

# In Sanger's Shadow



Margaret Sanger,  
the Illinois Birth Control  
League, and the  
Ideological Battle over  
Birth Control in the  
1920s and 1930s

BY ERIN KIMBERLY SHAW

By 1923, Margaret Sanger was ready to expand her ever-growing birth control crusade. Having formed New York City's American Birth Control League in 1921, Sanger sought to broaden her movement past the city's perimeters. Consequently, she began preparations for a large-scale conference in Chicago, uniting her established movement in the East with sympathizers in the Midwest. Fortunately for Sanger, a burgeoning birth control league already existed in Chicago. The Parents' Committee (later known as the Illinois Birth Control League) had formed six years earlier. Corresponding with James A. Field — president of the Parents' Committee and professor of economics at the University of Chicago — Sanger hoped to use Field's connections to "secure patrons" for her conference, since she was not familiar with birth control sympathizers in Chicago.<sup>1</sup> Hoping to further employ Field's expertise, Sanger requested that Field present a paper at the conference on "the cost

Left: Portrait of Margaret Sanger, circa 1917. See page 353 for complete image.

1. Clara Louise Rowe to Margaret Sanger, 26 June 1923, folder 1, slide 76, American Birth Control League Records, Houghton Library, *Harvard University*, Cambridge, Massachusetts.



of overpopulation.”<sup>2</sup> Field, a distinguished demographer in economics, certainly possessed the knowledge to discuss, as Sanger desired, “the cost . . . of providing for the unfit.”<sup>3</sup> Regardless, Field rebuffed Sanger’s request. While having “reflected a good deal upon [Sanger’s] invitation,” Field nevertheless felt, “very skeptical about the validity and the relevancy of attempts to prove the necessity of birth control by arguments *in terms of dollars and cents*.”<sup>4</sup>

Despite Sanger’s growing power within the birth control movement, Field refused to comply with her particular agenda. Thus, his rejection put him and his organization initially outside her movement’s ascendancy. While it may seem peculiar that a professor of economics would refuse to argue “in terms of dollars and cents,”<sup>5</sup> Field’s view of birth control revolved around the benefits and rights of birth control for women rather than its worth as a tool to control the fecundity of the “unfit.” As Sanger’s desire for hegemonic leadership burgeoned, she became less willing, even hostile, to arguments that focused on women’s rights. Most importantly, she rebuffed any rationale for birth control that opposed her own.

The birth control movement gained significant power during the 1920s, due primarily to an immense ideological shift. While birth control had once belonged within the ranks of the socialist agenda, it became a very different project under the supervision of two professional groups: physicians and eugenicists. Previously, birth control was an issue of free speech (due to anti-obscenity laws) as well as an issue of social reform,

2. Clara Louise Rowe to Professor James A. Field, 26 June 1923, folder 1, slide 76, American Birth Control League Records, Houghton Library, *Harvard University*, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

3. *Ibid.*

4. Professor James A. Field to Clara Louise Rowe, 2 August 1923, folder 1, slide 76, American Birth Control League Records, Houghton Library, *Harvard University*, Cambridge Massachusetts. [emphasis added]

5. *Ibid.*

yet most male socialists refused to see birth control as “a fundamental issue.”<sup>6</sup> Consequently, women in the socialist movement, such as Margaret Sanger, who saw the potential of reproductive control for far-reaching change were often dismayed by the opinions of their male counterparts.<sup>7</sup> Once the socialist movement dissipated after World War I, birth control lost the benefits of a cohesive movement.<sup>8</sup> This vacancy pushed many of these women into partnerships with, as Linda Gordon describes, “more-conservative reformers, for whom birth control was not a part of a larger struggle for justice but a singular, self-contained cause.”<sup>9</sup> While the birth control movement had always been spearheaded by powerful and determined women like Sanger, the participation of physicians and eugenicists increased the movement’s respectability; removing it from the “radical fringe” and placing it within a more palatable public discourse. Doctors viewed birth control as a health measure: it was a way “to prevent pathologies in mothers.”<sup>10</sup> Eugenicists saw it as a fundamental condition of social progress: a way to “improve the quality of the whole population,” inevitably through the forced control of a certain population’s reproduction.<sup>11</sup>

Margaret Sanger was not the only female reformer who transitioned from the socialist movement to a focused birth control movement. Mary Ware Dennett, a former suffragist, challenged Sanger’s leadership

6. Christine Stansell, *American Moderns: Bohemian New York and the Creation of a New Century* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2000), 235; Linda Gordon, *The Moral Property of Women* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 172.

7. Gordon, *The Moral Property of Women*, 172.

8. The dissipation of socialist influence in the United States is most frequently attributed to the intense anticommunist and anti-immigrant reaction that followed World War I. See: Gordon, *The Moral Property of Women*, 172.

9. *Ibid.*

10. Gordon, *The Moral Property of Women*, 190.

11. *Ibid.*



monopoly in the birth control movement.<sup>12</sup> Both came from activist backgrounds in New York, and they would command separate, but increasingly centralized, campaigns in New York City.<sup>13</sup> Dennett would lead the Voluntary Parenthood League, and Sanger would lead the American Birth Control League. Sanger was still highly influenced by her socialist background and she valued opening clinics to provide birth control access to working-class and immigrant women. She disdained Dennett's strict adherence to legislative reform: a tactic that Sanger once called a "bourgeois, pink tea, lady-like affair."<sup>14</sup> Dennett believed that birth control reform could only be achieved if it was stricken from obscenity laws and contraceptive information was allowed to flow freely in society. She helped introduce numerous bills to amend birth control's legal status, but none would pass. As Sanger embraced an increasingly professionalized contraceptive campaign, she would shift control of birth control access from women to doctors. Doctors would become — as Sanger envisioned — the sole purveyors of contraceptive devices and information. On the other hand, Dennett believed that Sanger's strategy encouraged "class and special-privilege legislation" and would establish a "medical monopoly" in contraception.<sup>15</sup> While Sanger and the ABCL would dominate the movement and subsequent historical analysis, the VPL still contributed significantly to the movement's progress. Despite working for the same cause, Dennett and Sanger were bitter rivals. Differing methodologically and ideologically, the two women often refused

12. Before forming the National Birth Control League or Voluntary Parenthood League, Dennett was the corresponding secretary of the National American Woman Suffrage Association in 1910. See: Constance M. Chen, *"The Sex Side of Life": Mary Ware Dennett's Pioneering Battle for Birth Control and Sex Education* (New York: New Press, 1996).

13. Gordon, *The Moral Property of Women*, 171.

14. David M. Kennedy, *Birth Control in America: The Career of Margaret Sanger* (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 1970), 93.

15. Reed, *From Private Vice to Public Virtue*, 101.

to support the other's endeavors. Their disunity arguably affected the efficacy of the birth control movement as a whole.<sup>16</sup>

Within this larger context, the Chicago League sought to maintain its local identity and autonomy. While Linda Gordon has argued that local birth control leagues "lost their momentum" after World War I, the Chicago League, established first under the name "Parents' Committee," was founded after World War I without the direct influence of a national organization.<sup>17</sup> Publicly siding with Dennett's Voluntary Parenthood League, the Parents' Committee resisted Sanger's attempts to interfere in their local movement. While the Chicago League was initially successful in avoiding Sanger's control — as Professor Field demonstrated by denying her the Chicago League's assistance for the Chicago conference — the league over time would be forced to acquiesce more control to Sanger and the American Birth Control League. Eventually, the Parents' Committee would be renamed the "Illinois Birth Control League," demonstrating at least a public or superficial connection with Sanger's American Birth Control League. This name change was most likely an attempt by the IBCL to associate its local movement with the national movement in New York. While the IBCL would continue resisting Sanger's control throughout the 1920s and into the 1930s, it would transform eventually into a movement that most aptly fit Sanger's vision: a highly medicalized organization that no longer espoused a woman's individual right to control her reproduction.

This essay examines the Illinois Birth Control League's transformation from an autonomous organization to a unit of Sanger's national movement. This transformation demonstrates the power of Sanger's

16. Rose Holz stated in her dissertation: "The relationship between the two women deserves much further exploration." In this essay, I hope to examine their strained relationship through the lens of the Illinois Birth Control League; R. Holz, "The Birth Control Clinic in America: Life Within, Life Without, 1923–1972" (PhD diss., University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, 2002), 76.

17. Gordon, *The Moral Property of Women*, 171.



political machine as well as her unwillingness to accept a faction of birth control advocacy that was not her own. Even though the IBCL sided initially with Dennett's VPL, its subsequent concessions to Sanger's ABCL placed it in the middle of an ideological feud. While the IBCL's members stood with the principles of Dennett and the VPL, the growing monopoly Sanger cultivated within the national movement forced the IBCL to heed Sanger's leadership at the risk of their own movement's failure. This transformation demonstrates the disunity of the birth control movement in the 1920s. Fueled by personal agendas and aspirations, Sanger sought to dominate the movement, practically suppressing any opposing tactic or strategy.<sup>18</sup> Consequently, Sanger effectively aided in the homogenization of the birth control movement, adhering to strict medical and eugenical control. As the IBCL's conversion demonstrates, birth control advocates frequently clashed personally and ideologically. These discords inevitably would harm the efficacy of the movement, as members focused their energy on internal controversy rather than external change.

This essay begins by tracing the roots of the Chicago birth control movement. While Sanger's first speech in Chicago galvanized leaders of the Chicago League to organize a local birth control league, it was her earlier radicalism, rather than her later medical and eugenical birth control ideology that influenced their action. By examining the personal ideology of two of its members, this section establishes the disdain IBCL members had for eugenics. The second section examines two narratives: the IBCL's legal struggle for a clinic license as well as its relationship to Sanger's Middle Western Birth Control Conference. Both the legal struggle and the conference challenged the IBCL's birth control ideology and effectively facilitated the IBCL's transition toward Sanger's political agenda. Finally, the third section will analyze the role of the IBCL in Sanger and Dennett's bitter rivalry. Stuck in the middle of this debate, the IBCL was forced eventually to ally its support based on strategy rather than ideology.

18. *Ibid.*

The first wave of birth control scholarship, starting in the 1970s, focused primarily on Margaret Sanger's campaign in New York.<sup>19</sup> While birth control historians David Kennedy and James Reed characterized Sanger as an uncontested and laudable leader, Linda Gordon challenged these previous assertions. With her revolutionary 1976 work, *Woman's Body, Woman's Right*, Gordon questioned the legacy of Sanger's career and professional allegiances by examining the severe consequences eugenics and the medical profession had in the birth control movement.<sup>20</sup>

In dialogue with Gordon, Rose Holz argues that the establishment of a national organization (the American Birth Control League) was contingent on Sanger's and other birth control leaders' ability to appease a national audience and achieve the allegiance of the medical profession. Thus, Holz argues that there was a *conscious* and *strategic* shift to establish the legitimacy of clinics through the newly professionalized medical establishment.<sup>21</sup> In contrast, Gordon primarily argued that this shift to professionalism pushed feminists from their leadership positions in the movement. Like Gordon, Carole McCann in *Birth Control Politics in the United States* shifts the agency from the birth control feminists to the doctors by asserting the medical professionals' interest in absorbing contraception within their jurisdiction. However, McCann slightly devalues the effect that eugenical thought had on the movement in favor of the power

19. David M. Kennedy, *Birth Control in America: The Career of Margaret Sanger* (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 1970); James Reed, *From Private Vice to Public Virtue: The Birth Control Movement and American Society Since 1830* (New York: Basic Books, 1978).

20. First edition of Gordon's book was published in 1977. See: Linda Gordon, *Woman's Body, Woman's Right: A Social History of Birth Control in America* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977). In this essay I have consulted the most recent and revised edition of her original work. See: Linda Gordon, *The Moral Property of Women: A History of Birth Control Politics in America* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002).

