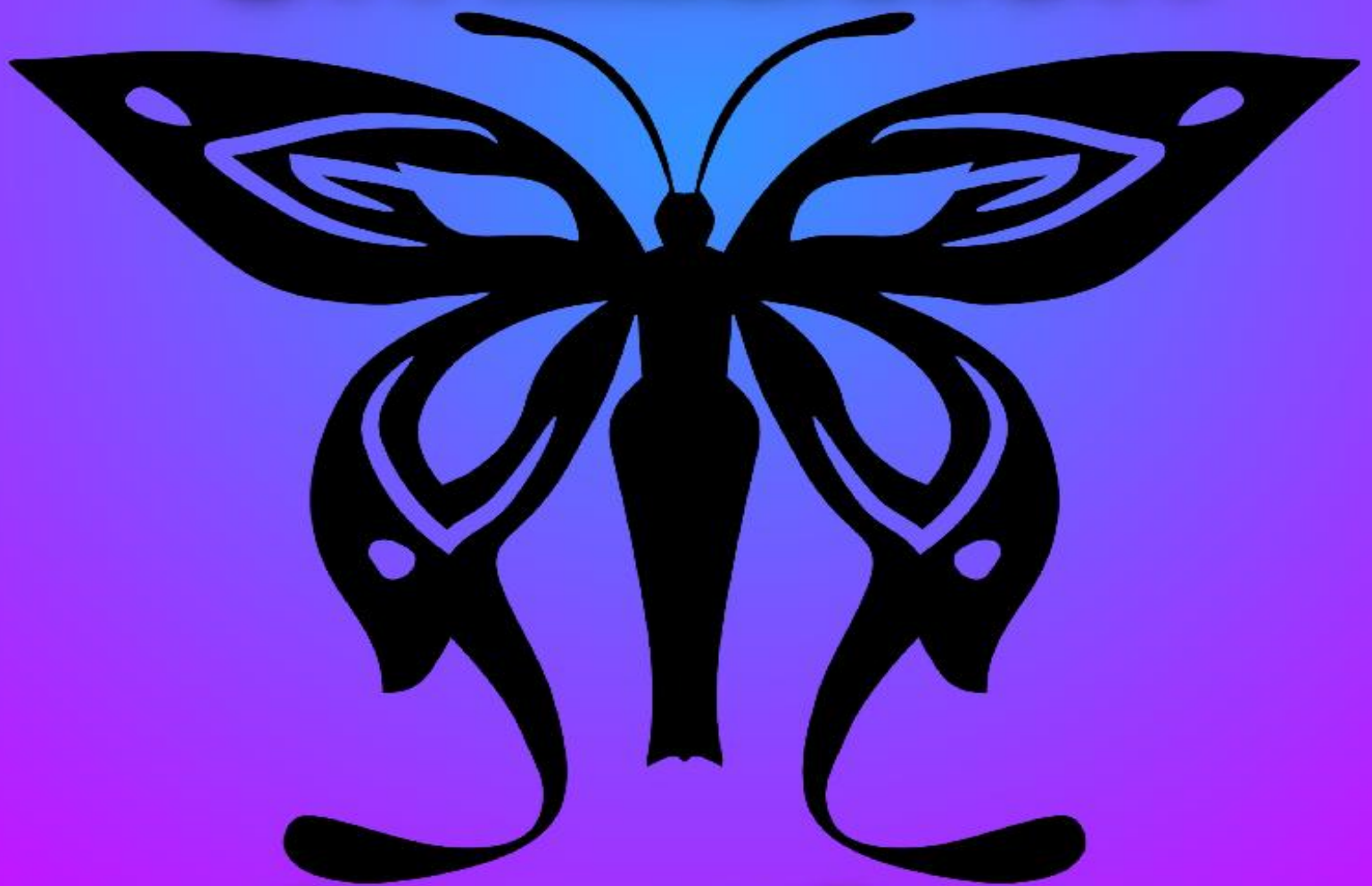


The Pivot of Civilization



Margaret Sanger

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PUBLISHER NOTES:

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To Alice Drysdale Vickery

**Whose prophetic vision of liberated womanhood has been
an inspiration**

"I dream of a world in which the spirits of women are flames stronger than fire, a world in which modesty has become courage and yet remains modesty, a world in which women are as unlike men as ever they were in the world I sought to destroy, a world in which women shine with a loveliness of self-revelation as enchanting as ever the old legends told, and yet a world which would immeasurably transcend the old world in the self-sacrificing passion of human service. I have dreamed of that world ever since I began to dream at all."

