

From Right to Responsibility:

Resonance and Radicalism in Feminist-Led Reproductive Control Movements, 1907-1942*

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Word Count = 9,299

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As eugenics gained new prominence from the end of the 19th century through World War II, feminist leaders of the reproductive control movement pushed for the social and legal acceptance of birth control simultaneously as a right for women and as a tool to further racist, scientific and ethnonationalist eugenic interventions. How did feminist reproductive control advocates in the interwar period align their movement with the broader eugenics movement? This paper analyzes the trajectories of two feminist birth control activist leaders in the United States and Germany to trace the development and divergence of their reproductive control movements through three general framings over the first half of the 20th century: advocating the individual, advancing humanity, and augmenting the state. I argue that the linking of these movements to eugenics was not simply a marriage of convenience, but the result of strategic deployment of radicalism for resonance and the growing conflation of eugenics with nationalism. Finally, I argue that these cases present a kind of double resonance through which movement leaders could reframe reproductive control as a solution not only to the ‘problems’ of their audiences, but also their own ‘problems’ with the limitations of their cause. This analysis helps to map reproductive control as a device historically wielded by white feminists to organize broader political support to fit varying and contradictory ideological projects that motivate its utilization and lend insight into seemingly paradoxical social movement trajectories.

Keywords: eugenics, social movements, feminism, reproduction, nationalism, racism

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The emergence of eugenics at the turn of the twentieth century presented to its proponents “a bridge to unite the domain of science with the domain of human action.” (Eugenics Education Society 1912) British polymath Francis Galton had coined the term in 1883 “to express the science of improving stock... which especially in the case of man, takes cognizance of all influences that tend in however remote a degree to give the more suitable races or strains of blood a better chance of prevailing speedily over the less suitable”; over the next decades the terms of this improvement came to be attached to reproductive interventions ranging from involuntary sterilization to population arms races (Laughlin 1922; Bund 1910; S. F. Galton 1883). Feminist leaders joined these discussions, by turns highlighting the necessity of centralizing women’s experiences in medical and political intrusions into the home and the capacity of coercive birth control to shape the population. Although these leaders had initially framed their work as an issue of women’s rights, free speech, and new sexual ethics, they reoriented their work to align with much broader and more powerful causes: immigration, nationalism, and the “future of the race”. Thus the feminist leadership of pro-population control movements presents an ideological puzzle: if feminist leaders pursued contraceptives and contraceptive education as a right, why did they also argue (and in some cases, simultaneously) for the enforced population control by way of sterilization and mandatory contraceptive measures? And how did they utilize this alignment with the eugenics movement to resolve their own intra-movement struggles to gain relevance and political and social influence?

Existing scholarship has characterized the relationship of feminist leaders to population control as a “marriage of convenience”(Makepeace 2009) in which feminists piggybacked their agenda onto the eugenics movement in order to stay relevant and gain support and understanding of birth control. This work argues that this relationship instead presented feminist leaders with a doubly-resonant strategy: in addition to growing their audience and increasing support for birth control, linking reproductive rights to reproductive control also expanded and extended white feminists’ political power and influence on reproductive discourse. Reproductive rights movements have historically emphasized access to contraception and pro-choice narratives, while reproductive justice counters this law-based orientation to argue that the right to have children, and the right to parent with dignity, are equally important to supporting reproductive choice (Jolly 2016; Luna and Luker 2013). This paper argues that the initial framing of reproductive rights as the right not to have children came about as a result of the alignment of the movement’s alignment with the eugenics movement in the interest of positioning white feminists as arbiters of reproductive access not only for themselves, but for the state.

Women’s leadership in modern reproductive policymaking has been framed as a right since at least 1910, when reproductive and domestic issues were construed as the natural political starting point for women activists (Atkinson 1910). By analyzing the political trajectories of feminist leaders Helene Stöcker in Germany and Margaret Sanger in the United States, this paper

examines the roles of agency and identity in feminist-led reproductive control movements and the relationship of these to both external and internal resonance (Laslett 1991; Becker 1963; McDonnell, Bail, and Tavory 2017). More broadly, I argue that in addition to being products of local discursive opportunity structures, radicalism and resonance are uniquely utilized by the leveraging of identity as both right and responsibility to specific cultural objects. The unstable social and political period between 1917 and 1942 presented unique gaps through which the radical could become resonant: framed as a solution to social and political problems and motivated by a specifically white and feminist relationship to these cultural objects, reproductive control was maneuvered from the sidelines to the main stage within a matter of years (McDonnell, Bail, and Tavory 2017; Stern 2019). By alternately using strategies to define radicalism via resonance and vice versa, Sanger and Stöcker had the opportunity to choose the alignments of their work with the dynamic and shifting frames incentivized by two rising forces-- ethnonationalism and scientific racism. The extent to which these forces incentivized both resonant and flexible framings helps to trace not only the evolution of radical movements through the rise of eugenic thought and practice in the early 20th century, but also contemporary reproductive access movements and the prioritization of control of, over support of, reproduction.

Framing, Morality, and the Pursuit of Resonance

Much of the historical literature on reproductive control tends to discuss its checkered past as a kind of dark age, separating contemporary reproductive control from its predecessors both thematically and politically as well as failing to take into account the fact that the period so quickly rejected as an inconvenient origin story came about as the result of tensions which are reproducible (Allen 1988; Stern 2016; Benjamin 2016). Meanwhile, much of the sociological literature begins its account of abortion and contraception post *Roe vs. Wade*, skipping over the early 20th century roots of abortion and contraception framing (Boyle, Kim, and Longhofer 2015). Exceptions include Wilde and Danielsen's analysis of the period between 1929 and 1931, in which they find that many American religious groups reversed their anti-contraceptive stance as a result of the ongoing national project to limit the fertility of immigrants (Wilde and Danielsen 2014).