21. R. Holz, "The Birth Control Clinic in America: Life Within, Life Without, 1923–1972" (PhD diss., University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, 2002).



of the medical profession.<sup>22</sup> More specifically, she argues that many doctors found *free* birth control clinics a threat to their ability to maximize their professionalization as well as to charge for health services. By making birth control a medical cause, doctors could affirm their professional authority and charge for their services. In contrast, Andrea Tone in *Devices and Desires* emphasizes the conscious decision of professionals to divorce birth control from any ideology of female reproductive autonomy. Tone thus argues that the movement's emphasis on medical professionalism effectively inhibited contraceptives' dissemination among the public.<sup>23</sup>

Current literature has shifted focus from the national movement toward local leagues. These local accounts demonstrate how the success of a national birth control movement greatly depended on local organizations, whose strategies varied between different communities.<sup>24</sup> These recent examinations, however, still privilege the clinics that operated along side and with the national organization, and moreover assumed that all birth control clinics sought to achieve this status.<sup>25</sup> Contributing to this new wave of birth control literature, this paper examines the Chicago League. However, this paper aims to complicate the relationship of local leagues with the national movement. Through the lens of

22. Carole McCann, *Birth Control Politics in the United States, 1916–1945* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994).

23. Andrea Tone, *Devices and Desires: A History of Contraceptives in America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001).

24. See: Christine E. Nicholl and Robert G. Weisbord, "The Early Years of the Rhode Island Birth Control League," *Rhode Island History* 45:4 (November 1986): 111–125; "‘Better Babies’: Birth Control in Arkansas During the 1930s," *Hidden Voices of Women in the New South* ed. Virginia Bernhard, et al. (Columbia, MO, and London: University of Missouri Press, 1994); Kriste Lindenmeyer, "Expanding Birth Control to the Hinterland: Cincinnati's First Contraceptive Clinic as a Case Study, 1929–1931," *Mid-American* 77 (spring/summer 1995): 145–173.

25. R. Holz, "Nurse Gordon on Trial: Those Early Days of the Birth Control Clinic Movement Reconsidered," *Journal of Social History* 39 (2005): 114.

Chicago's history, we can glean a new understanding of the internal workings of the birth control movement. Importantly, this analysis demonstrates the struggle and disunity that members of local and national leagues faced. Rather than portraying the desire of local leagues to collaborate with the national movement, the Chicago League indicates that this decision could be unwilling, even coerced.

As Sanger's political machine grew, it would become increasingly difficult for the Illinois Birth Control League to maintain its original ideological intentions. Eventually, Sanger's league would subsume the IBCL. Consequently, it too would espouse Sanger's "medical monopoly"<sup>26</sup> doctrine. Sanger's absolute control of the movement would subsequently shape both ideas and policies about female contraception, evident even in the present. Currently, almost all forms of female contraceptives can only be obtained through the medical profession. Sanger's stringent ideology and unrelenting leadership would homogenize not just the birth control movement of the 1920s and 1930s, but the possibilities for access to female contraception decades later.

## The Origins of the Illinois Birth Control League

In 1916, Margaret Sanger embarked on a national speaking tour praising the benefits of birth control and women's right to access it. In April, Sanger spoke near the Chicago stock yards to an audience of over 1,200.<sup>27</sup> A large number still wished to get in and crowded the halls so densely that Sanger's speech was interrupted numerous times in order for the police to escort the standing spectators out. Condemning punitive federal and state laws prohibiting birth control dissemination, Sanger asked:

26. James Reed, *From Private Vice to Public Virtue: The Birth Control Movement and American Society Since 1830* (New York: Basic Books, 1978), 101.

27. "Birth Control Way to Welfare — Mrs. Sanger," *Chicago Tribune*, April 26, 1916, 17; the article does not indicate where exactly the speech took place, only that it was near the Chicago stock yards.



"Has the state a better right to decide when a woman shall have a child than the woman herself?"<sup>28</sup> Denouncing the Comstock Act,<sup>29</sup> Sanger queried: "Do we realize the menace of this censorship? The postal service was never created to be a religious or ethical institution."<sup>30</sup> During her tour, Sanger incited impetus to begin birth control leagues that would sustain resistance against contraception's legal limitations as well as open clinics throughout the country. The idea of a birth control league was not new, as ten leagues already existed in 1916. Roused by Sanger's polemical speech, hundreds of women signed a petition requesting that a similar league form in Chicago.<sup>31</sup>

Still, Sanger received an ambivalent and more often lukewarm reception from the press and many Chicago women's clubs. Prior to her stock-yards speech, Sanger's request to speak on the subject of birth control was rejected by the Chicago Woman's Club. Rose Landauer, chairman of the Woman's Club reform committee, found Sanger "too brutally plainspoken . . . a little too strong for Chicago."<sup>32</sup> In a moment of insight, Effie Lobdell, vice president of the Woman's Club, suggested: "We do not want to shirk consideration of so vital a national phase as birth control . . . however . . . the opinion and findings of *physicians* should first be

28. Ibid.

29. Comstock Act of 1873 prohibited the dissemination of obscene items. Particularly, "for the prevention of conception, or for causing unlawful abortion, or shall advertise the same for sale, or shall write or print, or cause to be written or printed, any card, circular, book, pamphlet, advertisement, or notice of any kind, stating when, where, how, or of whom, or by what means . . ."; "Act of the Suppression of Trade in, and Circulation of, Obscene Literature and Articles of Immoral Use," (ch. 258 17 Stat. 598 enacted March 3, 1873)

30. "Birth Control Way to Welfare — Mrs. Sanger," *Chicago Tribune*, April 26, 1916, 17.

31. Ibid.

32. "Woman's Club Rejects Mrs. Sanger's Tale as 'Too Strong' for Chicago," *Chicago Tribune*, April 11, 1916, 17.

taken up before listening to the views of just one person.”<sup>33</sup> After her speech, one *Chicago Tribune* editorialist found Sanger’s actions reprehensible because “young girls with their hair in curls and young men who composed a large part of Mrs. Sanger’s audience were not there to think. No good could be expected to come of this and in every probability much harm.”<sup>34</sup> In sum, the editorialist implied that Sanger’s speech attracted the young and unmarried who wished to employ birth control licentiously. However, he did approve of “the right sort of people” in attendance at Sanger’s speech. Intuitively, “the right sort” would include doctors and other professionals with the qualified expertise to discuss the subject “in a public hall.”<sup>35</sup> As it stood, Sanger had attracted an audience “promiscuously.”<sup>36</sup>

While over a thousand attendees in a working-class and immigrant neighborhood anxiously flocked to hear Sanger speak, many Chicago organizations, such as the Woman’s Club or the *Chicago Tribune*, withheld their verdict on Sanger’s message. Both the Woman’s Club and the *Chicago Tribune* suggested that many reformers and middle-class citizens wished to see birth control within the hands of “experts” or medical professionals.<sup>37</sup> Sanger’s personal and professional associations at the time of her speech placed her within the radical fringe of the early twentieth

33. Ibid. [emphasis added]

34. “Mrs. Sanger’s Lecture,” *Chicago Tribune*, April 27, 1916, 6.

35. Ibid.

36. Ibid.

37. Sanger did not take the Chicago Woman’s Club’s rejection lightly. In response, “she attacked it, saying she did not care to speak to a ‘sophisticated’ audience anyway. ‘I want to talk to the women of the stock yards . . . they are the victims of a system or lack of system that cries out for corrections;’” Linda Gordon, *The Moral Property of Women* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 155.



century.<sup>38</sup> Even when she argued birth control as a female prerogative, most women's organizations refused to support her. Suffragists tended to regard contraceptives as "an inducement to promiscuity."<sup>39</sup> Even after women's suffrage was enacted, the National Woman's Party in 1921 refused to support the birth control cause.<sup>40</sup> As Sanger developed as the preeminent leader of the birth control movement, her political strategy would begin to cater to and accommodate the anxieties and resistances she fought early in her career.

An audacious group of activists would convene after Sanger's lecture in order to fulfill the wishes of the working-class stock-yards women who sought a birth control league in Chicago.<sup>41</sup> Formed in January 1917, a group called the "Parents' Committee" actualized this desire. Straying from the trend of Chicago professionals and club organizations to avoid the issue of birth control, these doctors, professors, and philanthropists demonstrated a dedication to this cause at a time when it remained a part of the radical fringe. Notable members included doctors Alice Hamilton and Rachelle Yarros, University of Chicago economics professor James A. Field, and philanthropist Helen Carpenter. These individuals rejected birth control's sexual taboo and rebuffed the cautious conservatism of their peers, such as the Woman's Club and the *Chicago Tribune*. In particular, Doctors Hamilton and Yarros — residents of Jane Addam's Hull

38. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Sanger was an active member of socialist circles, such as the International Workers of the World (IWW). She would begin her birth control crusade during her alliance with socialist organizations See: Christine Stansell, *American Moderns: Bohemian New York and the Creation of a New Century* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2000), particularly Chapters Seven and Eight.

39. Andrea Tone, *Devices and Desires: A History of Contraceptives in America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001), 17.

40. *Ibid.*, 125.

41. "Birth Control Way to Welfare — Mrs. Sanger," *Chicago Tribune*, April 26, 1916, 17.

House — willfully led the organization despite the hesitation of their leader. In contrast to these women, Addams “refused to lend her name to the still controversial cause.”<sup>42</sup> Ultimately, the goal of the organization was to open free clinics to offer birth control advice and devices to citizens of Chicago.

Just four months before the Parents’ Committee assembled, Margaret Sanger’s own attempt to establish a free clinic was thwarted. Sanger operated her Brooklyn clinic — the first in the country — in Brownsville for a mere ten days before the authorities shut it down.<sup>43</sup> Opening the Brownsville Clinic with the aid of her sister, Ethel Byrne, Sanger disregarded the need for direct medical supervision. She would later be sentenced to thirty days on Blackwell’s Island for the legal transgression.

Aware of the legal obstacles confronting their goal of opening clinics, the Parents’ Committee sent a letter to Illinois Attorney General Edward J. Brundage inquiring about the state’s legal stance on birth control. Considering Sanger’s recent legal difficulties, Brundage responded: “There is no such status in this State *as that in New York* which forbids and penalizes the giving of advice or information relative to the prevention of conception” and that “the giving of such advice is very largely discretionary with the physician.”<sup>44</sup> Understanding the necessity of

42. Ellen Chesler, *Woman of Valor: Margaret Sanger and the Birth Control Movement in America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 171.

43. Gordon, *The Moral Property of Women*, 156.

44. Attorney General Edward J. Brundage to Doctor Rachele Yarros, 24 February 1917, folder 1, box 8, Planned Parenthood — Chicago Area Papers, *Chicago Historical Society*, Chicago, Illinois [emphasis added]. It is important to note that Brundage stresses: “The law makes it a crime, under very severe penalties, to cause or produce an abortion or miscarriage, unless the same is necessary for the preservation of the life of the mother . . .” Committee members, especially Doctor Yarros, would often speak out against abortion, viewing birth control as the “preventative measure.” Brundage’s declaration is congruent with Comstock legislation that also amended the right to abortion if it endangered the life of the mother. Ironically, this clause made pregnancy prevention a more serious crime than abortion; Tone, *Devices and Desire*, 22.



physicians in their clinic's process, the committee appointed prominent physician, Rachele Yarros, as their medical director. Considering Brundage's letter as legal authorization, the Parents' Committee began the long process toward their goal of a free clinic.

Even before Sanger's rousing stock-yards speech, the imminent leaders of the Parents' Committee had a deep understanding of birth control's necessity. At a Chicago Medical Society meeting just two months before Sanger's stock-yards speech, Yarros proclaimed: "It is necessary . . . to undertake a rational and active campaign among our population to remove the religious, so-called moral, and old fashioned medical reasons against birth control."<sup>45</sup> Doctor Hamilton "told of the Leagues on birth control in Europe."<sup>46</sup> Also in attendance was Professor Field, who presented his paper on "the Beginning of the Birth Control Movement."<sup>47</sup> These three individuals showed initiative prior to Sanger's visit to advocate for women's right to birth control. While the petition signed by hundreds of women at Sanger's speech spurred their collaboration, the desire to begin a clinic began prior to Sanger's address. This active initiative toward birth control reform would foreshadow the committee's independence and initial distance from Sanger's growing political power.

## Leaders of the Chicago Movement

As president and medical director respectively, Field and Yarros orchestrated many of the IBCL's greatest successes. Stopping anti-contraceptive legislation and founding birth control clinics throughout the city, these two individuals led the Chicago League during its most formative years. Both Field and Yarros were committed to a birth control ideology that

45. "Doctor Admits Defying Law to Control Births," *Chicago Tribune*, February 17, 1916, 13.