—Havelock Ellis

INTRODUCTION

Birth Control, Mrs. Sanger claims, and claims rightly, to be a question of fundamental importance at the present time. I do not know how far one is justified in calling it the pivot or the corner-stone of a progressive civilization. These terms involve a criticism of metaphors that may take us far away from the question in hand. Birth Control is no new thing in human experience, and it has been practised in societies of the most various types and fortunes. But there can be little doubt that at the present time it is a test issue between two widely different interpretations of the word civilization, and of what is good in life and conduct. The way in which men and women range themselves in this controversy is more simply and directly indicative of their general intellectual quality than any other single indication. I do not wish to imply by this that the people who oppose are more or less intellectual than the people who advocate Birth Control, but only that they have fundamentally contrasted general ideas,—that, mentally, they are DIFFERENT. Very simple, very complex, very dull and very brilliant persons may be found in either camp, but all those in either camp have certain attitudes in common which they share with one another, and do not share with those in the other camp.

There have been many definitions of civilization. Civilization is a complexity of countless aspects, and may be validly defined in a great number of relationships. A reader of James Harvey Robinson's *MIND IN THE MAKING* will find it very reasonable to define a civilization as a system of society-making ideas at issue with reality. Just so far as the system of ideas meets the needs and conditions of survival or is able to adapt itself to the needs and conditions of survival of the society it dominates, so far will that society continue and prosper. We are beginning to realize that in the past and under different conditions from our own, societies have existed with systems of ideas and with methods of thought very widely contrasting with what we should consider right and sane to-day. The extraordinary neolithic civilizations of the American continent that flourished before the coming of the Europeans, seem to have got along with concepts that involved pedantries and cruelties and a kind of systematic unreason, which find their closest parallels to-day in the art and writings of certain types of lunatic. There are collections of drawings from English and American asylums extraordinarily parallel in their spirit and quality with the Maya inscriptions of Central America. Yet these neolithic American societies got along for hundreds and perhaps thousands of years, they respected seed-time and harvest, they bred and they maintained a grotesque and terrible order. And they produced quite beautiful works of art. Yet their

surplus of population was disposed of by an organization of sacrificial slaughter unparalleled in the records of mankind. Many of the institutions that seemed most normal and respectable to them, filled the invading Europeans with perplexity and horror.

When we realize clearly this possibility of civilizations being based on very different sets of moral ideas and upon different intellectual methods, we are better able to appreciate the profound significance of the schism in our modern community, which gives us side by side, honest and intelligent people who regard Birth Control as something essentially sweet, sane, clean, desirable and necessary, and others equally honest and with as good a claim to intelligence who regard it as not merely unreasonable and unwholesome, but as intolerable and abominable. We are living not in a simple and complete civilization, but in a conflict of at least two civilizations, based on entirely different fundamental ideas, pursuing different methods and with different aims and ends.

I will call one of these civilizations our Traditional or Authoritative Civilization. It rests upon the thing that is, and upon the thing that has been. It insists upon respect for custom and usage; it discourages criticism and enquiry. It is very ancient and conservative, or, going beyond conservation, it is reactionary. The vehement hostility of many Catholic priests and prelates towards new views of human origins, and new views of moral questions, has led many careless thinkers to identify this old traditional civilization with Christianity, but that identification ignores the strongly revolutionary and initiatory spirit that has always animated Christianity, and is untrue even to the realities of orthodox Catholic teaching. The vituperation of individual Catholics must not be confused with the deliberate doctrines of the Church which have, on the whole, been conspicuously cautious and balanced and sane in these matters. The ideas and practices of the Old Civilization are older and more widespread than and not identifiable with either Christian or Catholic culture, and it will be a great misfortune if the issues between the Old Civilization and the New are allowed to slip into the deep ruts of religious controversies that are only accidentally and intermittently parallel.