Scholars of this period cite it as a rich site of persistent cultural and political framings, from censorship to gender relations (Beisel 1993; Bederman 2008). Sociologists often turn to the concept of framing to discern not only why some movements are more successful than others, but also how resonant framings emerge (Goffman 1974; Snow et al. 1986). Ferree (2003) defines resonance as "the mutually affirming interaction of a frame with a discursive opportunity structure supportive of the terms of its argument", with radicalism similarly defined as "a mutually contradictory relationship between this structure and a frame." Both historical and modern analyses of reproductive control framings have relied on a three-pronged model to explain not only the divisions in framing among movements, but also the permeability of their boundaries. A "women's rights frame, medical frame, and religious, natural family frame" cluster fits with current global debates surrounding abortion (Boyle, Kim, and Longhofer 2015), while a "protection of motherhood, protection of childhood, protection of the people" cluster was deployed

by German sexual reformers in 1912 (Ferdinand 1999). The propagation of these framing trilogies demonstrate that they can be used not only to diagnose sociological phenomena, but to direct the phenomena themselves.

In this analysis I also apply a trio of framings to analyze the development of Sanger and Stöcker's movements concurrently: advocating the individual, advancing humanity, and augmenting the state. Since the success of these movements was largely dependent on the resonance of their framings, Sanger and Stöcker were constantly having to negotiate between prioritizing the radical underpinnings of their movements and leveraging the more culturally resonant alignment of reproductive control as a cure for social ills. Benford and Snow define framing as an active process of contextualization in the sense that "something is being done, and processual in the sense of a dynamic, evolving process" (Benford and Snow 2000). They also note the agency involved in the process of framing, in that evolution of the movement itself is a result of the actors' driving effect. Their diverse audiences and collaborators could only have been managed with such a flexible palette of frames; between 1924 and 1925 alone, Margaret Sanger had spoken at both a Klu Klux Klan gathering and introduced Bertrand Russell at a society luncheon while Helene Stöcker opened her first sexual counselling center in Berlin and joined the "Group for Revolutionary Pacifists" (Wickert 1991; Sanger 1938, 1924)

While some instances of cultural resonance occur naturally over the course of problem-solving (McDonnell 2014), others are brought about through the intentional reframing of a movement to resonate with a specific population (Robnett 2004). This instance of cultural resonance was not a single framing, but a repeated procedure that ensured a diverse group of supporters and popularity across race, gender, and class (Reger 2002). I argue that this repeated reframing was driven by interwar anxieties and the demand both on and from these actors to construe their movements as solutions to the social problems they saw as drivers of international conflict. It was also driven by what theorists have called a pragmatist theory of social mechanisms. Gross (2009) argues that social mechanisms are "best thought of as chains or aggregations of problem situations and the effects that ensue as a result of the habits actors use to resolve them." This methodological approach helps to make sense of how birth control could appeal to the socialist free speech movement, women's rights activists, immigration concerns, pacifists, and nationalists-- and how could a movement founded on the basis of individual rights and freedoms so drastically shift to one of control (Gross 2009). A change in political repertoires might also be understood as a result of situated political innovation, through which actors creatively reorganize existing strategies through experimentation to achieve movement success through changing contexts (Jansen 2016).

In short, the "pragmatist and processual move" of actors achieving resonance through 'solving' a social puzzle using cultural objects and narratives (McDonnell, Bail, and Tavory 2017) ensured the success of the movement, while gendered marginalization encouraged these agents to position reproductive control as a cohesive framework through which these puzzles could be solved. Sanger and Stöcker's gender was a boon to their perceived competence in the field of reproductive control, unlike their earlier attempts at political organization. They also undertook

their work with a moral zeal that propelled their cause from the fringes to the center. Sanger wrote in 1929 that “the changing attitude toward contraception, which is evident everywhere when men and women are thinking deeply about the constant problems of human existence—in Europe, in Asia, and in America—is one of the eloquent indices of the triumph of the new, scientific morality” (Sanger 1929) Meanwhile, Stöcker advocated a new sexual morality, not dissimilar from Sanger’s in its ultimate call for the displacement of a morality that treated women’s sexual agency as a dangerous and immoral, but also one that elevated the concept of romantic love in a child-bearing relationship and also denounced the practice of marrying for money (Herlitzius 1995; Stöcker 2015). Part of this new morality was also that women had not only the right to reproduce, but also the responsibility to reproduce ‘correctly’. The moral weight of this responsibility was such that if women failed to adequately participate in the project of responsible reproduction, measures must be put in place to discourage or prevent their participation in the project at all (Sanger 1921; Herlitzius 1995). Thus their consistent reframing constructed their movements as not only externally, but also internally, resonant.

Data and Methods

To investigate how feminist leaders exploited a double resonance between eugenics and contraceptive access, this article relies on a combination of primary and secondary sources on the work and lives of Margaret Sanger and Helene Stocker between 1907 and 1942. These decades cover their emergence as social reformers and activists, their political involvement with legislation on reproduction, and the result of their work through the beginning of the second world war. Importantly, their organizing persists throughout two world wars and the intervening period of political and social upheaval.

As Abbott (2005) writes, the historicity of individuals is a central force in determining most historical processes-- they are the “prime reservoir of historical connection from past to present” (Abbott 2005). Tracing the trajectories of two feminist leaders of the birth control movement is thus an ideal case for analyzing the emerging alignment of contraceptive and eugenic advocacy in the first decades of the 20th century. During these years both Germany and the United States were grappling with both the emerging potential for state intervention into their populations’ reproduction and increasing demands for the unfettered dissemination of contraceptive information and devices (Usborne 1992; Timm 2010; Stern 2016). The relationships between these countries’ eugenic programs has been well documented, acknowledging to varying degrees the simultaneous participation of the United States in eugenic programs and the extent to which Nazi eugenics emerged from American research and policies (Black 2012; Kevles 1995; David, Fleischhacker, and Höhn 1988). But the relationships that formed before and between the world wars also persisted through another avenue-- that of white feminist organizing for reproductive justice and ownership over reproductive policing. The origins of this seemingly paradoxical relationship emerge through the public and private accounts of feminist leaders of the period, in this case American activist and founder of Planned Parenthood and German philosopher and social reformer Helene Stöcker.