46. *Ibid.*

47. *Ibid.*

put women in charge of contraceptive use and denounced eugenical attempts to dominate women's reproduction. As the subsequent IBCL president, Helen Carpenter, would note, members of IBCL were "unanimously" in favor of making contraceptive information freely available to women, not restricted to the eugenical or medical profession.<sup>48</sup> Thus, Yarros and Field — along with other leading members of IBCL — adhered to an ideology that placed them in opposition to a national birth control movement that increasingly abided by medical and eugenical ideology.

Fighting against the mainstream eugenical ideology that would eventually propel the birth control movement, Yarros sought to establish a more feminist friendly movement within Chicago. Born in Russia in 1869, she experienced a relatively privileged upbringing. At eighteen years old, Yarros was forced to flee Russia due to her association with the Nihilists, a subversive political society.<sup>49</sup> Escaping pursuit by the czarist police, she immigrated to the United States. Starting from a quintessential immigrant path, she supported herself through work in a sweatshop. Educating herself when she could, she eventually went to Boston and met her future husband, Victor Yarros. Like Rachele, Victor was a Russian emigrant with radical ideas. With the support of her husband, Yarros was admitted to the Woman's Medical College in Philadelphia, where she graduated with distinction. She then spent a year as an intern in Massachusetts General Hospital. Considering, as Nancy Cott has demonstrated, "women medical school graduates had to search for and travel to the few scattered internships open to them,"<sup>50</sup> her internship indicates an exceptional level of intelligence and skill. Victor Yarros was attracted to the political movements flourishing in Chicago,

48. Helen Carpenter to Mary Ware Dennett, 16 February 1931, series 4, slide 343, Mary Ware Dennett Papers, Schlesinger Library, *Harvard University*, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

49. *Women Building Chicago, 1790–1990*, s.v. "Yarros, Rachele Slobodinsky."

50. Nancy Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 1987), 221.



and in 1895 the two moved to the Midwest.<sup>51</sup> Through years of dedicated medical work, Yarros established herself as one of the preeminent female doctors of Chicago. She eventually earned a professorship at the University of Illinois at Chicago for both obstetrics and social hygiene.

Opposed to ideology that posited women primarily as mothers, Yarros asserted women's right to sexual satisfaction: "Women have been placed on moral pedestals and regarded as too saintly and pure to need sexual satisfactions. The double standard of morals was the result of this old and baseless distinction — a standard now rejected by women as well as by science."<sup>52</sup> Divorcing sexual intercourse from reproduction, Yarros's contention put her against common ideology that affirmed women as chaste and sex as purely reproductive. Further, she contested the notion that women were merely the sexual vassals of men: they were not "instruments of pleasure for the licensed and privileged male."<sup>53</sup>

In contrast to eugenic philosophy, Yarros focused primarily on the benefits of birth control to the individual rather than society. Birth control, she argued, could act as a device to improve the opportunities of citizens, not to control the vigor of the race. Recognizing the benefits of birth control for women, Yarros promoted women's personal reproductive choice. Rather than an inevitable consequence of femininity, motherhood could be a responsible, voluntary, and planned part of life. In contrast to many of the eugenical ideologies that propelled the Sanger's American Birth Control League,<sup>54</sup> Yarros believed:

51. *Women Building Chicago, 1790–1990*, s.v. "Yarros, Rachele Slobodinsky."

52. Rachele Yarros, *Modern Woman and Sex: A Feminist Physician Speaks* (New York, Vanguard Press, 1933), 121.

53. *Ibid.*

54. In particular, Doctor William J. Robinson of the American Birth Control League once stated, "It is the acme of stupidity, in my opinion, to talk in such cases of individual liberty, of the rights of the individual. *Such individuals have no rights.* They have no right in the first instance to be born, but having been born, they have no right to propagate their kind." William J. Robinson, *Eugenics, Marriage*

The birth-control clinic does not discriminate against any class or group. It does not command the fit to breed regardless of circumstances. It does not advise the poor to renounce parenthood. *It deals with individuals in the light of their particular conditions and requirements.*<sup>55</sup>

Yarros consciously attempted to reappropriate reproduction from meritocratic individuals who believed they should control the fecundity of others.<sup>56</sup> While others would later argue: "The purpose of birth control is eugenical . . . its activities . . . should demand a higher birth rate among persons best endowed by nature . . . and [should] forbid and . . . prevent reproduction by the defective and degenerate family stock."<sup>57</sup> Giving power back to the individual, Yarros wished to provide contraceptive information to any who sought it.

Yarros was particularly suspicious of the meritocracy evident in eugenic theories. Skeptical of eugenics' arbitrary and biased nature, she noted: "The classes dominant today . . . would appoint the wardens and other functionaries upon whom the duty of sterilizing the unfit would devolve."<sup>58</sup> Thus, reproductive control would inevitably target the "undesirable" category designated by the "classes dominant." Yarros questioned: "Would they sterilize the embezzlers, the industrial pirates... the dishonest and greedy officers and . . . the bribe-taking lawmakers?"<sup>59</sup>

*and Birth Control [Practical Eugenics]*, (New York: The Critic and Guide Company, 1917), 75–76. [emphasis added]

55. Yarros, *Modern Woman and Sex*, 168. [emphasis added]

56. Such as Robinson, see above.

57. H.H. Laughlin to Margaret Sanger, 24 March 1923, folder 1, slide 80, American Birth Control League Records, Houghton Library, *Harvard University*, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

58. Yarros, *Modern Woman and Sex*, 171.

59. *Ibid.*



Revealing her political alignment, she declared: "The answer is obvious. They would sterilize the Communists, the 'agitators,' the militant critics of plutocratic civilization."<sup>60</sup> Chicago's tumultuous history of widespread persecution against labor activists likely furthered Yarros's mistrust of the "dominant class" and her fear for the individual reproductive freedom of the "agitators."<sup>61</sup>

While coming from a background almost antithetical to Yarros, James Alfred Field came to many of the same ideological conclusions about contraceptives. Field was born in Milton, Massachusetts, in 1880. Raised among affluence, Field received an education from the prestigious Milton Academy and graduated valedictorian. Continuing his education at Harvard, Field was first introduced to the discussion of eugenics. While studying abroad, Field visited the Eugenics Laboratory in the University of London. Although Field lacked the radical background of Yarros, he still had reservations about this new and popular field of study. While he focused his studies on economics, he was most interested in issues concerning individuals. Like Eugenicists, Field concentrated on problems with population; however, instead of being interested in "the group problems of numbers and racial superiority," he focused on "the more individual problems of parenthood."<sup>62</sup> Field rejected the notion of an inherent degenerative nature of the lower classes. Instead, he viewed

60. Ibid.

61. Particularly, the Haymarket Riot of 1886 and the trial of the eight anarchists. See: James Green, *Death in the Haymarket: A Story of Chicago, the First Labor Movement, and the Bombing that Divided Gilded Age America* (New York: Anchor Publishing, 2007); Yarros and her husband made two or three visits to the Soviet Union and expressed satisfaction over some of the progress she had found there; "Rachelle Slobody Yarros, 1869–1946," 1946, Victor and Rachelle Yarros Papers, *University of Illinois at Chicago, Chicago, Illinois*, 259.

62. James A. Field, *Essays on Population and Other Papers* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1931), xvi. Biographical information on Field provided by pages xix–xxviii.

birth control both “as a means of helping the poor man out his dilemma” and “a rational way of life for individuals with economic standards to maintain ideals of individual attainment . . .”<sup>63</sup> Although this ideology put him at odds with many contemporary scholars, it eventually would fit Chicago’s birth control movement, which perpetuated this unique stance.<sup>64</sup>

As president of the IBCL, Field consistently acted on these beliefs. As stated before, he declined Sanger’s offer to present a paper on “the cost . . . of providing for the unfit,”<sup>65</sup> refusing to present birth control in eugenical terms. After the conference, Field spoke before a legislative committee in Springfield, Illinois, testifying against a bill that would make giving any written or verbal birth control information under any circumstance illegal.<sup>66</sup> Unlike Sanger and other national reformers in the movement, Field did not testify in favor of restricting birth control information to doctors. Instead, like his ally Mary Ware Dennett, Field wanted contraceptive information to be available to all. He respected the wishes of Sanger’s stock-yards audience, who wanted birth control information, and not necessarily through the costly hands of the medical profession.<sup>67</sup>

Although Yarros and Field grew up under very different social and political circumstances, both backgrounds led to similar birth

63. *Ibid.*, 317.

64. Field’s resistance to mainstream eugenics is particularly noteworthy considering, “In the 1920s eugenics as a scholarly field represented the capitulation of higher education to a fad, allowing the Eugenacists’ skills to become a commodity for sale to the highest bidder.” Gordon, *The Moral Property of Women*, 192.

65. *Ibid.*

66. Helen G. Carpenter, “The Annual Report of the Illinois Birth Control League, 29 April 1925,” folder 1, box 8, Planned Parenthood—Chicago Area Papers, *Chicago Historical Society*, Chicago, Illinois.

67. Hundreds of women at Sanger’s stock-yards speech signed a petition requesting a birth control league in Chicago. See: “Birth Control Way to Welfare—Mrs. Sanger,” *Chicago Tribune*, April 26, 1916, 17.



control ideologies. Yarros was introduced to radicalism at an early age, as a member of a subversive political group. This early radical association would help to shape her later ideas about female equality and reproductive rights. Field, on the other hand, came to his conclusions in opposition to a growing ideology that favored eugenics. Field was certainly exposed to eugenic thought, even actively seeking it out in London. But despite this exposure, he remained skeptical of eugenics' validity. Field was known for his participation in civic and philanthropic organizations, as well as for his independent and inquisitive nature. Through his dedication to charitable work and his tendency to question ideas, Field reached a personal conclusion that birth control should benefit the individual, rather than "benefiting" society.

### Chicago's Legal Fight for a Clinic: Sanger's Struggle for Midwestern Control

After 1918 Margaret Sanger no longer publicly resembled the populist arouser of the Chicago stock yards two years prior. Following her public trial and incarceration in 1916, Sanger's new strategy "abandon[ed] the rhetoric of class warfare" in favor of an ideology that embraced the prerogative of both doctors and eugenicists to utilize birth control as a tool of social change.<sup>68</sup> Sanger established the American Birth Control League in 1921 and found that she was leading a rapidly changing advocacy movement. The main strategies of the organization — opening clinics and lobbying for legislation — demanded a large and steady flow of money. This new strategy therefore increased the power of wealthy individuals within the birth control movement, consequently pushing out nearly all of the former movement's radical membership.<sup>69</sup> Trading stock

68. Carole McCann, *Birth Control Politics in the United States, 1916–1945* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), 43.

69. Gordon, *The Moral Property of Women*, 171.

yards for “white-tie dinners,”<sup>70</sup> Sanger embraced the rising conservatism of her movement in exchange for increased power and respectability. Consequently, this shift disassociated birth control from its previous radical connections.<sup>71</sup> In this process, Sanger shirked her previous assertion that “[a woman has] a right to decide when [she] shall have a child,”<sup>72</sup> for a claim that she “once, too, [had] been naïve enough to think that contraceptive information should be available to all,”<sup>73</sup> therefore asserting that working-class women were incapable of effectively employing birth control.

As Sanger expanded her increasingly professional campaign, she began examining uncharted territory. While still focused on birth control clinics in New York City, Sanger also initiated new tactics to expand and consolidate her leadership in the national movement: moving the league westward and seeking federal protection for doctors administering contraceptives.<sup>74</sup> In a letter from American Birth Control League secretary Clara Louise Rowe, Rowe confirmed that Sanger sought “to get thoroughly established in Chicago and the Middle West.”<sup>75</sup> Thus, Sanger and the ABCL began to organize the Middle Western Birth Control Conference, to be held in Chicago during October. Placing the conference in

70. Ibid.

71. Ibid.

72. “Birth Control Way to Welfare—Mrs. Sanger,” *Chicago Tribune*, April 26, 1916, 17.

73. Constance M. Chan, *“The Sex Side of Life”: Mary Ware Dennett’s Pioneering Battle for Birth Control and Sex Education* (New York: The New Press, 1996), 216.