Contrasted with the ancient civilization, with the Traditional disposition, which accepts institutions and moral values as though they were a part of nature, we have what I may call—with an evident bias in its favour—the civilization of enquiry, of experimental knowledge, Creative and Progressive Civilization. The first great outbreak of the spirit of this civilization was in republican Greece; the martyrdom of Socrates, the fearless Utopianism of Plato, the ambitious encyclopaedism of Aristotle, mark the dawn of a new courage and a new wilfulness in human affairs. The fear of set limitations, of punitive and restrictive laws imposed by Fate upon human life was visibly fading in

human minds. These names mark the first clear realization that to a large extent, and possibly to an illimitable extent, man's moral and social life and his general destiny could be seized upon and controlled by man. But—he must have knowledge. Said the Ancient Civilization—and it says it still through a multitude of vigorous voices and harsh repressive acts: "Let man learn his duty and obey." Says the New Civilization, with ever-increasing confidence: "Let man know, and trust him."

For long ages, the Old Civilization kept the New subordinate, apologetic and ineffective, but for the last two centuries, the New has fought its way to a position of contentious equality. The two go on side by side, jostling upon a thousand issues. The world changes, the conditions of life change rapidly, through that development of organized science which is the natural method of the New Civilization. The old tradition demands that national loyalties and ancient belligerence should continue. The new has produced means of communication that break down the pens and separations of human life upon which nationalist emotion depends. The old tradition insists upon its ancient blood-letting of war; the new knowledge carries that war to undreamt of levels of destruction. The ancient system needed an unrestricted breeding to meet the normal waste of life through war, pestilence, and a multitude of hitherto unpreventable diseases. The new knowledge sweeps away the venerable checks of pestilence and disease, and confronts us with the congestions and explosive dangers of an overpopulated world. The old tradition demands a special prolific class doomed to labor and subservience; the new points to mechanism and to scientific organization as a means of escape from this immemorial subjugation. Upon every main issue in life, there is this quarrel between the method of submission and the method of knowledge. More and more do men of science and intelligent people generally realize the hopelessness of pouring new wine into old bottles. More and more clearly do they grasp the significance of the Great Teacher's parable.

The New Civilization is saying to the Old now: "We cannot go on making power for you to spend upon international conflict. You must stop waving flags and bandying insults. You must organize the Peace of the World; you must subdue yourselves to the Federation of all mankind. And we cannot go on giving you health, freedom, enlargement, limitless wealth, if all our gifts to you are to be swamped by an indiscriminate torrent of progeny. We want fewer and better children who can be reared up to their full possibilities in unencumbered homes, and we cannot make the social life and the world-peace we are determined to make, with the ill-bred, ill-trained swarms of inferior citizens that you inflict upon us." And there at the passionate and crucial question, this essential and fundamental question, whether procreation is still to be a superstitious and often disastrous mystery, undertaken in fear and

ignorance, reluctantly and under the sway of blind desires, or whether it is to become a deliberate creative act, the two civilizations join issue now. It is a conflict from which it is almost impossible to abstain. Our acts, our way of living, our social tolerance, our very silences will count in this crucial decision between the old and the new.

In a plain and lucid style without any emotional appeals, Mrs. Margaret Sanger sets out the case of the new order against the old. There have been several able books published recently upon the question of Birth Control, from the point of view of a woman's personal life, and from the point of view of married happiness, but I do not think there has been any book as yet, popularly accessible, which presents this matter from the point of view of the public good, and as a necessary step to the further improvement of human life as a whole. I am inclined to think that there has hitherto been rather too much personal emotion spent upon this business and far too little attention given to its broader aspects. Mrs. Sanger with her extraordinary breadth of outlook and the real scientific quality of her mind, has now redressed the balance. She has lifted this question from out of the warm atmosphere of troubled domesticity in which it has hitherto been discussed, to its proper level of a predominantly important human affair.

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CHAPTER I: A New Truth Emerges

Be not ashamed, women, your privilege encloses the
rest, and is the exit of the rest,
You are the gates of the body, and you are the gates of
the soul.

—Walt Whitman

This book aims to be neither the first word on the tangled problems of human society to-day, nor the last. My aim has been to emphasize, by the use of concrete and challenging examples and neglected facts, the need of a new approach to individual and social problems. Its central challenge is that civilization, in any true sense of the word, is based upon the control and guidance of the great natural instinct of Sex. Mastery of this force is possible only through the instrument of Birth Control.