These particular cases were selected because the correspondence of these divergences with major world events puts them in conversation with larger parallels between countries and ideologies, and because they demonstrate relatively extreme divergence despite having much in common. First, both women began their work as radical activists and first raised their concerns about reproductive freedoms within these groups; Sanger in the Socialist Women's League, Stöcker in the radical wing of the Women's Movement (Sanger 1938; Wickert, Hamburger, and Lienau 1982). Second, their activism took place over a period in which reproductive control became increasingly juxtaposed with ethnonationalism and scientific racism; from 1915-1945, they increasingly framed reproductive control as a solution to questions of national strength, racial purity, and human value. Finally, their legacies emerged very differently as a result of their capacity to successfully reframe their movements using radicalism and resonance to interact with contemporary social dilemmas and their own identities as women. Sanger's ability and willingness to reframe her goals to find resonance with contemporary social and political interests resulted in her organization gaining the cultural and political status Planned Parenthood enjoys today. Meanwhile, Stöcker's moves to reframe her movement as a pacifist one failed to successfully resonate with the political climate and by the time of her death, she considered her life's work destroyed (Wickert 1991). Beginning with the premise that reproduction should no longer be left up to chance-- a statement that resonates with both modern ethnonationalism and the ethics of reproductive intervention-- Sanger and Stöcker's cases demonstrate the role of agency and social structure in negotiating identity, resonance, and the process of framing (Stern 2019; Nagle 2017; Conrad and Gabe 1999).

The transcendence of birth control rhetoric was preserved across various collections and archives in the United States and Germany. I rely here on personal papers collections, primarily held by the Margaret Sanger Papers Project at New York University and Helene Stöcker's papers kept in the Swarthmore College Peace Collection. I also draw on Sanger's 1938 autobiography and Stöcker's posthumously published notes for her autobiography (Sanger 1938; Stöcker 2015). I supplement these writings with published conference programs, namely from the International Eugenics Conferences of 1912, 1921 and 1932 and Neo-Malthusian and Birth Control Conferences in 1910, 1911, 1922, and 1925. Finally, I employ a variety of secondary sources to establish the political and social contexts of Sanger and Stöcker's activism.

Advocating the Individual (1907-1917)

By 1907, both Margaret Sanger and Helene Stöcker were established actors in the birth control reform movements. Both had strongly developed political agendas centering around the concept that reproduction should not be left to chance; both suggested that this could be achieved by putting control of conception in the hands of the mother. (Stöcker 1907; Sanger 1917)

Sanger began her work on birth control access as a member of the socialist movement in New York City, in which she and her husband had been active members since 1907. Early on, Sanger was selected to recruit women for the Socialist cause because, in her words, she was American and a mother, thus disrupting negative stereotypes of socialist women (Sanger 1938).

Later Sanger, along with Mary Dennett and Emma Goldman, first began raising awareness of the suppression of contraceptive information using the existing platforms of the socialist movement, including socialist newspaper the *New York Call*. Their argument was that birth control, or at least information on it, was protected as free speech and that restricting access and dissemination violated women's constitutional rights. Sanger and Goldman forged alliances with other leftist groups to promote their cause and published a newsletter called the "Woman Rebel" as well as a pamphlet called "Family Limitations" (Sanger 1938; Chesler 2007). These publications ran afoul of the Comstock Act, and in 1914 she was charged with violating postal obscenity laws for sending contraception information through the U.S. Postal Service (Chesler 2007). To avoid facing trial, she traveled to Europe, where she spent several months traveling and meeting with international supporters of the birth control movement in Germany, the United Kingdom, and France. By this time, Sanger and her international friends (including eugenicists and social reformers Marie Stopes, Dr. Alice Vickery, and Havelock Ellis) had much higher aspirations for birth control than simply legalizing its existence. They had begun to discuss the larger possibilities of general population control and expanded their ranks to include respected members of the medical profession, as well as demographers and political dissidents (Sanger 1938). However, she faced increasing pressure to return to New York and continue the fight contraceptive access, and in a published article in "Freedom: A Journal of Anarchist Communism" she promised to do just that:

"As I near the conclusion of the work which I came to Europe to do, the thought naturally comes to me, "Shall I return to America, and stand trial for these indictments?" We who know the State and its machinery, know that it is not built upon reason, or justice, or upon a desire for human welfare. We know it maintains its hold upon us by force, and for me to return and expect to reason with a Government which knows no reason, seems a childlike act. On the other hand, there is the danger of this movement being transferred from the control of the State to the control of the medical profession, which in reality is only an exchange of high priests--another Church which the workers must pass through with bended knees before they can get to the knowledge that rightly belongs to them. It is my desire that such knowledge should be available to every adult man and woman, but especially to the working men and women. There have been so many letters come to me these last few weeks urging my return, and requesting me to take up the working class side of the fight, and fight the case against a growing tendency of class liberty and class privilege, that I have decided to return to America in the latter part of the summer, and stand my trial." (Sanger 1915)

Sanger is explicit here about her radicalism, her opposition to "the State and its Machinery," and her distrust of medical professionals as advocates of real contraceptive access. She pledges to return to the U.S. to face trial only in order to further advocate for the working class. This framing might have resonated with the readers of the *Journal of Anarchist Communism*, but even other members of the birth control movement found her free speech arguments and woman-first rhetoric

indefensible. At a dinner given in her honor the night before she stood trial in Federal Court, the New York Times reported that “it was apparent from the few speeches made that while all endorsed the principles for which Mrs. Sanger is making her fight, not all agreed with her methods. Indeed, Mrs. Sanger seemed to recognize this feeling, for in the brief address she made, she touched upon this subject.” Later in her address, the Times recounted that she noted the particular reason for her writings was to arouse the working women.