74. “On January 2, 1923, [Sanger] opened her second clinic, the Birth Control Clinical Research Bureau (BCCRC) . . . across the hall from the ABCL headquarters,” Tone, *Devices and Desires*, 125.

75. Clara Louise Rowe to Margaret Sanger, 29 May 1923, folder 1, slide 74, American Birth Control League Records, Houghton Library, *Harvard University*, Cambridge, Massachusetts.



Chicago allowed Sanger to capitalize on the existing regional birth control league, as well as assert her national authority over it. Further, it allowed Sanger to recruit professionals in the Midwest, particularly doctors and professors, to her national campaign. Consequently, the overwhelming majority of invitees would consist of these two groups.

Amidst Sanger's increasing centralization of America's birth control movement, Chicago's local league began its own struggle toward the establishment of birth control clinics. As Sanger orchestrated her Middle Western States Birth Control Conference, the Parents' Committee (Chicago's local birth control league) put into motion a legal dispute for a free birth control clinic that would last over two years. While Illinois Attorney General Brundage had assured the Parents' Committee six years prior that no status existed which would penalize those who provided contraceptive information,<sup>76</sup> the committee quickly found its plan under fire. In Chicago, free clinics had to be approved by the local Department of Health, which could easily deny the request to establish such a clinic.<sup>77</sup> Hence, when the Parents' Committee's application was received by commissioner of health, Herman N. Bundesen, Bundesen denied their application. While Bundesen acknowledged that there was no state statute prohibiting contraceptive information, he further asserted that he would not approve "the licensing of any practice or teaching which . . . would tend to corrupt morals, injure health, increase crime or destroy the state."<sup>78</sup> Infuriated by Bundesen's subjective ruling, the Parents' Committee appealed to the mayor, William E. Dever, who could over-

76. Attorney General Edward J. Brundage to Doctor Rachele Yarros, 24 February 1917, folder 1, box 8, Planned Parenthood — Chicago Area Papers, *Chicago Historical Society*, Chicago, Illinois.

77. R. Holz, "The Birth Control Clinic in America: Life Within, Life Without, 1923–1972" (PhD diss., University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, 2002), 40.

78. Commissioner of Health Herman N. Bundesen to Mrs. Helen G. Carpenter, 19 September 1923, folder 1, box 8, Planned Parenthood — Chicago Area Papers, *Chicago Historical Society*, Chicago, Illinois.

turn Bundesen's decision. When their threats of legal action failed to arouse Dever,<sup>79</sup> the committee sought a writ from the Cook County Circuit Court that would compel Dever and Bundesen to grant their license.

As the Illinois Birth Control League fought the city of Chicago for a clinic license, it simultaneously struggled to maintain a distance from Sanger's growing hegemony within the national birth control movement. Thus, the Chicago League began an ideological battle fought on two fronts: against the Department of Health and against Sanger. While practically, the IBCL's court case sought a license to open a birth control clinic, it was simultaneously fighting for its ideological view of contraception. First, it sought to challenge Bundesen's assertion that birth control was corruptive and injurious. Second, it fought for the ideology that birth control should be a free service, open to women who desired it. Similarly, the league was forced to defend its contraceptive ideology against Sanger's own opposing ideology, as her presence in Chicago increased. When asked to participate at Sanger's conference in a way that conflicted with the league's ideology, the IBCL was forced to combat Sanger, and thus the IBCL members pitted themselves against her growing power within the movement.

Meanwhile, Sanger continued to strengthen her new alliance to the birth control movement's professionalization. During the beginning of the IBCL's clinic dispute, Sanger resided in Chicago's Drake Hotel, organizing the Middle Western States Birth Control Conference, and sought to "establish herself" in the Midwest.<sup>80</sup> Extending the methods she used in New York, Sanger sought to fill the Middle Western Confer-

79. President of the Parents' Committee Field stated in his letter to Mayor Dever, "We do not wish to be compelled to revert to a legal action if it can be avoided . . ." Professor James A. Field to Mayor William E. Dever, 27 September 1923, folder 1, box 8, Planned Parenthood — Chicago Area Papers, *Chicago Historical Society*, Chicago, Illinois.

80. Clara Louise Rowe to Margaret Sanger, 29 May 1923, folder 1, slide 74, American Birth Control League Records, Houghton Library, *Harvard University*, Cambridge, Massachusetts.



ence Committee with members who fulfilled her revised birth control strategy: one of increased professionalization. In particular, Sanger sought eugenicists who viewed birth control in terms of racial improvement and doctors who viewed birth control as a medical prerogative. Scouring lists of midwestern doctors and professors, Sanger hoped their participation — or at least sympathy — would increase the prestige of her movement and of her conference.<sup>81</sup> Many professionals would support Sanger's conference so long as it was "conservative and cautious."<sup>82</sup> Sanger would state that one of the chief purposes of the conference was "to awaken social workers, physicians and the public at large to their racial responsibility."<sup>83</sup> In particular, Sanger received wholehearted support from H.H. Laughlin, the assistant director of the Carnegie Institutions' Eugenics Record Office in New York City. While lauding her for her work in the movement thus far, Laughlin strongly advised Sanger:

. . . Make it much clearer in future policy and propaganda that *the purpose of birth control is eugenical* . . . its activities . . . should demand a higher birth rate among persons best endowed by

81. A few examples of doctors and professors whom she (not always successfully) attempted to recruit include Professor E.W. Burgess of the University of Chicago, Doctor John Ritter of Chicago, Professor Thomas D. Eliot of Northwestern University, Professor John Lewis Gillin of Oberlin College, Professor F.B. Bassett of University of Minnesota. See: American Birth Control League Records, Houghton Library, *Harvard University*, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

82. Professor Clarence C. Little to Clara Louise Rowe, 11 July 1923, folder 1, slide 74, American Birth Control League Records, Houghton Library, *Harvard University*, Cambridge, Massachusetts. Professor Little further suggested that being "conservative and cautious [would] insure the success of the program."

83. Margaret Sanger to Doctor Frieda Blanchard, 10 May 1923, folder 1, slide 75, American Birth Control League Records, Houghton Library, *Harvard University*, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

nature with fine mental, physical, and moral qualities, and at the same time, to *forbid and positively prevent reproduction* by the defective and degenerate family stock.<sup>84</sup>

In response to Laughlin's letter, Sanger wrote, ". . . this conference is going to do much to unite the Eugenic Movement and the Birth Control Movement, for *after all they should be and are the right and left hand of one body.*"<sup>85</sup> Sanger therefore believed—or was at least willing to feign—that eugenics and birth control were inextricably linked, thus affirming Laughlin's assertion that birth control activism should *demand* a higher birth rate among some and *positively prevent* conception among others. Once again, Sanger displaced women's rights in favor of an ideology that positively denied female reproductive autonomy.

Furthering the transition to a "white-tie" birth control movement,<sup>86</sup> Sanger held the October conference in the Drake Hotel's ballroom. Catering to eugenical interest, the lectures of the conference included, "Crime and Heredity," "The Cost in Dollars and Cents of Disease, Defect, Delinquency and Dependency," "Eugenics—The Super Race," and "Civilization at the Crossways."<sup>87</sup> Lacking were any remnants of Sanger's previous assertions of women's reproductive autonomy. Instead, as Carol McCann notes: "Women's sexual and reproductive self-determination

84. H.H. Laughlin to Margaret Sanger, 24 March 1923, folder 1, slide 80, American Birth Control League Records, Houghton Library, *Harvard University*, Cambridge, Massachusetts. [emphasis added]

85. Margaret Sanger to H.H. Laughlin, 7 September 1923, folder 1, slide 80, American Birth Control League Records, Houghton Library, *Harvard University*, Cambridge, Massachusetts. [emphasis added]

86. Gordon, *The Moral Property of Women*, 171.

87. Margaret Sanger, "The Middle Western States Birth Control Conference," *Birth Control Review*, September 1923, 238.



[became] supplanted by the economic ethic of fertility . . .”<sup>88</sup> While pandering to eugenically driven ideology, Sanger simultaneously endorsed medical dominance of contraceptive care. Notably, there was a private meeting exclusively for the medical profession on the second day of the conference.<sup>89</sup> Led by the conference’s physician chairman, the discussion focused on the care and methods of birth control. By privileging doctors exclusively for this discussion, Sanger confirmed a commitment to a movement that made women dependent on the medical establishment for birth control information and devices. Her constant yielding to professional interest helps to affirm Linda Gordon’s declaration: “Sanger’s leadership was an important factor in facilitating, even encouraging, the professionalization of the birth control movement.”<sup>90</sup>

As Sanger’s dedication to eugenics increased, the Illinois Birth Control League became apprehensive about supporting her national movement’s expansion. While IBCL president James Field initially agreed to help Sanger compile a list of a possible committee of sponsors for the conference,<sup>91</sup> after her request to write “a paper on the cost in dollars and cents of providing for the unfit,”<sup>92</sup> Field informed Sanger that he would be “a listener

88. McCann, *Birth Control Politics in the United States*, 62.

89. Clara Louise Rowe to Professor James A. Field, 26 June 1923, American Birth Control League Records, Houghton Library, *Harvard University*, Cambridge, Massachusetts; “Tentative Program of the Middle Western States Conference,” 1923, folder 1, slide 593, American Birth Control League Records, Houghton Library, *Harvard University*, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

90. Gordon, *The Moral Property of Women*, 177.

91. Professor James A. Field to Clara Louise Rowe, 17 May 1923, folder 1, slide 79, American Birth Control League Records, Houghton Library, *Harvard University*, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

92. Clara Louise Rowe to Professor James A. Field, 26 June 1923, American Birth Control League Records, Houghton Library, *Harvard University*, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

rather than a speaker."<sup>93</sup> Eventually, Field and the other members of the IBCL discontinued any efforts to enlist a committee of sponsors for the conference due to their ideological disagreements with Sanger.<sup>94</sup> While Field and other prominent IBCL members eventually compromised their repudiation of the conference by joining its committee, their relationship with Sanger would remain tense for many years after.<sup>95</sup>

Still, Sanger and the IBCL were able to develop a mutually beneficial relationship. The Chicago League's fight for their free clinic license created an advantageous opportunity for Sanger's conference. Much as Sanger's public trials aided in her growing notoriety, Sanger viewed the IBCL's legal dispute as a way to increase the movement's prominence in Chicago as well as to advocate the necessity of her upcoming conference. She lamented early in the conference's planning: "Everything seems to be going in a way which is rather discouraging at the present moment," but emphasized, "it is a wonderful and psychological time to hold the Conference in Chicago . . . we are quite convinced that a conference voicing the opinion of scientists and economists will do a great deal to put the Clinic over in [Chicago.]"<sup>96</sup> In later correspondence, she used the

93. Professor James A. Field to Clara Louise Rowe, 2 August 1923, folder 1, slide 79, American Birth Control League Records, Houghton Library, *Harvard University*, Cambridge Massachusetts.

94. Professor James A. Field to Clara Louise Rowe, 24 June 1923, folder 1, slide 79, American Birth Control League Records, Houghton Library, *Harvard University*, Cambridge, Massachusetts. Not only was Field's skepticism about birth control's argument "in terms of dollars and cents" a catalyst for this suspension, but also the IBCL's public and pronounced allegiance with Sanger's rival Mary Ware Dennett. The implications of this alliance will be addressed later in the paper.

95. Conference Committee list in: Margaret Sanger, "The Middle Western States Birth Control Conference," *Birth Control Review*, October 1923, 265.

96. Margaret Sanger to Professor Raymond Pearl, 28 August 1923, folder 1, slide 92, American Birth Control League Records, Houghton Library, *Harvard University*, Cambridge, Massachusetts.



Chicago clinic dispute to garner support from various doctors and academics, citing the urgency of the time.<sup>97</sup> Despite lacking an official alliance with the IBCL, Sanger repeatedly recorded the progress of the clinic dispute in her journal, *Birth Control Review*, making it her cause. A month after claiming that the conference planning was “rather discouraging at the moment,” Sanger professed in the September issue of *Birth Control Review*: “The [clinic license] controversy augurs much interest in Chicago for the Birth Control Conference of the Middle Western States . . .”<sup>98</sup> Although it is unclear what explicit effect the clinic dispute had on the conference’s recruitment, the extensive conference committee list indicates Sanger was somehow able to overcome her earlier discouragement.