It may be objected that in the following pages I have rushed in where academic scholars have feared to tread, and that as an active propagandist I am lacking in the scholarship and documentary preparation to undertake such a stupendous task. My only defense is that, from my point of view at least, too many are already studying and investigating social problems from without, with a sort of Olympian detachment. And on the other hand, too few of those who are engaged in this endless war for human betterment have found the time to give to the world those truths not always hidden but practically unquarried, which may be secured only after years of active service.

Of late, we have been treated to accounts written by well-meaning ladies and gentlemen who have assumed clever disguises and have gone out to work—for a week or a month—among the proletariat. But can we thus learn anything new of the fundamental problems of working men, working women, working children? Something, perhaps, but not those great central problems of Hunger and Sex. We have been told that only those who themselves have suffered the pangs of starvation can truly understand Hunger. You might come into the closest contact with a starving man; yet, if you were yourself well-fed, no amount of sympathy could give you actual insight into the psychology of his suffering. This suggests an objective and a subjective approach to all social problems. Whatever the weakness of the subjective (or, if you prefer, the feminine) approach, it has at least the virtue that its conclusions are tested by experience. Observation of facts about you, intimate subjective reaction to such facts, generate in your mind certain fundamental convictions,—truths you can ignore no more than you can ignore such truths as come as the fruit of bitter but valuable personal experience.

Regarding myself, I may say that my experience in the course of the past twelve or fifteen years has been of a type to force upon me certain convictions that demand expression. For years I had believed that the solution of all our troubles was to be found in well-defined programmes of political and legislative action. At first, I concentrated my whole attention upon these, only to discover that politicians and law-makers are just as confused and as much at a loss in solving fundamental problems as anyone else. And I am speaking here not so much of the corrupt and ignorant politician as of those idealists and reformers who think that by the ballot society may be led to an earthly paradise. They may honestly desire and intend to do great things. They may positively glow—before election—with enthusiasm at the prospect they imagine political victory may open to them. Time after time, I was struck by the change in their attitude after the briefest enjoyment of this illusory power. Men are elected during some wave of reform, let us say, elected to legislate into practical working existence some great ideal. They want to do big things; but a short time in office is enough to show the political idealist that he can accomplish nothing, that his reform must be debased and dragged into the dust, so that even if it becomes enacted, it may be not merely of no benefit, but a positive evil. It is scarcely necessary to emphasize this point. It is an accepted commonplace of American politics. So much of life, so large a part of all our social problems, moreover, remains untouched by political and legislative action. This is an old truth too often ignored by those who plan political campaigns upon the most superficial knowledge of human nature.

My own eyes were opened to the limitations of political action when, as an organizer for a political group in New York, I attended by chance a meeting of women laundry-workers who were on strike. We believed we could help these women with a legislative measure and asked their support. "Oh! that stuff!" exclaimed one of these women. "Don't you know that we women might be dead and buried if we waited for politicians and lawmakers to right our wrongs?" This set me to thinking—not merely of the immediate problem—but to asking myself how much any male politician could understand of the wrongs inflicted upon poor working women.

I threw the weight of my study and activity into the economic and industrial struggle. Here I discovered men and women fired with the glorious vision of a new world, of a proletarian world emancipated, a Utopian world,—it glowed in romantic colours for the majority of those with whom I came in closest contact. The next step, the immediate step, was another matter, less romantic and too often less encouraging. In their ardor, some of the labor leaders of that period almost convinced us that the millennium was just around the corner. Those were the pre-war days of dramatic strikes. But even when most under the spell of the new vision, the sight of the overburdened wives of the strikers, with their

puny babies and their broods of under-fed children, made us stop and think of a neglected factor in the march toward our earthly paradise. It was well enough to ask the poor men workers to carry on the battle against economic injustice. But what results could be expected when they were forced in addition to carry the burden of their ever-growing families? This question loomed large to those of us who came into intimate contact with the women and children. We saw that in the final analysis the real burden of economic and industrial warfare was thrust upon the frail, all-too-frail shoulders of the children, the very babies—the coming generation. In their wan faces, in their undernourished bodies, would be indelibly written the bitter defeat of their parents.