This advocacy of the working class was a consistent theme in Sanger’s public persona. In her autobiography, upper-middle class Sanger writes of how she was struck by the suffering of the lower class and immigrant women who she tended to at the beginning of her career as a nurse in Manhattan. One (uncorroborated) experience left her particularly shaken: as she and a doctor visited an immigrant woman weakened from postpartum septicemia, her husband asked what could be done to prevent future pregnancy. “Sleep on the roof,” replied the doctor. After a difficult and emotionally draining few months, Sanger “was resolved to seek out the root of evil, to do something to change the destiny of mothers whose miseries were as vast as the sky.” (Sanger 1938; Chesler 2007) By framing her motivations as a result of feminine sympathy and drawing on contemporary rhetoric that childbearing and family issues should, as women’s’ concerns, be politically organized by women, Sanger successfully made the case that she was not only the right leader for the birth control movement, but also a protector of the underrepresented (Atkinson 1910).

Meanwhile in Germany, feminist, philosopher, and social reformer Helene Stöcker approached the issue of reproductive access from the standpoint of ethics, gender relations, and economic agency. Stöcker was an early member of the League for the Protection of Motherhood (Bund für Mutterschutz), an organization which aimed to promote social and legal reforms for motherhood, advocate the legalization of abortion, and promote a new ‘sexual ethic,’ which Stöcker believed would result in a stronger and healthier society. Her advocacy for the rights of single mothers and the legitimization of children born out of wedlock had cemented her reputation as a radical activist, but her aspirations for a future generation were rooted in population concerns not dissimilar from those held by early influencers of National Socialist doctrine (Stöcker 2015; Jähne 2008).

As the first woman in Germany to graduate with a PhD in philosophy, she wrote extensively on the importance of developing a new sexual ethic under which women would have more sexual and reproductive control (Stöcker 1905). After a time working towards women’s suffrage, despite her skepticism that the vote would achieve the social reform she sought, Stöcker turned to questions of marriage and reproduction (Hackett 1986). She drew on Nietzsche, Galton and Malthus for evolutionary and demographic inspiration and had a complex view of reproductive control that called on women as well as men to interrogate the philosophy behind their desire to reproduce. Her involvement in reproductive control activism was radical not only because of her stances on abortion and single motherhood, but also because she was adamant about the centering of female bodily and intellectual autonomy in the process of reproduction. She rejected contemporary reproductive control discussions that referred to women’s bodies as a means to an

end, and called on women to take seriously their role in not only personal reproduction, but the production of a ‘future generation’ (künftige Generation) (Deutscher 2010). Throughout her career, Stöcker was both deeply principled and notoriously difficult to compromise with. She characterized the first five years of the League as “lively, stormy, but successful” and was successful in her bid to push out Ruth Bré as president of league and supplant her Aryan, utopian ideology with an ethics and social sciences-based approach (Stöcker 2015; Weindling 1993). It was through the BfM that Stöcker opened her first clinic in Berlin in 1905, where she provided eugenic education and contraceptive counseling. By 1915, population concerns had begun to creep into the public consciousness, and the foundation of the German Society for Population Policy was announced. Although it included the protection of mothers and children in its list of projects, something which the BfM had been advocating for ten years, it largely saw mothers as instruments for reproduction and denounced radical feminist teachings on the philosophy of motherhood and reproduction; Stöcker wrote that politicians were finally recognizing the ‘dangerous radical’ BfM had been fighting for ten years earlier (Allen 1988).

Despite their differences in framing, at this stage Sanger and Stöcker generally expressed their motivation for advocating birth control to preserve the lives and independence of reproducing women. Both noted the unfair burden of both childbearing and controlling conception that was placed on women without any kind of formal education or medical assistance. Access to and education on birth control would, in their view, improve the medical and social situation of women while simultaneously improving the lives of the children intentionally brought forth. Their message of advocating for the individual was constant and well documented, and while the framing around it was flexible, the goal was clear: resources for contraception exist, and women ought to have access to them. They differed on the issue of abortion, however: Sanger’s staunch opposition to abortion meant that Planned Parenthood only began performing the procedure after her death, while Stöcker saw legal abortion as a necessity for women to exercise sexual autonomy. Despite this, both saw reproductive control as solutions to not only social problems, but problems that had informed their experiences. As a child, Stöcker took on a caretaking role for her younger siblings after her mother experienced prolonged illness after the death of her brother (Wickert 1991). Sanger, too, had taken over after her mother died of consumption, weakened, in Sanger’s estimation, by giving birth to eleven children (Sanger 1938). Their resolutions that children ought to be born not by chance but through careful planning, in order to preserve the health and economic stability of the parents, spoke to their own frustrations with the lack of reproductive control.

Their desire to introduce reproductive control was not, however, without its legal challenges. The social movements literature has noted the role of legal pragmatism in the navigation of resonance and radicalism. Studies of radical activism have demonstrated that under authoritarian regimes, activists must employ strategies that find resonance without overtly challenging the ruling party’s regime (Wang 2016; Staggenborg 2015). However, in this first stage of activism both Sanger and Stöcker were willing to challenge legal restrictions on contraceptive access in ways that allowed them to adopt more resonant stances later. Their engagement with the legal system was dictated by not only the restrictions in place in their respective countries, but also

their own perspectives on what women's reproductive control should entail. While Sanger contended with the Comstock Act of 1873, ultimately seeing its contraception restrictions partially overturned in 1936, Stöcker fought for the legalization of abortion in interwar Germany. Despite her optimism at the 1922 Neo-Malthusian conference in London, where she said that postwar social conditions meant that abortion legalization "is now demanded with great fervour," abortion policy fluctuated both in terms of legality and enforcement throughout the Weimar period. When the Nazis came to power, abortion was strictly illegalized and providers of contraceptive services lost their research and their practices; some who continued to practice were given penitentiary sentences (David, Fleischhacker, and Höhn 1988). Regardless of the later legal outcomes, Sanger and Stöcker demonstrated that they were not afraid to take on the state directly. Their work continued to center around opening clinics and creating avenues for the dispensation of contraceptive information until the outset of World War I, which disrupted their activist networks and cut funding (Sanger 1938; Pierpoint 1922).

