Margaret Sanger and Birth Control: the Public and Private Spheres of Women's Bodies
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My interest in Margaret Sanger began with a final paper for a history class during the spring semester of 2014. Her career, stretching over many decades, began before women had the vote and ended with the development of the birth control pill. The study of the birth control movement is also tied to the history of science, feminism, the radical left, and the American family, to name a few. Furthermore, theories about “the public” and publics which have developed in recent decades are applicable to the way that Sanger and her fellow activists argued that birth control was inherently a public issue, instead of something “obscene.” My research was primarily conducted at the Margaret Sanger Papers Project (MSPP), located in New York City, NY.

I began by going through several microfilms collections, beginning with one from the Library of Congress. As stated on the MSPP website, “Margaret Sanger gave a massive collection of her papers to the Library of Congress, which were microfilmed on 145 reels in 1977 by the Library. These papers cover the years 1900-1966, but the major part of the collection is concentrated between 1928-1940.” I first went through the index and marked down which containers and reels I thought would be useful, since it would be both inefficient and unproductive to look at each of the many thousands of slides in the collection. Eventually, after consulting with MSPP director Esther Katz, I narrowed my time frame to the years 1915 to 1937, though if I found documents beyond these limits that looked promising I got copies of these, too.

As I collected documents from the Library of Congress set, I realized that the role of science and “the scientific” were critical to a thorough study of the birth control movement. Margaret Sanger began by advocating for working class women; she was frustrated by mainstream feminists who tended to ignore the great burden of uncontrolled pregnancy that poor women could not afford to escape. Yet during the 1920s, Sanger shifted her emphasis to gaining respect among the medical and scientific community. By aligning the birth control movement with two powerful fields, its leaders could boost its credibility and associate it with public health.

The change in alliances and method was apparent in Sanger’s correspondence and the many other documents available at the MSPP. The Smith College Collections contained a large amount of letters, both personal and organization-related, that proved very enlightening. I tried to track down as many letters as possible between Sanger and physicians and scientists in order to gain insight into her relationship with this community. She would ask these doctors and scientists, nearly all men, for advice on everything from gaining a license from the New York Board of Charities to sterilization to organizing international conferences. This was quite a step from addressing the likes of Eugene V. Debs, Emma Goldman, and “Big” Bill Haywood (all notable radicals) during her early years in the public sphere.

Throughout all the many reels and documents I sifted through, the theme of birth control as innately public kept coming to the fore. Much of the opposition, supported by legislation known as the Comstock Laws, claimed that discourse concerning birth control, women’s bodies, and sexuality should stay only in the home or the bedroom. Margaret Sanger was arrested for merely using the phrase “prevention of conception.” With the hopes of learning more about what people outside of the birth control movement said and thought about Sanger, her work, and her compatriots, I went through one of the most “public” type of document: newspapers. The MSPP had copies of hundreds of newspaper clippings stretching from the 1910s on past the 1950s, though I only went to the late 1930s. The New York Times, The Washington Post, and the New York World-Tribune featured among the most common sources, but the collection also included various local newspapers from all over the country.

By the end of my six weeks at the MSPP, I had collected over 250 primary documents, ranging in time, subject, writer, and location. I have also begun to gather secondary sources, which allow me simultaneously to learn about Sanger and get a sense of a birth control movement historiography, in addition to comparing my thoughts as a researcher to what others have written before me. I think the results of this work have provided me a very promising start to what will hopefully become a full senior thesis.
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References:

http://www.nyu.edu/projects/sanger/publications/microfilm.php