While Sanger found ways to manipulate the IBCL’s legal dispute for her own gains, the IBCL appeared to find this public alliance beneficial as well. It was during the court case that the league officially changed its name from Parents’ Committee to Illinois Birth Control League. The IBCL may have found the increasing notoriety and acceptability of Sanger’s American Birth Control League advantageous. The Chicago League’s concession to join the conference committee seemed to pay off, as the conference publicly endorsed the efforts to establish a Birth Control Clinic in Chicago.<sup>99</sup> Further, it did seem to increase the league’s respectability, as prominent Chicago citizens attended the event, many

97. The recipients of her appeals included, but were not limited to, Luther Burbank, Raymond Pearl, and even renowned sexologist Havelock Ellis. See: American Birth Control League Records, folder 1, slide 92, Houghton Library, *Harvard University*, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

98. Margaret Sanger, “The Middle Western States Birth Control Conference,” *Birth Control Review*, October 1923, 265.

99. *Ibid.*, 320.

of whom would later join the IBCL's supporting council.<sup>100</sup> In particular, Hull House leader Jane Addams attended the event. Strikingly, Addams had refused to lend her name to the Parents' Committee in 1916, despite the involvement of other Hull House residents.<sup>101</sup> Addams presence at the conference (and presumably her growing approval of the birth control movement) indicates that birth control was beginning to become subsumed in the greater Chicago reformist agenda, affirming what Linda Gordon has noted: "People accustomed to working in respectable, even elegant, charity organizations joined the movement."<sup>102</sup> Consequently, birth control was moving from a "controversial cause" to yet another notch in Addams's (and other Chicago reformers') long list of charitable works.<sup>103</sup>

Yet despite striking a mutually beneficial compromise, Sanger and the IBCL persistently distrusted each other. Just a week after the conference concluded, Sanger professed quietly to a colleague: "You may not have understood that the group here in Chicago are not affiliated with our organization and it is quite possible that they do not want us to remain here to carry on our campaign of education."<sup>104</sup> Further, a letter from renowned British birth control activist Marie Stopes to Sanger during the conference suggests a complete disregard for the Chicago League's

100. Including, but not limited to, prominent doctors and professors in Chicago and Evanston. For complete list see: Bernice Guthmann, *The Planned Parenthood Movement in Illinois, 1923-1965* (Chicago: Planned Parenthood Association, 1965), 5.

101. Chesler, *Woman of Valor*, 171.

102. Gordon, *The Moral Property of Women*, 171.

103. Chesler, *Woman of Valor*, 171.

104. Margaret Sanger to Doctor Warner, 8 November 1923, folder 1, slide 107, American Birth Control League Records, Houghton Library, *Harvard University*, Cambridge, Massachusetts.



own efforts.<sup>105</sup> Stopes referred to IBCL member Ruth Porter as “[a] woman of infantile intelligence and little or no worldly experience.”<sup>106</sup> She advised Sanger: “You ought to cut these people [The Illinois Birth Control League] right out of your mind: they will simply go on from one blunder to another, and achieve little or nothing.”<sup>107</sup> Stopes continued: “. . . [they] couldn’t run an applecart without upsetting it.”<sup>108</sup> Stopes then discussed the logistics of a move to Chicago, where she would be employed by Sanger and run a “private Birth Control Clinic, sell [Sanger’s] books, take *paying* patients only, and have them treated by a *qualified medical practitioner* . . .”<sup>109</sup> In order to undermine the Chicago League, which challenged her own vision for the movement, Sanger was prepared to spend significant funds ensuring that her own movement would continue. While it is unclear what transpired during and after the conference that could have caused this sentiment, it is clear that either Sanger or the IBCL did not necessarily wish to sustain an ongoing professional relationship. Clearly, Sanger was willing to consider initiating a rival movement in Chicago, displacing the efforts of the IBCL. Astoundingly, Sanger was even willing to compromise the efficacy of Chicago’s preexisting organization in order to install one that assumed her agenda and ideology.<sup>110</sup>

105. The letter from Sanger to Stopes was not in the collection. I thus can only infer its content.

106. Marie Stopes to Margaret Sanger, 30 October 1923, folder 1, slide 105, American Birth Control League Records, Houghton Library, *Harvard University*, Cambridge, Massachusetts; Stopes continued her biting patronization of Ms. Porter: “I tried to let some daylight into what Mrs. Porter is no doubt pleased to regard as her ‘mind.’”

107. *Ibid.*

108. *Ibid.*

109. *Ibid.* [emphasis added]

110. Like Sanger, Marie Stopes has been widely noted for her overt eugenical ideology and allegiance to medical control of contraceptives. For more information

Less than one month after the Middle Western Birth Control Conference, the IBCL received the decision of the Cook County Circuit Court regarding their case. Raising hopes among IBCL members and other contraceptive compatriots, the presiding judge, Harry Fisher, decided in favor of the IBCL. Fisher's opinion was marked by Sanger as "another onward step in the Birth Control movement, for it sets a judicial seal of approval on several of the chief arguments of the advocates of this reform."<sup>111</sup> His opinion was printed and published in Sanger's *Birth Control Review* as well as distributed throughout the country in pamphlets. While Bundesen repeatedly had claimed that birth control "could [not] square with public policy,"<sup>112</sup> Judge Fisher rejected this rationale, giving the first judicial sanction for the establishment of a birth control clinic in the United States.<sup>113</sup> Despite this setback, Bundesen and his allies planned to appeal.

While IBCL vice president Helen Carpenter assured the *Chicago Tribune*, "the clinic [would] not be established . . . until every legal barrier had been surmounted,"<sup>114</sup> the IBCL went ahead and opened a "medical center" in order to begin clinic work before the case had been resolved. While free clinics had to be approved by the Department of Health, fee-based services from private physicians were not subject to the

on Stopes, see: Ruth E. Hall, *Passionate Crusader: The Life of Marie Stopes* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977).

111. Margaret Sanger, "Birth Control and Public Policy—Judicial Opinion of Judge Harry M. Fisher," *Birth Control Review*, June 1924, 165.

112. Commissioner of Health Herman N. Bundesen to Mrs. Helen G. Carpenter, 19 September 1923, folder 1, box 8, Planned Parenthood—Chicago Area Papers, *Chicago Historical Society*, Chicago, Illinois.

113. "Birth Control Clinic is Given Approval—Bundenen Loses Fight Before Fisher," *Chicago Tribune*, 24 November 1923, 3.

114. *Ibid.*



same scrutiny.<sup>115</sup> The IBCL could overcome their clinic's legal barrier by placing Rachele Yarros in charge of a private contraceptive center. The IBCL was aware of this loophole even before their legal dispute began, but sought the case against Bundesen and Dever regardless. President Field insisted to Mayor Dever that "[a pay clinic was] not the purpose of the Parents' Clinic organization."<sup>116</sup> The Parents' Committee originally formed in response to the hundreds of working-class women that desired contraceptive information. Field understood that these women, the majority of them often being too poor to afford private contraceptive care from discrete doctors, needed a *free* clinic. Still, by opening a fee-based center, the league could start providing contraceptive information — for a nominal fee.

While the IBCL's initial court victory created hope of birth control's legal legitimacy, the victory was short-lived. As the IBCL operated their first contraceptive center, Bundesen, still pursuing an appeal, sought an ordinance that would prohibit the dissemination of birth control information. This ordinance, aimed at the Illinois Birth Control League, would remove the legal loophole that allowed a contraceptive center to run, provided that it charged a fee. Bundesen sought to establish these contraceptives as "a public nuisance...subject to police suppression."<sup>117</sup> Although Bundesen failed to establish this ordinance, he would win his case in the appellate court. While the court did not decide whether "the operation of such a clinic would be against public policy and morals," the appellate judge did decree that the commissioner had not "abused the discretion allowed him by the law" when he refused to give the IBCL

115. Holz, *The Birth Control Clinic in America*, 40.

116. Professor James A. Field to Mayor William E. Dever, 27 September 1923, folder 1, box 8, Planned Parenthood — Chicago Area Papers, *Chicago Historical Society*, Chicago, Illinois.

117. "Seek Ordinance Against Birth Control League — Bundesen Finds Present Ban Inadequate," *Chicago Tribune*, 25 October 1924, 12.

its license for a clinic.<sup>118</sup> Although this legal battle had evolved primarily into an ideological battle, it left the IBCL particularly vulnerable. Despite the league's victory, city lawyers continued to seek some legal means of shutting their center.<sup>119</sup> Thus, the appellate court granted the commissioner the subjective power to regulate public morality in a way that he saw fit.<sup>120</sup>

By 1925, The Illinois Birth Control League had aggressively fought an ideological battle on two fronts: one against Bundesen and Chicago's Department of Health and one against Sanger's increasing dominance in the birth control movement. After the IBCL effectively maneuvered a loophole that allowed them to open a birth control clinic without the approval of the commissioner of health, their long and tireless legal battle became an ideological struggle. The league sought to affirm birth control's legitimacy, while Bundesen sought to prove its immorality. As Sanger increased her presence in Chicago, the IBCL became her target. In response, the IBCL initially asserted its own personal ideology and autonomy, frustrating Sanger's attempts to subsume the IBCL within her conference and within her vision for a national movement.

Neither battle ended favorably for the local league. While the IBCL preserved its birth control centers, it eventually lost the court case and with it lost any hope of a positive legal outcome. Concurrently, the IBCL only temporarily asserted its independence from Sanger's conference. Finding it advantageous to associate with Sanger's campaign, the league

118. "Birth Control Clinic Loses License Fight — Appellate Court Upholds Dr. Bundesen," *Chicago Tribune*, 4 February 1925, 21.

119. *Ibid.*

120. Regardless, the IBCL continued to open centers all over the city, including one that opened just a month after the Appellate court's decision. Parallel to the IBCL's struggle, Margaret Sanger opened her second clinic, the Birth Control Clinical Research Bureau across from ABCL headquarters in New York City in early 1923. As in Chicago, the clinic was refused a license by the New York State Board of Charities. See: Tone, *Devices and Desires*, 125.



participated in her conference, altered its name, and quietly gave some control over to Sanger. Effectively, losing the court case and conceding to Sanger's conference set the stage for yet another surrender of control over to Sanger's campaign.

### Stuck in the Middle: Dennett, Sanger, and the Illinois Birth Control League

Although Sanger and Doctor Stopes discussed opening a birth control clinic in Chicago independent of the Illinois Birth Control League, their personal and professional relationship was not always amicable. Two years before their discussed plan, Stopes wrote to Sanger, complaining that Sanger had "deeply wounded" her.<sup>121</sup> Visiting New York in 1921, Stopes sought a meeting with her American counterpart. Sanger, however, refused to see her. While Sanger claimed that she did not have time to meet, Stopes wrote in a letter to Sanger: "I should have thought no business more important than that we should meet."<sup>122</sup> Stopes, a renowned birth control activist in England, sought to form a relationship with Sanger, and thus begin to unite their two movements. Stopes surmised in her letter that Sanger's snub was due to Stopes's commitment to Mary Ware Dennett's movement.<sup>123</sup> Exasperated, Stopes insisted that a commitment to Dennett did not "imply opposition to [Sanger]"<sup>124</sup> Stopes asserted: "Anyone who claims that I am committed to one or the other political organization will lose my support. I will never be made the plaything of parties — my work is statesmanship — I am committed

121. Doctor Marie Stopes to Margaret Sanger, 29 October 1921, series 4, slide 291, Mary Ware Dennett Papers, Schlesinger Library, *Harvard University*, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

122. *Ibid.*

123. *Ibid.*

124. *Ibid.*

only and entirely to the Truth and to the best interests of humanity."<sup>125</sup> Rather than meet Stopes, Sanger decided initially to allow a petty rivalry with Dennett hinder efforts at international cooperation of the birth control movement.