At this stage neither Sanger nor Stöcker prioritized eugenics, punitive sterilization, or coercive reproductive control in their reproductive advocacy. However, eugenics had made major inroads in both Germany and the United States: between 1907 and 1917 thirteen states had passed either voluntary or compulsory sterilization legislation, while in 1913 the Medical Society for Sexology and Eugenics was founded in Berlin. The growing tide of eugenic fervor was set to exert its influence as Sanger and Stöcker moved into the unsettled terrain of the first world war.

Advancing Humanity (1917-1924)

The first world war had disrupted not only Stöcker and Sanger's activism, but also the driving forces behind it. For Helene Stöcker, who even before the war had written about the dangers of nationalism, wrote in her notes that as a true opponent of the war from the first to the last days, to experience the conflict was also to experience deep disappointment. "In our naive and early beliefs and achievements of the early 1900s, we thought that war between cultured peoples was simply unbelievable or in any case something surmountable." (Stöcker 2015) Stöcker's beliefs about the morality of such 'cultured peoples' had been shaken; the terrible impact of nationalism and competing states suggested that advancing the human condition was a worthier cause than continuing to focus on state institutional reforms. She dedicated herself to pacifist causes and posed reproductive reform as a means to reduce potential future conflict arising from populations competing over limited resources. She expressed these views at international conferences like the Fifth International Neo-Malthusian Conference in London in 1922:

"Mankind ought to inspire itself with the knowledge of its high obligation towards the coming generation and forget for no moment that the procreation of man is one of the most important affairs for individual happiness, for the ascent of the race. Not before each one in particular feels it his obvious duty to ask himself with Nietzsche: " Are you a human being, who should be allowed to wish himself a child ? " — not before society asserts the holiness of human life as the principle of all morality, will that religion of the future be

fulfilled of which Galton and Nietzsche dreamed. Complete international disarmament, spiritual demobilisation of hate and the possibility of happiness for the individual are most closely and most inseparably connected.”

For Stöcker, it was the failure of humanity to prioritize its impulse for self-preservation that resulted not only in policies that failed to protect and promote motherhood and reproduction, but also resulted in the devaluation of human life that made war possible. Within the setting of the international conference, the project of uniting and advancing humanity across national borders seemed of particular importance after the war. Both Sanger and Stöcker were active in the Neo-Malthusian League, formed in the late 1800s as a means of gathering support and organizing discussion around Malthus's theories of population growth and had already had several international conferences in England, Germany, and the Netherlands. Sanger first attended the fifth conference in 1922 in London while avoiding trial for violating the Comstock Act. Stöcker had been in attendance since the 1911 conference in Dresden, where she spoke on motherhood and Malthusianism and hosted the first International Congress for Motherhood and Sexual Reform (Vickery 1911; “Mutterschutz Und Sexualreform-Kongress, Dresden 1911” 1911). By advocating birth control and other forms of reproductive control at these conferences, Sanger and Stöcker were participating in the broader project of linking reproductive practice to population control. Obtaining birth control information for women on an individual basis was too small a project, and linking it to broader population control movements gave Sanger and Stöcker the weight they needed to grow their activism.

The Neo-Malthusian League (1877-1927) was founded on the principles of Thomas Robert Malthus, a British scholar whose demographic theories continue to be influential. His 1798 book *Essay on the Principle of Population* argued that if unchecked, humanity is always at the brink of potential calamity: while food production can only ever increase arithmetically, the population increases geometrically, and society relies on positive checks (which raise the death rate) and negative checks (which limit the birth rate) to maintain a balance between resource supply and demand (Malthus 1970). The Neo-Malthusian League originated from professed concern for British overpopulation; its six international conferences drew a number of international reproductive control advocates, from feminists like Sanger and Stöcker to physicians, advocates of racial hygiene, and social reformers (Soloway 1979). Malthus's work also gave rise to a new generation of population scientists, who had the tools to test and observe theories about the effect the environment on development and the heredity of traits. Francis Galton (1822-1911), generally regarded as the founder of eugenics, predicted that the human race might be physically and mentally improved by encouraging judicious marriages through several generations (F. Galton 1904). Although Galton's theories gained significant support through the nineteenth century, it was generally regarded as impossible to compel the population to marry and reproduce with eugenics in mind, and that compelling them to do so would infringe on personal freedoms. In the U.S., Galton's work inspired feminists and sexual reformers to argue that monogamy and/or sexual repression could only result in inferior reproduction, which could then be linked to better

established Malthusian arguments about the economic and demographic risks that an uncontrolled population presented. These risks seemed particularly pressing after the first world war. By the 1920s, the international discussion around birth control was no longer limited to fringe women's rights groups and population control advocates; scientists, demographers, and politicians were interested in discussing the potential for organized control over reproduction and the potential for curating national populations.

Likewise, Sanger's aspirations for birth control had continued to grow, and at the first Birth Control Conference in 1921 she addressed the participants as the chairwoman: "our definite aim is to repeal the laws so that the medical profession may give to women at their request knowledge to prevent conception." (American Birth Control Conference 2012) Although this part of her message stayed constant, she was quick to seek resonance with her audiences. When she spoke to radicals and socialists, she decried inadequate birth control as a form of class oppression; when speaking to wealthy white women, she claimed that birth control would secure their independence (Chesler 2007). Throughout all of these, her identity as a woman and a mother secured her audiences and legitimized her work, as well as mitigating legal trouble (Sanger 1938). Even at this early stage, Sanger showed that she was adept at leveraging radicalism and resonance for a successful framing.

