

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 con-

sider 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 favor—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 encyclopædism 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 over populated 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 be come 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 pre dominantly important human affair

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