Stopes's initial frustration with Sanger demonstrates the disunity of the birth control movement. Birth control sympathizers were forced to ally with either Sanger or Dennett: not both. For these women — particularly Sanger — compromise and cooperation were impossible. These two leading activists often inhibited or disrupted the work of the other due to their ideological differences. While Sanger embraced a medical and eugenical view of birth control by the 1920s, Dennett continued to advocate for changes in birth control's legal obscenity status. Yet, while ideological differences exacerbated the schism between the two women, personal ambition and ego contributed to the feud. Undoubtedly, their refusal to collaborate, or even cooperate, harmed the efficacy of the national birth control movement: it partitioned membership, funds, sponsors, and morale. Stopes recognized the threat of this political segregation, and refused to participate. Declaring she would not "be made the plaything of parties,"<sup>126</sup> Stopes resisted becoming a political tool of either Dennett or Sanger.

While the Illinois Birth Control League initially sided with Dennett and the Voluntary Parenthood League, their collaboration with Sanger on the Middle Western Birth Control Conference initiated a professional relationship with her and the American Birth Control League. For many years, the IBCL could negotiate — though tensely — between both organizations. While the IBCL felt a personal and ideological alliance with Dennett, it was advantageous organizationally to maintain a professional relationship with Sanger, as she was increasingly strengthening her national power. However, once Sanger began her campaign for a legislative bill that would exempt doctors from Comstock's obscenity act, the IBCL

125. *Ibid.*

126. *Ibid.*



could no longer avoid the movement's feud. The IBCL's ideological alliance with Dennett's anti-obscenity campaign would clash with Sanger's "doctors only" legislative crusade. The league's subsequent decision would mark one of their last attempts to remain autonomous from Sanger's national movement. Rather than act upon personal conviction, IBCL president Helen Carpenter negotiated between the two leaders of the movement's national campaign. The Chicago League's inevitable decision between Sanger and Dennett demonstrates its transition from a local autonomous league to a league deeply embedded in the birth control movement's national politics.

Mary Ware Dennett arose out of a political background similar to Sanger's, but would eventually come to favor an opposing strategy in the birth control movement. Dennett was raised in, and married into, respectable upper-class society. However, when she divorced her husband, she sought a new and refreshing scene. Thus, she moved to New York City and was thrust into the bohemian and socialist scene in New York City.<sup>127</sup> Influenced by her socialist surroundings, Dennett became critical of private property, believing it to be the cause of many social ills.<sup>128</sup> Like many other radicals of the time, Dennett accepted a "modern" view of sex, which hailed a new vision of women's sexual behavior: one disassociated from reproduction.<sup>129</sup> Before starting her own birth control league, Dennett worked for numerous organizations such as the National American Woman Suffrage Association, American Union Against Militarism, League for Progressive Democracy, as well as the Woman's Peace Party. For Dennett, birth control fit into a greater agenda that sought to address larger inequalities within society.

Margaret Sanger and Mary Ware Dennett's rivalry has become an intense subject of debate for birth control scholars. For historians David

127. Chen, "The Sex Side of Life," 150–151.

128. Ibid.

129. Ibid., 157.

Kennedy and James Reed, Sanger's attempt to dominate the birth control movement was an earnest attempt to *protect* women and provide safe and effective birth control. Dennett's approach — to remove birth control from obscenity and allow information to flow freely — would endanger women by exposing them to “quack” doctors who peddled ineffective birth control through the mail. In contrast, Sanger's “doctor only” policy would insure that women would receive safe contraceptives and reliable guidance.<sup>130</sup> For Linda Gordon, Andrea Tone, and Constance Chen, Sanger's approach had two negative repercussions for women. First, “it removed the technique of contraception from a woman's control” and “created a medical monopoly over birth control.”<sup>131</sup> Second, keeping birth control obscene would “only hurt those who needed help most.”<sup>132</sup> More specifically, it would limit access to birth control to those who could afford medical care. By keeping contraceptive in the hands of physicians, it would omit women who were unable to afford health care. In contrast, Dennett's anti-obscenity approach “might have made contraceptives *universally* safe and accessible.”<sup>133</sup> Chen, Gordon, and Tone all argue that Sanger depicted birth control as a medical prerogative in order to consolidate her own control within the movement. An underlying theme in these two factions of scholarship is whether women possessed the ability to understand birth control methods and to use them properly without the aid of doctors or other professionals. Kennedy and Reed believe that

130. See: David M. Kennedy, *Birth Control in America: The Career of Margaret Sanger* (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 1970) 218–224; James Reed, *From Private Vice to Public Virtue: The Birth Control Movement and American Society Since 1830* (New York: Basic Books, 1978), 97–105.

131. Gordon, *The Moral Property of Women*, 183–184.; For Sanger's struggle with Dennett, see pages 183–185.

132. Constance M. Chen, “*The Sex Side of Life*”: *Mary Ware Dennett's Pioneering Battle for Birth Control and Sex Education* (New York: New Press, 1996), 213. For the “Dennett vs. Sanger” dispute, see pages 205–222.

133. Tone, *Devices and Desires*, 126.



Sanger's medicalization of birth control was an attempt to "protect" women, whereas Tone, Chen, and Gordon believe this approach limited birth control access and treated the majority of women, especially working class women, as incapable of properly using contraceptives. These opposing views mirror the debate that occurred between Sanger and Dennett.

Sanger and Dennett's antagonism began in 1916. While Sanger was in exile,<sup>134</sup> Dennett established and led the National Birth Control League (NBCL).<sup>135</sup> Dennett strongly believed in fighting for birth control "through legal channels."<sup>136</sup> Dennett's campaign always emphasized changes to state and federal law that would make birth control dissemination legal. In contrast, Sanger's earliest campaign revolved around violating the law. By publishing birth control magazines and pamphlets considered "obscene" by the Comstock Act, Sanger disregarded the law in favor of more direct action.<sup>137</sup> Increasing her challenge to birth control law, Sanger decided to open the Brownsville Clinic in Brooklyn and sought an official endorsement from the NBCL. When the NBCL refused—due to Dennett's strict adherence to changing the law rather than breaking it—Sanger's grudge set in.<sup>138</sup> In retaliation, the Browns-

134. Sanger fled the United States in 1915 when she faced trial for violating Comstock's anti-obscenity law for her publication *Family Limitation*, which offered birth control instruction; Tone, *Devices and Desires*, 120.

135. Melissa Doak and Rachel Brugger, "How Did the Debate Between Margaret Sanger and Mary Ware Dennett Shape the Movement to Legalize Birth Control, 1915–1924?" *Women and Social Movements in the United States, 1600–2000*, <http://asp6new.alexanderstreet.com/was2/was2.object.details.aspx?dorpid=1000675755>.

136. *Ibid.*

137. Two examples of her illegal published materials were *Family Limitation*, about which she faced trial in 1915, and *The Woman Rebel*.

138. Sanger's clinic was illegal under New York law. As mentioned above, the clinic was shut down and Sanger was arrested a mere ten days after its opening.

ville Clinic became a powerful tool with which to challenge the NBCL for leadership in the birth control movement.<sup>139</sup> Indeed, Sanger's subsequent trial and incarceration would enhance her publicity, making her the preeminent face of the birth control struggle. Just two years later, the NBCL would disintegrate due to financial strain. Undeterred, Dennett formed the Voluntary Parenthood League the same year. Dennett even invited Sanger to serve on the VPL's executive committee, but Sanger turned her down.<sup>140</sup>

Before long, "the schism began to grow embarrassing."<sup>141</sup> In 1921, Sanger established the American Birth Control League, arguably to compete with Dennett and the VPL for leadership of the movement.<sup>142</sup> Not long after, Sanger issued a written statement condemning Dennett and effectively banishing her from Sanger's movement. The statement was quoted in Sanger's *Birth Control Review*:

[The VPL] is not entitled to have any space given in the [*Birth Control*] *Review* to any of its activities or accomplishments, or to any of the views of its members or representatives. Even news items concerning work done by the VPL for Birth Control in general are not considered as of any interest to the readers of the *Review* as such, and hence are not invited nor likely to be used.<sup>143</sup>

139. Kennedy, *Birth Control in America*, 84.

140. Chen, "The Sex Side of Life," 212.

141. *Ibid.*, 213.

142. Melissa Doak and Rachel Brugger, "How Did the Debate Between Margaret Sanger and Mary Ware Dennett Shape the Movement to Legalize Birth Control, 1915–1924?" *Women and Social Movements in the United States, 1600–2000*, <http://asp6new.alexanderstreet.com/was2/was2.object.details.aspx?dorpId=1000675755>.

143. *Ibid.* [emphasis added]



Some historians have suggested that Sanger's "competitive and controlling nature" exacerbated the rift between the two women.<sup>144</sup> While correspondence between the two women has demonstrated that Dennett attempted to behave diplomatically, Sanger continually rebuffed Dennett's "sporadic efforts at reconciliation."<sup>145</sup> Sanger's refusal to acknowledge the VPL's "activities or accomplishments" posited her own accomplishments as pivotal and Dennett's as inconsequential. It is possible that Sanger would rather a rival birth control campaign fail than succeed and challenge her dominant presence in the birth control movement.

One particular point where Sanger and Dennett's ideologies clashed was over legislation. Dennett's tactics revolved exclusively around altering the law. Thus, legislative change was initially her exclusive expertise within the movement; a strategy that the younger Sanger distained as a "bourgeois . . . affair."<sup>146</sup> By 1924, Dennett had successfully introduced the Cummins-Vaile bill into the senate. Despite the pleas of numerous birth control supporters, Sanger refused to support the bill.<sup>147</sup> Yet her lack of support did not stem from disapproval of the legislative method. While Sanger had initially rebuffed Dennett's legislative strategy, it did not stop her from attempting it herself.<sup>148</sup> Despite assurance that she

144. Ibid.

145. Ibid.

146. Kennedy, *Birth Control in America*, 93.

147. Margaret Sanger to James A. Field, 13 August 1923, folder 1, slide 84, Houghton Library, *Harvard University*, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

148. In particular Northwestern University professor Thomas Eliot begged Sanger not to introduce a competing bill, citing that there was "a reasonable division of labor between the VPL and the ABCL," and "It would be extremely unfortunate if members of congress were give any opportunity to dodge their responsibilities on the ground that there is a *division of forces* in respect to federal legislation;" Thomas D. Eliot to Margaret Sanger, 13 November 1923, folder 1, slide 130, Houghton Library, *Harvard University*, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

would not attempt to introduce a competing bill,<sup>149</sup> Sanger sent ABCL secretary Anne Kennedy to Washington to investigate the possibility of an ABCL-sponsored, federal, doctors only bill.<sup>150</sup> Regardless, neither bill even made it beyond congressional committee. Significantly, Sanger reversed her previous denunciation of Dennett's legal strategy. In fact, her involvement in legislative change would only increase over time. Perhaps it was the opportunity to increase her presence in the movement — and consequently challenge Dennett's campaign further — that altered Sanger's previous repudiation of Dennett's tactics.

The form that a birth control bill should take caused animosity between the women as well. Dennett favored an "open bill" that would remove birth control from the obscenity list altogether because, according to Dennett, "allowing birth control information to be circulated through the mail would guarantee access to all women, even those who could not afford a physician."<sup>151</sup> In contrast, Sanger argued that "every woman should have individual guidance from a doctor in order to ensure that the methods used would be safe and effective."<sup>152</sup> Dennett, however, believed that Sanger's strategy encouraged "class and special-privilege legislation" and would establish a "medical monopoly" in contraception.<sup>153</sup> While Sanger rebutted Dennett's assertion by indicating the danger that unregulated birth control information could cause women,

149. Margaret Sanger to Thomas D. Eliot, 15 November 1923, folder 1, slide 130, Houghton Library, *Harvard University*, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

150. Kennedy, *Birth Control in America*, 223.

151. Dennett qtd. in Melissa Doak and Rachel Brugger, "How Did the Debate Between Margaret Sanger and Mary Ware Dennett Shape the Movement to Legalize Birth Control, 1915–1924?" *Women and Social Movements in the United States, 1600–2000*, <http://asp6new.alexanderstreet.com/was2/was2.object.details.aspx?dorpId=1000675755>.