Four years later, she organized the sixth International Neo-Malthusian and Birth Control Conference in New York City. Sanger learned in Europe what the Neo-Malthusians had realized decades before: in order to cultivate a wide support base, the message and applications of their theories had to be interdisciplinary and wide-reaching. By hosting international conferences with the participation of members of the medical, demographic, and economic fields, Sanger was not only encouraging collaboration, but also seeing what would 'stick,' both among the scholarly and popular audiences. Attendance at the conference shows the wide range of supporters of Neo-Malthusianism found in interwar America (including Stöcker, who spoke on the need for birth control in Germany). W.E.B. DuBois made the following statement at the conference:

"Next to the abolition of war in modern civilization comes the regulation of birth by reason and common sense instead of by chance and ignorance. The solution for both of these problems of human advance is so perfectly clear and easily accomplished that it is only kept back by the stupidity of mankind, the utter refusal of even educated persons to face the problem frankly. While this is, in the highest degree, discouraging, it is, on the other hand, encouraging to know that "light, more light" is needed and here as elsewhere we have only to keep everlastingly at it to bring ultimate triumph." (Du Bois ca. February 14, 1925)

The promise of an "ultimate triumph" through the removal of chance and ignorance from the reproductive process spoke to a number of interwar anxieties from all disciplines. At this conference, Sanger was tasked not only with presenting birth control as an answer to these, but the most compelling answer. In her 1938 autobiography, she recounts meeting with a committee of eugenicists during the convention:

“Recently (eugenics) had cropped up again in the form of selective breeding... I accepted one branch of this philosophy, but eugenics without birth control seemed to me a house built upon sands. It could not stand against the furious winds of economic pressure which had buffeted into partial or total helplessness a tremendous portion of the human race. The eugenicists wanted to shift birth control emphasis from less children for the poor to more children for the rich. We went back of that and sought first to stop the multiplication of the unfit.”(Sanger 1938)

This is a conceptual transformation for Sanger regarding contraception: not only can it be used on an individual basis to preserve or achieve a better quality of personal life, but it might also be applied to improve the society as a whole. Also implicit in stopping “the multiplication of the unfit” is the institutionalization of birth control. The next chapter in Sanger’s autobiography recounts the growing concern over the world’s growing population and the overall tensions that existed between large and under-resourced nations (Sanger 1938). The popular intellectual opinion that expanding populations were the cause of war had clearly taken hold of Sanger, and hope for the general improvement of humanity using eugenic and contraceptive means would soon be redirected to more domestic subjects; for Stöcker, concentrating on the improvement of the state would lead only to more war, “the most anti-selectionary factor which exists.”(Pierpoint 1922)

The relationship of Sanger and Stöcker’s moral crusades to the demands of their audiences continued to present a double resonance; not only did their advocacy of birth control present a ‘solution’ to the problems of war, economic debilitation, and the “multiplication of the unfit”, but the alignment of their advocacy with these movements presented solutions to their fears about the future of humanity. For Stöcker, who saw the first World War in close proximity as well as the nationalist ideology that brought it about, the new mission was to avoid future war. Sanger, who experienced the war more abstractly, was now more invested in the national project of promoting a more ‘eugenically’ sound population in preparation for conflicts to come. For both, the tension began to lie in the argument that birth control was ultimately a tool for personal agency-- if birth control was to solve the problems Sanger and Stöcker promised it would, it required complete participation and adherence on the part of the population. As deeply mired in nationalism as interwar Europe and America were, this question of adherence became one of competition; the project that argued for humanist gains was equally resonant with the nationalist project.

Augmenting the State (1925-1942)

In 1925, the sixth and final Neo-Malthusian and Birth Control Conference was convened in New York City. Whereas before the first world war the United States had largely operated with an open border policy (excluding Chinese immigration), the Immigration Act of 1924 had drastically limited the quotas for incoming migrants and increased national spending on border enforcement (Ngai 1999, 2007). Building on international crises of national identity and population control, Margaret Sanger welcomed the participants with a speech highlighting the importance of biological gatekeeping in modern America:

“You, friends from foreign countries who have come here to our greatest city, must have noticed the intricate systems of signals which regulates the crowded traffic in our streets and thoroughfares. By this system, the pedestrian is assured some degree of safety. But while the congestion of American population in our cities has forced upon us a system to regulate traffic in city streets and country roads, America as a nation refuses to open her eyes to the problem of biological traffic and racial roads. Biologically this country is "joy-riding" with reckless carelessness to an inevitable smash-up. Is it too late to prevent national destruction? This question we must face- and answer.”(Sanger 1926)

Racial roads, biological traffic leading to an ‘inevitable smash-up’-- Sanger here speaks to fears about immigration, racial ‘impurity,’ economic debilitation under the weight of caring for the disabled, and the future of the American people. Her warnings about the repercussions of not instituting birth control (either as a choice or as a mandate) were intended to resonate with American interwar anxieties as well as popular theories already presented as solutions, namely ethnonationalist and scientific racism. Theodore Roosevelt had spoken in 1905 about the danger of ‘race suicide’: meanwhile, the beginnings of ‘genetic’ screening (via IQ and syphilis tests in ‘Better Baby’ competitions, and science-fictionesque calls for the test tube production of elite humans) had fed these white nationalist paranoid and added weight to these claims(Roosevelt 1905; Kevles 2016). Sanger’s aim at this conference was to align birth control with these already popular messages and present it as a necessary element of the desired intervention to an audience of demographers, politicians, scientists, and eugenicists. Sanger had begun her crusade for birth control two decades earlier by advocating for the right to educate and be educated on contraceptive measures and personal birth control.

Attending the conference was Helene Stöcker,

The latter years of the interwar period were crowned by a combination of aggressive nationalism expressed in terms of racial purity and population strength and national preservation, characterized by the belief that war was the result of unwieldy and cramped populations. Increasing aggression led to a combination of retaliatory actions and passive increasing of the defences; in terms of population and reproductive control, these looked very similar. Wilde and Danielsen found that by the 1920s, about half of America’s most prominent religious groups believed that white Anglo-Saxon Protestants were being outbred by southern and eastern European immigrants and that a ‘race suicide’ was in progress (Wilde and Danielsen 2014). The preservation of a race meant the cultivation of certain elements while eliminating others; for both German and American eugenicists, this included not only race and ethnicity but also disability and hereditary characteristics (considered in that period to include intellectual and intellectual disabilities, crime, alcoholism, and sexual promiscuity) (Kevles 2016). Sanger’s 1925 analogy of the U.S. “biologically joy-riding... to an inevitable smash-up” was only one example of the increasingly ethnonationalist sentiments expressed in her speeches (Sanger 1926). She expressed concern over rising populations elsewhere (most notably Japan and Germany) and while she was firmly against the idea of nations competing based on the size of the population, she did believe that the quality

of the population would be a key factor in the future success of the nation, both in its ability to compete on a global scale but also in order to function most efficiently. In order to prevent this “smash-up”, a stand had to be taken, and enforced, against “reckless reproduction.”

