diminish It?” 22.

¹⁹ Hannah M. Stone, “The Reproduction Rate of Genius: Will Birth Control Diminish It?” 23.

²⁰ John A. McClorey, “The Reproduction Rate of Genius: Will Birth Control Diminish It?” 22.

McClore's statement. Geneticist E.M. East (1879-1938) especially attacks the claims that "geniuses have descended from mad parents" by arguing that there is no statistical evidence to prove this.²¹ He himself provides no statistical evidence but argues further that the priest's evidence about sustainable population size is unsound. The other writers weighing in on this question focus less on McClore's argument and more on the benefits of birth control when applied to the lower groups of society. Both James F. Cooper and Frank H. Hankins (1877-1970) argue that before birth control can be proven either effective or ineffective, it must be distributed and practiced regularly among the lower classes.²² This demonstrates that birth control had not yet taken off among the poorer members of society but was becoming popular among upper classes. Birth control, the men argue, will help parents raise better children because the parents will not have a child until they are ready to dedicate their time and resources to their child. This argument comes up multiple times in eugenicist appeals for birth control and demonstrates how eugenics was beginning to focus on nurture as well as nature as a determining factor in raising better humans. The argument by McClore echoes the sentiments of the moral reformers of the 1920s, chiefly religious men and women, who fought to support the birth of all children, and thus were strictly and enthusiastically anti-birth control.²³

Although eugenics supporters were unsure about birth control on eugenic grounds—it might keep the "best" citizens from being born—morally, they seemed to have no qualms about the implementation of modern contraception. This is not to say that the readers of the *Eugenics Quarterly*, as well as some of its contributors, were not unreligious. In the same issue that

²¹ E.M. East, "The Birth Rate of Genius: Does Contraception Curb It?" *Eugenics Quarterly* 2 no. 5 (May 1929): 20.

²² James F. Cooper and Frank H. Hankins, "The Birth Rate of Genius: Does Contraception Curb It?" *Eugenics Quarterly* 2 no. 5 (May 1929) 20.

²³ Gordon and Mass, "Woman's Body, Woman's Right," 347-350.

contains the second installment in the discussion about the reduction of genius is an article titled “Eugenic Thought in the American Birth Control Movement 100 Years Ago.” This article celebrates American thinkers of the nineteenth century who argued for birth control from many standpoints; as a moral implement, in order to save women whose health would be threatened by repeated childbirth, as an economic practice by lessening the spending on public welfare, and as a way to wipe out hereditary disease. These arguments were still the main proponents of the pro-birth control eugenicist stance in the 1920s.²⁴ The format of this article is noteworthy. At the very end, in the remaining space on the page, is a Bible verse. The verse reads “The Lord is the portion of mine inheritance and of my cup: thou maintainest my lot. The lines are fallen unto me in pleasant places; yea, I have a goodly heritage.”²⁵ Other articles also end in quotes, some of which are also from the Bible. The inclusion of these quotes signifies that at least some eugenicists believed that God intended for humanity to preserve its best members and eradicate its lesser members. Secondly, it can be interpreted that the scientists working on the eugenics front knew that religion would appeal to their readers, showing another instance of how the words of God were used to legitimize the eugenics movement’s push for birth control.

The contributors to the *Eugenics Quarterly* were clear in their opposition towards laws that restricted birth control access. The August 1929 issue contains an article by Dr. Stone in which she details the circumstances of the arrest of five nurses working at the Birth Control Clinical Research Bureau in New York City, including herself. The raid, she writes, was prompted by an anonymous complaint made to the police about the clinic. An undercover policewoman then sought birth control advice from Stone, who told her that she should space out the time between her pregnancies in order to protect her health and her potential child’s health.

²⁴ Norman E. Himes, “Eugenic Thought in the American Birth Control Movement 100 Years Ago,” *Eugenics Quarterly* 2 no. 5 (May 1929): 8.

²⁵ Himes, “Eugenic Thought in the American Birth Control Movement 100 Years Ago,” 8.

Stone and the other nurses were arrested on the charge of giving out birth control information, and hundreds of private patients' records were seized. However, the staff was declared not guilty because of the existence of a section of the same law which stated that the distribution of such information is legal if it is given to a married woman by a practicing physician with the intent of protecting the mother or the child's health.²⁶ The ruling in this trial is significant, since eugenics supporters could use virtually any reason for giving out birth control as "protecting a child's health," including the mental or physical state of the mother. It also demonstrates an appeal to sympathy for Stone and the other nurses, who were apparently not treated well by the police. Dr. Stone and the editors of the *Eugenics Quarterly* used this trial as an example of why the law keeping contraceptive information away from women was irresponsible and regressive.