The eloquence of those who led the underpaid and half-starved workers could no longer, for me, at least, ring with conviction. Something more than the purely economic interpretation was involved. The bitter struggle for bread, for a home and material comfort, was but one phase of the problem. There was another phase, perhaps even more fundamental, that had been absolutely neglected by the adherents of the new dogmas. That other phase was the driving power of instinct, a power uncontrolled and unnoticed. The great fundamental instinct of sex was expressing itself in these ever-growing broods, in the prosperity of the slum midwife and her colleague the slum undertaker. In spite of all my sympathy with the dream of liberated Labor, I was driven to ask whether this urging power of sex, this deep instinct, was not at least partially responsible, along with industrial injustice, for the widespread misery of the world.

To find an answer to this problem which at that point in my experience I could not solve, I determined to study conditions in Europe. Perhaps there I might discover a new approach, a great illumination. Just before the outbreak of the war, I visited France, Spain, Germany and Great Britain. Everywhere I found the same dogmas and prejudices among labor leaders, the same intense but limited vision, the same insistence upon the purely economic phases of human nature, the same belief that if the problem of hunger were solved, the question of the women and children would take care of itself. In this attitude I discovered, then, what seemed to me to be purely masculine reasoning; and because it was purely masculine, it could at best be but half true. Feminine insight must be brought to bear on all questions; and here, it struck me, the fallacy of the masculine, the all-too-masculine, was brutally exposed. I was encouraged and strengthened in this attitude by the support of certain leaders who had studied human nature and who had reached the same conclusion: that civilization could not solve the problem of Hunger until it recognized the titanic strength of the sexual instinct. In Spain, I found that Lorenzo Portet, who was carrying on the work of the martyred Francisco Ferrer, had reached this same conclusion. In Italy, Enrico Malatesta, the valiant leader who was after

the war to play so dramatic a role, was likewise combating the current dogma of the orthodox Socialists. In Berlin, Rudolph Rocker was engaged in the thankless task of puncturing the articles of faith of the orthodox Marxian religion. It is quite needless to add that these men who had probed beneath the surface of the problem and had diagnosed so much more completely the complex malady of contemporary society were intensely disliked by the superficial theorists of the neo-Marxian School.

The gospel of Marx had, however, been too long and too thoroughly inculcated into the minds of millions of workers in Europe, to be discarded. It is a flattering doctrine, since it teaches the laborer that all the fault is with someone else, that he is the victim of circumstances, and not even a partner in the creation of his own and his child's misery. Not without significance was the additional discovery that I made. I found that the Marxian influence tended to lead workers to believe that, irrespective of the health of the poor mothers, the earning capacity of the wage-earning fathers, or the upbringing of the children, increase of the proletarian family was a benefit, not a detriment to the revolutionary movement. The greater the number of hungry mouths, the emptier the stomachs, the more quickly would the "Class War" be precipitated. The greater the increase in population among the proletariat, the greater the incentive to revolution. This may not be sound Marxian theory; but it is the manner in which it is popularly accepted. It is the popular belief, wherever the Marxian influence is strong. This I found especially in England and Scotland. In speaking to groups of dockworkers on strike in Glasgow, and before the communist and co-operative guilds throughout England, I discovered a prevailing opposition to the recognition of sex as a factor in the perpetuation of poverty. The leaders and theorists were immovable in their opposition. But when once I succeeded in breaking through the surface opposition of the rank and file of the workers, I found that they were willing to recognize the power of this neglected factor in their lives.

So central, so fundamental in the life of every man and woman is this problem that they need be taught no elaborate or imposing theory to explain their troubles. To approach their problems by the avenue of sex and reproduction is to reveal at once their fundamental relations to the whole economic and biological structure of society. Their interest is immediately and completely awakened. But always, as I soon discovered, the ideas and habits of thought of these submerged masses have been formed through the Press, the Church, through political institutions, all of which had built up a conspiracy of silence around a subject that is of no less vital importance than that of Hunger. A great wall separates the masses from those imperative truths that must be known and flung wide if civilization is to be saved. As currently constituted, Church, Press,