152. *Ibid.*

153. Reed, *From Private Vice to Public Virtue*, 101.



she also believed: "Allowing the medical profession control over the dissemination of contraception and contraceptive information would lessen their hostility toward birth control and associate it with science. Nothing else would bring the movement as much prestige."<sup>154</sup> Thus, Sanger could help to ensure women's reproductive safety, as well as enhance the respectability of her own movement.

By 1929, the Voluntary Parenthood League had all but disbanded, arguably, because of the funding issues caused by Sanger's ceaseless attacks on Dennett and the organization. Further, after 1928 Sanger no longer formally commanded the American Birth Control League. Due to creative differences between Sanger and the ABCL board of directors, Sanger submitted her resignation as president.<sup>155</sup> Still, the feud persisted. Subsequently, the Illinois Birth Control League's involvement with both women would reach an impasse. The relationship of Sanger to the IBCL had warmed significantly over six years, at least professionally. For example, when Sanger launched a nationally organized lobbying effort to amend the federal Comstock law, it was from the home of IBCL president Helen Carpenter.<sup>156</sup> The National Committee on Federal Legislation for Birth Control was established in April 1929, with Carpenter serving as vice chairman.<sup>157</sup>

154. Melissa Doak and Rachel Brugger, "How Did the Debate Between Margaret Sanger and Mary Ware Dennett Shape the Movement to Legalize Birth Control, 1915–1924?" *Women and Social Movements in the United States, 1600–2000*, <http://asp6new.alexanderstreet.com/was2/was2.object.details.aspx?dorpId=1000675755>.

155. Chesler, *Woman of Valor*, 238.

156. Tragically, former IBCL president James Field died at the age of forty-seven in 1927 from pneumonia. Carpenter assumed leadership after his passing. See: James A. Field, *Essays on Population and Other Papers* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1931), xxviii.

157. Kennedy, *Birth Control in America*, 224.

While historian Ellen Chesler has argued that Sanger effectively persuaded members of the IBCL to forego an alliance with Dennett during the Middle Western Birth Control Conference, Carpenter maintained correspondence with Dennett well into the 1930s.<sup>158</sup> Even after hosting Sanger's committee in 1929, Carpenter wrote to Dennett: "I feel more strongly than ever that contraception should be taken from the list of obscenities and I think with the change in public opinion it would not be too difficult to accomplish."<sup>159</sup> Having received the proposed bill in late February, Carpenter reconsidered her professional relationship with Sanger. Dissatisfied with Sanger's staunchly "doctors only" approach, Carpenter convened the leaders of the Illinois Birth Control League in order to form a resolution. Writing Sanger two weeks later, Carpenter affirmed that the directors of the Illinois Birth Control League and the Chicago League's medical council were overwhelmingly for the open bill. Carpenter claimed this was a view that Sanger knew she had always held.<sup>160</sup> Consequently, Carpenter decided that she could not remain as vice chairman of Sanger's committee, for she could no longer favor the bill. Thus, Carpenter resigned from the Committee on Federal Legislation for Birth Control and the IBCL resolved not to participate in any part of Sanger's campaign for the bill's passage.<sup>161</sup>

158. Chesler, *Woman of Valor*, 227.

159. Helen Carpenter to Mary Ware Dennett, 8 March 1930, series 4, slide 343, Mary Ware Dennett Papers, Schlesinger Library, *Harvard University*, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

160. Carpenter continued that the bill "*cannot command the cordial support of our organization* [the IBCL]" Helen Carpenter to Margaret Sanger, 13 March 1930, series 4, slide 343, Mary Ware Dennett Papers, Schlesinger Library, *Harvard University*, Cambridge, Massachusetts. [emphasis added]

161. Mrs. Nathan S. Davis III to Margaret Sanger, 14 March 1930, series 4, slide 343, Mary Ware Dennett Papers, Schlesinger Library, *Harvard University*, Cambridge, Massachusetts.



Despite cultivating a professional relationship with Sanger, Carpenter and the IBCL never relinquished their original birth control ideology. Neither Dennett nor Carpenter believed that the medical profession should monopolize birth control. In contrast, Sanger advocated for doctor-controlled contraceptives. While Sanger apparently understood Carpenter's views from the beginning, she still collaborated with Carpenter and the IBCL. Perhaps, Sanger's tolerance stemmed from her desire for Chicago's participation and endorsement. Regardless, once Carpenter revealed her resolution, Sanger refused her cordiality. Writing to Dennett days after their resolution, Carpenter revealed: "Mrs. Sanger was in Chicago for a few hours yesterday but evidently did not care to see me, for she was very much engaged with important business."<sup>162</sup> While this could be a valid excuse, it rings of Sanger's excuse to Stopes, for whom she could also not "find time." While Sanger may have been able to tolerate private viewpoints that differed from her own, public opposition—or a public alliance with Dennett—was an unforgivable transgression.<sup>163</sup> As Carpenter expressed to Dennett, "I am irretrievably on her black list."<sup>164</sup>

Even if the IBCL withdrew support from Sanger's political campaign, it did not mean that they wished to inhibit her progress. Carpenter wrote to Dennett that she did not want letters she received from doctors who

162. Helen Carpenter to Mary Ware Dennett, 18 March 1930, series 4, slide 343, Mary Ware Dennett Papers, Schlesinger Library, *Harvard University*, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

163. Carpenter announced the IBCL's favor for an "open bill," as opposed to Sanger's "doctors only" bill, in their 1929 Annual Report. Thus publicly withdrawing support from Sanger's cause. See: Helen Carpenter, "The Annual Report of the Illinois Birth Control League," 30 April 1930, series 4, slide 343, Mary Ware Dennett Papers, Schlesinger Library, *Harvard University*, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

164. Helen Carpenter to Mary Ware Dennett, 26 July 1930, series 4, slide 343, Mary Ware Dennett Papers, Schlesinger Library, *Harvard University*, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

opposed Sanger's bill given "undue publicity."<sup>165</sup> She further resolved: "There is no use in emphasizing the fact that we are against the bill. I think it is a mistake to run an opposition party."<sup>166</sup> Still, while Dennett refused to introduce competitive anti-obscenity bills during Sanger's legislative campaigns, it did not inhibit her from "educating" people from Sanger's "doctor only" stance to her "open bill" position. Dennett revealed to Carpenter, "the V.P.L. . . . will continue its quiet educational work among leaders of opinion . . . the Northern California Birth Control Committee . . . has come out overwhelmingly for the clean repeal . . . *the yeast is working*"<sup>167</sup> Dennett actively sought to remove other's support from Sanger's strategy and convert them to her own, thereby merely shifting alliance within the movement rather than expanding its power. Although Dennett and Carpenter refused to participate in the sort of public smear campaign that Sanger often employed against Dennett, they still exacerbated the ideological schism of the movement.

Although Carpenter initially believed that the IBCL could never endorse Sanger's "doctors only" bill, by 1931 Carpenter and the IBCL had a complete turnabout. Much to Dennett's chagrin, the IBCL reversed its year-old decision to withdraw all support from Sanger's bill.<sup>168</sup> Carpenter was resigned, ". . . the bill is good so far as it goes . . ."<sup>169</sup> She went on to explain:

165. Helen Carpenter to Mary Ware Dennett, 18 March 1930, series 4, slide 343, Mary Ware Dennett Papers, Schlesinger Library, *Harvard University*, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

166. *Ibid.*

167. Mary Ware Dennett to Helen Carpenter, 16 July 1930, series 4, slide 343, Mary Ware Dennett Papers, Schlesinger Library, *Harvard University*, Cambridge Massachusetts. [emphasis added]

168. Mary Ware Dennett to Helen Carpenter, 20 February 1931, series 4, slide 343, Mary Ware Dennett Papers, Schlesinger Library, *Harvard University*, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

169. Helen Carpenter to Mary Ware Dennett, 16 February 1931, series 4, slide 343, Mary Ware Dennett Papers, Schlesinger Library, *Harvard University*, Cambridge, Massachusetts.



Careful as we have all been to avoid a public break with Mrs. Sanger a number of people have written that if a break has come they will, of course, go with Mrs. Sanger and against the . . . League. This I think is an unfortunate situation, it does not help our cause to have dissensions in the ranks, and while it is difficult, even impossible, to work with Mrs. Sanger still I think we must try to hold things together.<sup>170</sup>

While the IBCL had always wished to avoid becoming an “opposition party,” they were now coerced from passive disapproval into unwilling cooperation. While Carpenter and the IBCL were still “unanimously for the open bill,”<sup>171</sup> they no longer felt that their resistance was viable.

Although it cannot be known what Sanger’s explicit role in the IBCL’s shift was, it is feasible that she could have somehow threatened the league. Returning to Marie Stopes, Sanger first snubbed Stopes, and then proceeded to threaten her career when Stopes publicly supported Dennett. In 1921, when Stopes arrived in the United States to publicize her new book and to speak under the auspices of the VPL, Sanger “began sending Stopes letters attempting to dissuade her from any association with Mary Ware Dennett . . . Threatening to withdraw support for Stopes’ book if she associated with the VPL.”<sup>172</sup> Similarly, Carpenter told Dennett that she was “irretrievably on [Sanger’s] black list” and soon thereafter the IBCL felt that they had no other choice but to support Sanger’s bill.<sup>173</sup> While birth control was Sanger’s life passion, the drive for leadership consumed her. As one of her former coworkers articulated:

170. Ibid.

171. Ibid.

172. Chen, “*The Sex Side of Life*,” 220.

173. Helen Carpenter to Mary Ware Dennett, 26 July 1930, series 4, slide 343, Mary Ware Dennett Papers, Schlesinger Library, *Harvard University*, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

As far as her cause was concerned, Margaret Sanger counted 1,3,4,5. She was number one, and there was no number two, she would let no one approach her that closely. When Mary Ware Dennett had the effrontery to claim to be another number one, she became Margaret's enemy *who had to be vanquished at all costs*.<sup>174</sup>

Likewise, Dennett's associates would have to submit to Sanger's leadership, or be "vanquished" as well.

Starting off as an organization independent — even defiant — of Sanger's leadership, the Illinois Birth Control League eventually became enveloped within her political power and national movement. While it is possible that Sanger may have bullied the league, other factors also contributed to the IBCL's eventual acquiescence. As Carpenter mentioned, if the league publicly broke with Sanger, many of their supporters would "go with Mrs. Sanger . . ." <sup>175</sup> As Sanger's national prominence grew, it became increasingly difficult to sustain a movement apart from her. Sanger effectively garnered the majority of birth control's sympathizers. Monopolizing the movement, it also became difficult, if not impossible, for other organizations to oppose her tactics. The league's initial resistance to Sanger's bill would be its last autonomous stand. Indeed, the IBCL *acts* very little within this saga. Stuck in between two powerful women, Carpenter and the IBCL were tossed between them rather than acting autonomously. While established independently of Sanger, and even initially defiant of her control, the IBCL eventually became subsumed within her movement, and thus lost much of its independence.

174. Chen, "The Sex Side of Life," 221.

175. Helen Carpenter to Mary Ware Dennett, 16 February 1931, series 4, slide 343, Mary Ware Dennett Papers, Schlesinger Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts.



Further, some scholars have argued that Sanger's adherence to "doctors only" birth control was merely a strategy to assume uncontested leadership of the movement.<sup>176</sup> Indeed, assuming a strategy of professionalization did give Sanger's movement great respectability among the public, and thus wider support. However, Sanger continued to distribute birth control information at her own discretion, despite the fact that she was not a doctor.<sup>177</sup> While she refused to tolerate any other method of birth control activism, she would not personally adhere to this strategy.<sup>178</sup> Sanger certainly did promote professionalization of birth control but, as Linda Gordon argues, she merely "encouraged a trend that would have happened without her."<sup>179</sup> Sanger's strategy may have been an attempt to gain control and prestige within the movement, but it very well was the only option for Sanger to remain relevant. As professionals gained prestige in society, Sanger may have been forced to ally with their growing power, or to be left behind.<sup>180</sup> Regardless, while this strategy catapulted her to uncontested leadership, it would have lasting repercussions for the fate of female contraception.