The presence of a multitude of articles about birth control in one year's worth of *Eugenics Quarterly* issues demonstrates that the men and women contributing to the *Eugenics Quarterly* were convinced that birth control would be a rational step in the process of creating a world, named, free of hereditary diseases, and, unnamed, free from any group of people they found undesirable. They did this by appealing to religion and to science and using the health of mother and child as a way to frame eugenic birth control, especially among lower classes. The existence of so many persuasive articles about birth control also hints that the men and women, especially non-scientists, reading the *Eugenics Quarterly* still needed some convincing. The social undertones of the *Eugenics Quarterly* are in no way subtle nor complex. Quite simply, anyone deemed lesser did not deserve to have children, and in fact had a societal obligation not to. This included anyone with any sort of mental or physical disability, including autism, down syndrome, addiction, and numerous other aspects that qualified in the 1920s as different or unhelpful. Birth control movement leaders contributing to *Eugenics Quarterly* also seemed to

²⁶ Hannah M. Stone, "The Birth Control Raid," *Eugenics Quarterly* 2 no. 8 (August 1929): 24-27.

believe that hereditary problems should be eradicated, regardless of what their motivations for contributing these opinions were. Although birth control has gained respect as a scientific area of study while eugenics has been condemned, we must acknowledge that the two worked together, if only to propel their own goals. Even as we celebrate the advancements in ethics and in science in America since the 1920s, let us not forget how both science and ethics can be manipulated in order to promote the most haunting of causes.

About the author

Meg Spaulding is a recent college graduate from the University of California, Santa Cruz. She is currently a writer for Screen Rant and an English and History tutor.

Bibliography

- Allen, Garland E. ed. "Social Origins of Eugenics." Cold Springs Harbor Laboratory Eugenics Archive. Accessed May 2017. <http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/eugenics/list2.pl>.
- "American Eugenics Research—Racism Masquerading as 'Science'." Alliance for Human Research Protection. Accessed May 2017. <http://ahrp.org/1913-u-s-eugenics-research-association/>.
- "Birth Control or Race Control? Sanger and the Negro Project." The Margaret Sanger Papers Project, New York University Newsletter #28 (2001).
https://www.nyu.edu/projects/sanger/articles/bc_or_race_control.php
- Bragdon, Joseph H. "'Momma's Got the Pill': How Anthony Comstock and Griswold v. Connecticut Shaped US Childbearing," *The American Economic Review* 100 no. 1 (March 2010): 98-129.
<http://www.ingentaconnect.com/content/aea/aer/2010/00000100/00000001/art00004>.
- Carlson, Elof ed. "Scientific Origins of Eugenics." Cold Springs Harbor Laboratory Eugenics Archive. Accessed May 2017. <http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/eugenics/list2.pl>.
- Cooper, James F. and Hankins, Frank H. "The Birth Rate of Genius: Does Contraception Curb It?" *Eugenics Quarterly* 2 no. 5 (May 1929): 20.
- East, E.M. "The Birth Rate of Genius: Does Contraception Curb It?" *Eugenics Quarterly* 2 no. 5 (May 1929): 20.
- Gordon, Linda and Bonnie Mass. "Woman's Body, Woman's Right: A Social History of Birth Control in America." *Science and Society* 42 no. 3 (1978): 347-350.

<https://philpapers.org/rec/GORWBW>.

“Hannah Stone: The Madonna of the Clinic.” *The Margaret Sanger Papers Project*, New York University Newsletter #9, (1994).

https://www.nyu.edu/projects/sanger/articles/hannah_stone.php.

Himes, Norman E. “Eugenic Thought in the American Birth Control Movement 100 Years Ago.” *Eugenics Quarterly* 2 no. 5 (May 1929): 8

Little, C.C., “The Reproduction Rate of Genius: Will Birth Control Diminish It?” *Eugenics Quarterly* 2 no. 3 (March 1929): 22

Lombardo, Paul ed. “Eugenic Sterilization Laws.” Cold Springs Harbor Laboratory Eugenics Archive.

McClore, John A. “The Reproduction Rate of Genius: Will Birth Control Diminish It?” *Eugenics Quarterly* 2 no. 3 (March 1929): 22.

Sanger, Margaret. “The Reproduction Rate of Genius: Will Birth Control Diminish It?” *Eugenics Quarterly* 2 no. 3 (March 1929): 23.

Schmidt, Samantha, “Planned Parenthood to Remove Margaret Sanger’s Name from N.Y. Clinic over Views on Eugenics,” *Washington Post*, July 21, 2020.
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/history/2020/07/21/margaret-sanger-planned-parenthood-eugenics/>.

Stone, Hannah M. “The Birth Control Raid.” *Eugenics Quarterly* 2 no. 8 (August 1929): 24-27.

Stone, Hannah M. “The Birth Control Clinic.” *Eugenics Quarterly* 2 no. 5, (May 1929): 11.

Stone, Hannah M. “The Reproduction Rate of Genius: Will Birth Control Diminish It?” *Eugenics Quarterly* 2 no. 3 (March 1929): 23.