Sanger’s personal concerns mirrored the mounting anxiety that accompanied growing nationalism. In her undated notes, Sanger ruminates on the terrible effects that a lack of reproductive control has and will have in a post-WWI landscape:

“Germany is benefitting today by the efforts from scientific achievements & free experiments allowed & developed under the former system which allowed a the intelligence of her people free reign to seek truth & happiness without fear & imprisonment. The world war thrust upon us a new [Internationality?] . Ever since that historic & Sad event the world has been united not by Music, Art, Science & brotherly love, but by Fear. Fear of Invasion, of Starvation, & Uncertainty, Insecurity & another War. Various & Sunday groups offer Solutions for this woeful situation. The Politicians & political minded offer--The League of Nations the first essential in Solving any problem is to recognize the factors involved. One of the fundamentals factors which reflects these essential but ↑incomplete↓ phases of the problems is the factor of hunger & reproduction. Hunger is the driving force behind all our economic industrial & commercial organization. Limitation of armaments, Militaristic offer schemes of Competitive armaments. Marxians & Socialists offer The Third International Industrial Revolution & Equality of Distribution. Theologists offer ↑love↓ charity, Philanthropy & good will. While Nations rearm, hatred & fear increases & these situations grow from bad to worse. Then there is the reproductive impulse in constant conflict with one Economic political & Social system--All of which are at the mercy of changes thru the terrific rise in population.”(Sanger, n.d.)

Compared to her 1915 speech in which she argued against state control of reproduction, saying that it would be “only an exchange of high priests--another Church which the workers must pass through with bended knees before they can get to the knowledge that rightly belongs to them,” Sanger had now taken on a distinctly nationalist tone. This final progression of Sanger’s perception of the utility of contraception was the necessary next step for the application and enforcement of the moral imperative she saw in controlling future reproduction. Any contradiction she recognized in the mass control of individual contraception could be reasoned as a necessary complication in the overall progress of the nation. Individual loss of choice could hardly invalidate the utility of national controlled reproduction; the benefits that overarching control could provide, when institutionalized and enforced by powers larger than the volunteer clinic, were simply too great to continue placing responsibility in the hands of the individual. This pivot was ethically possible for her because of the moral nature of her crusade, and practically possible because of her identity as a white American mother.

Helene Stöcker, meanwhile, prioritized elements of reproductive control very differently from Sanger. Although Sanger had extolled the benefits that Germany had accrued through

“scientific achievements & free experiments allowed & developed under the former system,” that system was coming to an end. The Weimar republic was rapidly crumbling socially and economically, and the “future generation” that Stöcker had strived for seemed increasingly unlikely in the aftermath of the first World War. The “renewal of the people” became a popular topic among German scholars who felt that the post-war penalization of the German people was designed to lay them low as a race, and that aggressive eugenics measures were an objective answer to a social problem.(Wickert 1991)

Although Stöcker argued that reproduction in cases of hereditary disease could be considered a crime, she was motivated more by a pacifist conception of reproduction, in which responsible reproduction would lead to a more economically and socially stable people who no longer needed to go to war. “No true individual,” she wrote in 1919, “no love, or parental joy, can exist as long as the foundations of our civic life are undermined and shattered.” (1919) At the 1925 Neo-Malthusian Conference, which Sanger opened with her warning that America was “biologically "joy-riding" with reckless carelessness to an inevitable smash-up”, Stöcker spoke of the “future task of humanity”:

“...instead of destroying itself in meaningless wars, to create by mutual co-operation ways and means by which this last horrid struggle for existence in the worst sense of the word, need never recur; but instead, by a well-planned control of births-- a new cultural world should be created, in which life is worth while for every one who is born. To help to come to this end, that is, as I understand, the special aim of this movement. To work for its development-- that is the religion of the future.”(Sanger 1925)

Stöcker’s radical formulation of pacifist birth control did not take hold, and reproductive control as a national project continued to increase in popularity across disciplines throughout the 1930s. The American Journal of Sociology reviewed three books on contraception in the March 1935 issue, including Sanger’s *The Practice of Contraception*; reviewer Norman E. Himes, who later wrote several books on the medical history of contraception, wrote of the urgency of increased sociological participation in the study of birth control: “is it not high time that more sociologists advanced our knowledge of the sociological aspects of this phase of social behavior?” (Himes 1935) For Stöcker, faith in this ‘social behavior’ seemed misguided. In a 1938 letter to her friend Kurt Hiller, Stöcker wrote of her disappointment in mankind and disgust for the ‘othering’ that resulted in war:

Above all, I am disappointed in mankind. My disappointment is not limited to certain groups, races or parties. I do not believe that certain nations or races or classes as a whole--that is, neither Germans nor Jews, neither French nor Italians, neither white nor yellow races, neither "capitalists" nor "Marxists"-- are the "misfortunes" of the world. This can often be shockingly heard from those who themselves suffer under the curse of fanaticism,

by which individual groups of people are stamped scapegoats for all the evils of the world.(Stöcker 2015)

Compared to Sanger, who found resonance with this kind of racialization, Stöcker rejected this worldview and found decreasing resonance with her pacifism. In 1941, she wrote to friends still in Switzerland:

“Hopefully you both are well and have a circle of old and new friends around you with whom you can think through the problems of our time. We could not have foreseen that it would become *so* problematic. And you would have to live another thousand or ten thousand years to see a pleasant development.”

