Margaret Sanger

Anarchy & the Early Birth Control Movement

Beni

1996

a review of

Woman of Valor: Margaret Sanger and the Birth Control Movement in America, Ellen Chesler, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1992, 639 pp.

Chesler obviously admires and empathizes with early twentieth century feminist and birth control advocate Margaret Sanger, but portrays Sanger honestly, showing how her personal faults and foibles affected what she was trying to accomplish, and how her strengths allowed her to accomplish so much.

The book's dust-jacket blurb informs the reader that Chesler has a BA from Vassar, and an MA and Ph.D. in history from Columbia, and "has long worked in local government, politics, and civic affairs." She is obviously a feminist who shares many of Sanger's views, and finds Sanger's life extremely interesting. But Chesler is, to put it bluntly, an all-too-common academic feminist who confuses history and biography with autobiography, and who, at some critical point during their research, suddenly realizes that their hero, or their model, or their ancestor is actually a normal human being whose behavior or desires or philosophy include crucial elements the biographer finds personally detestable.

So, the biographer begins to tinker with the truth, consciously or unconsciously, and somehow hides or camouflages the worst or more perverted aspects. To Chesler, the worst aspect is Sanger's anarchism and libertarian socialism. Chesler seems extremely uncomfortable with anarchists and anarchism, and she constantly downplays both, putting quotations around the terms whenever she cannot afford to ignore them entirely.

Originally a Debsian socialist, Sanger was influenced by Emma Goldman (which Chesler portrays honestly and in detail), but she also became an anarchist herself (which Chesler tries to hide by characterizing Sanger's anarchism as "socialism" or by portraying it as ill-digested wobblyism).

Goldman and Berkman are the only two people in Sanger's life Chesler identifies as "anarchists." Sanger was active in the anarchist Ferrer movement in New York, but Chesler identifies Ferrer as a "free thinker and educational reformer," and by implication turns his anarchist followers into liberal reformers, too. Peter Kropotkin is identified simply as a "prominent theorist of moderate socialism" who influenced Goldman!

Similarly, Chesler omits the fact that Sanger's friend, Frank Tannenbaum, was a well-known anarchist activist, and that her life-long friend Carlo Tresca was also a famous New York City anarchist until he was assassinated for his beliefs in the early 1940s. Chesler reproduces the front page of Sanger's first issue of her anarchist periodical, *The Woman Rebel*, including the prominent subtitle, "No Gods, No Masters." Chesler mischaracterizes this as "a provocative Wobbly banner." She also makes the typically ignorant mistake of identifying the IWW as "International Workers of the World."

Only that final error can be attributed to Chesler's ignorance; the others are obviously intentional since anarchist historian Paul Avrich is credited as personally assisting Chesler in her research, particularly on the Ferrer movement. Also, she cites all the major primary and secondary sources on Emma Goldman and the IWW in exhaustive detail in her footnotes.

Despite these problems, Chesler goes further than other major writers in killing the myth (started by Sanger herself) that Sanger was never "really" a radical. However, Chesler purposely minimizes Sanger's early radical beliefs by implying she either did not take them seriously or they were so marginal they were easily given up.

Using Chesler's own research, I interpret Sanger's shift away from anarchism and radicalism as a combination of pragmatism (she realized she'd never be successful remaining part of the anarchist movement) and personality conflicts (she developed such a personal dislike for Goldman and other well-known anarchists that she no longer wanted anything to do with them or their movement), as well as her realization that the economism, laborism and male orientation of the IWW anarchists would never be of any help to women of the sort that Sanger saw as her audience, her constituency, and her mission.

Again, using Chesler's own detailed research, I draw the conclusion that Sanger remained a radical and a socialist—perhaps even a libertarian socialist—in her own mind. I'm fairly certain she did not see herself as an anarchist after about 1915. Sanger apparently blamed the anarchist Ferrer school at the Stelton colony in New Jersey for the death of her daughter Peggy in November 1915, and Chesler shows quite clearly that Sanger never got over the death.

Also, I think, anarchist activists never got over Sanger's "theft" of one of their most popular concerns: a woman's right to her own body. Sanger took this issue from the anarchists, gradually stripped it of its truly subversive and radical content, reduced it to a demand for "birth control" in the minds of most people, and so identified it with her own name that even those radicals who supported birth control and related demands had to be somewhat circumspect in their public support for it.

Sanger remained a committed feminist for her entire life, although her public radicalism was a small part of her long and active life. Even with its problems, Chesler's book functions as an excellent history of the birth control and feminist movements and Sanger's role in them.

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See response in Letters, FE #349, Summer 1997.

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