176. Chen, "The Sex Side of Life," 221; Gordon, *The Moral Property of Women*, 208.

177. Chen, "The Sex Side of Life," 216.

178. Mary Ware Dennett once claimed that Sanger opposed the "open bill" because "the federal bill will make it possible for doctors to publish, and their books would put Mrs. Sanger out of business. A fact she well knows. Her books on method would have no great market when once the real scientists were in the field." See: Anne Kennedy to Mary Ware Dennett, "Reply from the American Birth Control League re: endorsing Cummins-V. Bill with marginal comment by M.W.D.," 6 June 1923, series 4, slide 326, Mary Ware Dennett Papers, Schlesinger Library, *Harvard University*, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

179. Gordon, *The Moral Property of Women*, 178.

180. *Ibid.*, 208.

## Conceding to a Professional Agenda: The IBCL and the State of Contraception

In her brief history of the birth control movement in Chicago, Bernice Guthmann describes the ascension of Mrs. Stanley G. Harris to the IBCL presidency as “a new phase of growth.”<sup>181</sup> Once President Carpenter stepped down in 1937, the “professional direction” of the league began.<sup>182</sup> This professional direction included the induction of a “professional director” as well as securing a “professional medical staff.”<sup>183</sup> The operative word here is “professional.” While the original league resisted the “professional” ideology espoused by Sanger in the 1920s, the new generation of league leaders would embrace wholeheartedly and overtly the rhetoric of professionalism. Once Carpenter conceded to supporting Sanger’s federal bill in 1931, there was little chance that the IBCL would challenge Sanger or the ABCL’s national authority again. By the time Carpenter stepped down, all original members of the Parents’ Committee had either passed on or resigned. In 1941, the ABCL officially changed to its current name, Planned Parenthood. Not long after, the Illinois Birth Control League also would change to the Illinois Planned Parenthood League.<sup>184</sup> The independently run Parents’ Committee had officially become a cog within Sanger’s envisioned national machine.

Examining local leagues just after Carpenter stepped down, Rose Holz provides an illuminating account of the relationship between local leagues and the American Birth Control League in her article, “Nurse Gordon on Trial: Those Early Days of the Birth Control Clinic Movement Reconsidered.” Soon after Carpenter’s concession to support

181. Bernice J. Guthmann, *The Planned Parenthood Movement in Illinois, 1923–1965* (Chicago: Planned Parenthood Association, 1965), 6.

182. *Ibid.*, 7.

183. *Ibid.*

184. *Ibid.*, 8.



Sanger's federal bill, the ABCL began a campaign to distinguish between "ABCL certified clinics" and "irregular clinics." The intent of ABCL certification was twofold. First, it sought to solidify the ABCL's monopoly over the movement. By becoming the source of "certification," the ABCL could control the fate of local leagues: "Without certification, the local leagues would lack "authenticity."<sup>185</sup> Second, by creating standards of certification, the ABCL "hoped to establish its clinics' allegiance to the professional medical world."<sup>186</sup> Still seeking an official endorsement from the American Medical Association, the ABCL simultaneously fought for the legitimacy of birth control and the legitimacy of its clinics. Adhering to a strict, standardized clinic system that placed clinics under "direct medical control," the ABCL finally gained AMA recognition in 1937.<sup>187</sup> However, the certification strategy came at a cost. As Holz describes: "Despite the organization's efforts to encourage the establishment of clinics elsewhere in the nation, its push for certification meant simultaneously the vilification of those which did not adhere to its new rules."<sup>188</sup> The ABCL had finally achieved what the IBCL had for so long resisted: Sanger's homogenized birth control movement that favored a "medical monopoly" of contraceptives and clinics.

Yet while Sanger arguably solidified her legacy in the birth control movement with the AMA's official endorsement, she continued to demonstrate a privately ambiguous adherence to "doctors only" ideology. When a nurse (Adele Gordon) running an "irregular clinic" was arrested and faced trial, she wrote to Sanger for legal and emotional support. While Sanger should have denounced her efforts (as she ran a clinic without "direct medical control"), Sanger instead declared: "In the time

185. Rose Holz, "Nurse Gordon on Trial: Those Early Days of the Birth Control Clinic Movement Reconsidered," *Journal of Social History* 39 (2005): 127.

186. *Ibid.*, 114.

187. *Ibid.*

188. *Ibid.*, 129.

of attack . . . we must all stand together and fight the enemy.”<sup>189</sup> Sanger very well may have felt akin to Nurse Gordon who, like Sanger, was a “good trained nurse.”<sup>190</sup> Having opened her first clinic in Brownsville in 1916 without medical supervision, Sanger knew firsthand that nurses (like herself) were more than capable of conducting birth control clinics without a doctor’s command. Sanger’s quiet correspondence with Nurse Gordon further suggests that her unwavering public adherence to “doctors only” birth control was more a strategic decision than a personal ideological commitment.

Nevertheless, Sanger’s strategic decision had lasting repercussions for the ABCL as well as “irregular” birth control clinics. Though Sanger was willing to support Gordon’s actions privately, her former organization was not. New ABCL president Marguerite Benson refused Nurse Gordon’s pleas for public support. In fact, the *Birth Control Review* did not even mention Gordon’s trial or subsequent acquittal.<sup>191</sup> Instead, an article published in *BCR* soon after Gordon’s acquittal “lambasted the irregular clinic movement.”<sup>192</sup> Although the article does not mention Gordon by name, the timing of the article is telling. Receiving medical endorsement aided in the movement’s acceptability, but consequently the ABCL disavowed any clinic that could threaten its image of medical professionalism.

Returning to Chicago, Guthmann’s description of the IBCL’s “new phase of growth” fits the trends outlined by Holz. Emphasizing its “professional direction,” the IBCL posed as a “certified clinic” under the guidance of ABCL’s national movement. Thus, the transformation was complete. Starting independently as the Parents’ Committee, the IBCL slowly conceded completely to Sanger’s movement. Like Sanger,

189. *Ibid.*, 126.

190. Sanger qtd. in Holz, “Nurse Gordon on Trial,” 125.

191. Holz, “Nurse Gordon on Trial,” 128.

192. *Ibid.*



the IBCL was willing to maintain a public persona that may have contradicted its private beliefs. The IBCL maintained an alliance with Mary Ware Dennett for almost fifteen years. While Sanger begrudgingly tolerated this allegiance, she could no longer quietly abide it when the IBCL publicly denounced Sanger's legislative bill efforts in favor of Dennett's. Although it is unknown what particularly forced Carpenter to rescind her alliance with Dennett's "open bill," evidence exists that suggests it could have been pressure from Sanger. Thus, Sanger's fraught relationship with the IBCL demonstrates numerous things about the birth control movement. First, there was no unified birth control movement. While previous scholarship has emphasized the discord between Sanger and Dennett, the friction between leaders stretched far from the national movement into local organizations. Second, Sanger's personal aspirations to achieve uncontested leadership in the movement resulted in the highly medicalized birth control that exists for women today. Finally, discord between leaders would inevitably harm the efficacy of the movement. Sanger and Dennett, along with Chicago's leaders, often withheld support or aid to factions of the movement that did not fit their personal ideal. While in 1917 Chicago offered a viable alternative to the national movement, it could not maintain its local autonomy.

Sanger relentlessly demonized an open market for birth control in the 1920s, preferring that it be in the hands of the medical profession.<sup>193</sup> Consequently, doctors remain the sole purveyors of female contraceptives today. The Norplant implant, the Depo-Provera injection, the progesterone vaginal ring, and — overwhelmingly the most popular — the contraceptive pill all require a doctor's prescription.<sup>194</sup> As a result, these

193. Tone, *Devices and Desires*, 292.

194. The only female contraceptive that does *not* require a prescription is the vaginal condom. Unfortunately, it is not even remotely popular. Women complain that it is "big and bulky" and that it "makes [them] squeamish." Further, at three dollars per condom, it hardly acts as a cheaper alternative to prescription birth control. See: Tone, *Devices and Desires*, 285–286.

methods favor women who have access to medical care and possess the means to pay for medication, ultimately perpetuating the same problem that Dennett warned of nearly a century ago: that a medical monopoly of contraceptives would hurt the women who needed birth control the most. As in the 1920s, poor women today are forced to negotiate a desire to control their reproduction with a budget that hardly allows for it. To address truly the needs of women who lack sufficient resources, there need to be inexpensive over-the-counter options.<sup>195</sup> While the Illinois Birth Control League sought to provide free birth control services and fought for open contraceptive information, its inability to maintain its autonomous local movement inevitably diminished this original goal. But, the IBCL must be lauded for its successes and longevity. It successfully opened numerous clinics throughout Chicago and provided thousands of women with the contraceptive consultation they desired, even if for a fee. Further, the IBCL effectively transitioned to Planned Parenthood, and continues its work providing contraceptive services today. Still, the working-class women that swarmed the Chicago stock yards to demand contraceptive information nearly a century ago ultimately did not realize their dream, and many women today share the same reproductive struggles. ■

195. Tone, *Devices and Desires*, 292.



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BIRTH CONTROL MEETING  
IN HONOR OF

# Margaret Sanger

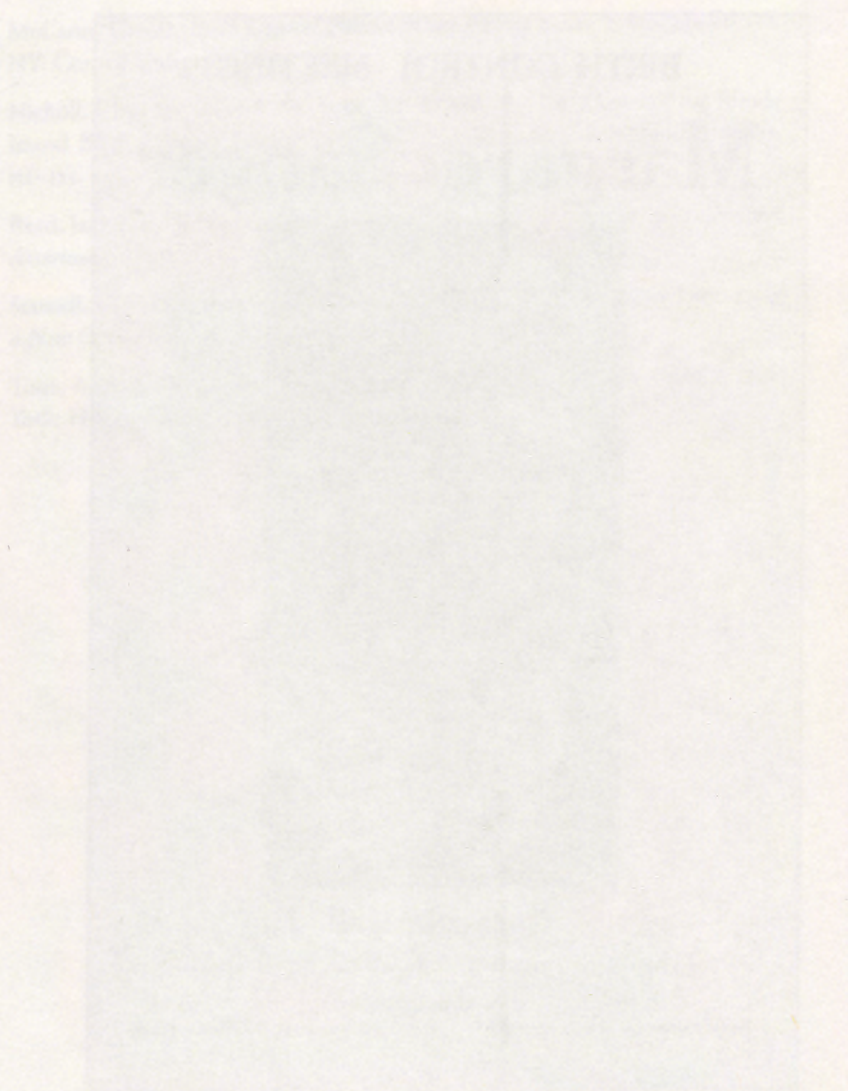


Carnegie Hall  
Monday, January 29, 1917, at 8 P.M.

Admission 25 cents  
Reserved Seats, 50 and 75 cents      Boxes Seating 8 Persons, \$10.00

The portrait detail of Margaret Sanger shown on page 296 is taken from the poster reprinted above. Courtesy of the Margaret Sanger Papers, New York University.





Cover: Aerial view of Chicago © Vito Palmisano/Getty Images