Although Sanger and Stöcker began their activism promoting controlled reproduction as a woman’s right, by the end of the 1930s they had taken starkly divergent paths. Sanger, once prosecuted for obscenity under the Comstock Act and imprisoned for her birth control activism, found increasing resonance for her cause as she shifted her movement for reproductive independence for women towards one of reproductive controls for the state. Stöcker found increasingly less resonance with her radical woman-centric stance and pacifist orientation (despite the similarities between her movement’s founding theories and Nazi racial ideology) and fled Germany the day after the Reichtagsbrand (the parliament fire which brought Hitler into power) Meanwhile, Sanger continued to campaign for birth control access and promotion, often traveling internationally and continuing to fight legislation against the dissemination of contraceptive information. In 1942, the American Birth Control League officially changed its name to the Planned Parenthood Federation of America, and Sanger continued to use this platform to promote access to contraceptive information and services until her death in 1966.

The only publicly available personal correspondence between Sanger and Stöcker is a series of letters between the two of them in 1942, the year before Stöcker’s death. Most of the letters discuss upcoming events or the health of friends and family; in one, Stöcker laments that “so many of our old co-fighters are gone now” and shares news of her own poor health(Stöcker 1942). Sanger responds: “Naturally, I have shared the concern of all your friends in as to your health and welfare during the past tragic years, and I pray that the future may still be rich in happiness and health and the supreme satisfaction of constructive work”(Sanger 1942). What exactly this “constructive work” meant was different to not only Sanger and Stöcker, but to their movements at different moments over the past thirty years. Despite their divergence, they seemed to ultimately agree on what exactly their reproductive control movements were striving for. In the sense that the “work” was always progressing towards a future in which the role of chance was ever diminishing in reproduction, then perhaps the “supreme satisfaction” still awaited.

Conclusions

In this paper I have shown how feminist reproductive control activist leaders aligned their movement with eugenics in the interwar period: first, how two leaders who were so notoriously uncompromising, and who held radicalism in such high esteem, could justify an ideological pivot that seems so antithetical to their initial goals, and second, how this actual alignment came about. The previous three sections on advocating the individual, advancing humanity, and augmenting the state have shown the main frames through which reproductive control moved through during the period from 1917-1942. The interaction of feminist-led reproductive control movements with these stages is important because it presents particular tensions that were resolved very differently by their actors. The paradox underlying these movements was that of right & repression; Stöcker and Sanger prioritized these differently according to the discursive opportunity structures in which they operated and were rewarded or denied lasting political resonance based on their willingness to assign rights and repression according to state interests.

By distinguishing the motivations for three framing clusters and demonstrating the role of agency in defining and prioritizing radicalism and resonance, I have argued that a historical comparative lens offers significant benefits to resonance analysis. If the feminist leaders within the movement had remained consistent with their initial approach to popularizing birth control by arguing it as a natural consequence of women's bodily autonomy and sexual independence, it would have likely remained a fringe social movement with little long-term impact. The relationship of feminism to eugenics, specifically in the interwar period, has been studied in a historical context but with very little emphasis on social mechanisms within the movement.

Many scholars have attempted to 'get to the bottom of' both Sanger and Stöcker's motivations and eugenics tendencies; they are all forced to reckon with these women's radical, forward-thinking feminist activism as well as the deeply problematic record of eugenic and racist language they left behind (Ziegler 2008; Hackett 1986; Gordon 2002; Jähne 2008; Allen 1988; Deutscher 2010). As long as Planned Parenthood continues to be a divisive organization in American abortion and birth control debates, there will be motive to paint Sanger either as a racist eugenicist who used birth control as a vehicle for her goal of white supremacy, or as a feminist whose movement had a marriage of convenience with eugenics in order to further itself (Stern 2016; Chesler 2007). In Stöcker's case, her obsession with Nietzsche and calls for eugenic practice in the interest of a future generation make her out to be an early adopter of National Socialist ideology at the same time as she remains known primarily for her work towards pacifism and progressive motherhood (Deutscher 2010; Wickert 1991; Allen 2000). To have a movement that deals in both rights and repression, ethnonationalism and science, radical sexual ethics and state control, makes it difficult to mitigate the desire to diagnose these cases as being misguided or malevolent. Rather, I focus here on the particular mechanisms through which these paradoxes were made possible. This is not the story of the birth control movement, but rather of its brief and productive time as part of a larger population control phenomenon within the context of interwar activism.

While white feminist leaders undoubtedly profited through their alignment with the eugenics movement, to say that feminists overwhelmingly supported and participated in the

eugenics movement purely in an attempt to keep their agenda in the public discourse is an oversimplification of an overlap in the movement that began before World War I and continued into the 1950s. It also oversimplifies the framing work done by activists like Stöcker and Sanger, whose radicalism was challenged by the need for resonance in a politically fraught period. Most importantly, it fails to recognize the double resonance that this ideological alignment offered: not only did it ‘solve the problem’ of negotiating identity and nationhood in a period of increased ethnonationalism and scientific racism, but it also ‘solved the problem’ of Sanger and Stöcker’s activism being labeled a women-only issue, inadequate to address interwar concerns, and motivated the expansion of their activism into a larger project that aligned with their own anxieties about the future value of reproduction. This double resonance not only justified their increasing divergence from their original aims, but encouraged it; their identities as white women in the early 20th century granted them political privileges in certain areas, and thus they mobilized these areas to work towards their agendas.

Finally, I show how reproductive control is itself a means to an end, with its advocates alternately linking and delinking it from the ideological projects that motivate it. The projects behind the resonant approaches that Sanger and Stöcker found-- rising ethnonationalism and scientific racism-- echo those of today (Reardon 2009; Benjamin 2016). At the same time as ethnonationalism experiences a resurgence on the right, biological racism is experiencing its own contemporary framing through the rise of race as a risk factor in public health literature and the growth of direct-to-consumer (DTC) genetic testing. Defining race, and racial ‘purity’, has never been so accessible and yet so incomplete (Roth 2016). By demonstrating the motivations by and mechanisms through which feminist birth control activists framed their movements, this paper maps the past and possibilities of reproductive control.

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