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“I Like a Fight”: Margaret Sanger and the First Birth Control Clinic in the United States

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“I LIKE A FIGHT”: MARGARET SANGER AND THE FIRST BIRTH CONTROL
CLINIC IN THE UNITED STATES

by

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DEDICATION

To Harriet Kessler, Elizabeth Ann Hall, and all the other people who have taught me to pursue justice.

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Many thanks to my advisor, Dr. Lauren Sklaroff; Dr. Joe November; and my cohort of History graduate students at the University of South Carolina for their academic and personal support. I am also grateful to Helene Kessler, John Hall, Eliana Hall, and Aaron Spitler, who have read my work at every stage and lifted me up when I needed it the most.

ABSTRACT

It is nearly impossible to read the news in the United States today without hearing the name Planned Parenthood, but few Americans know about the origins of this organization. Margaret Sanger founded the Birth Control Clinical Research Bureau, the precursor to Planned Parenthood, in 1923, but this was not the first time she opened a clinic. In this paper, I assess Margaret Sanger's 1916 opening of the Brownsville Clinic, the first birth control clinic in the United States, and the responses to this event from multiple historical perspectives. I use historical newspapers to demonstrate how popular media, legal experts, and laywomen viewed the Brownsville Clinic, Sanger, and her mission. In the papers, Sanger and her followers are depicted alternatively as brave activists, helpless women, or unprepared dreamers, but these reports do have something in common. They show that, while Sanger's original mission was to bring birth control access to the working-class women of New York, her goals shifted over the course of her trial to challenging the New York legal system and labeling birth control access as a legal issue.

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CHAPTER 1: “I LIKE A FIGHT”: MARGARET SANGER AND THE FIRST BIRTH CONTROL CLINIC IN THE UNITED STATES

Introduction and Significance

It is nearly impossible to read the news in the United States today without hearing the name Planned Parenthood, but few Americans know about the origins of this organization. Margaret Sanger founded the Birth Control Clinical Research Bureau, the precursor to Planned Parenthood, in 1923, after a brief but very eventful experience running a birth control clinic in the Brownsville neighborhood of Brooklyn. In this paper, I will evaluate Margaret Sanger’s 1916 opening of the Brownsville Clinic, the first birth control clinic in the United States, and the multiple responses to this event, including Sanger’s trial for breaking New York’s Comstock Law. Using historical newspapers, I will demonstrate how popular media, legal experts, and laywomen viewed the Brownsville Clinic, Sanger, and her mission. Sanger and her followers are depicted alternatively as brave activists, helpless women, or unprepared dreamers, but a through-line can be drawn through these reports. While Sanger’s original mission was to bring birth control access to the working-class women of New York, her goal shifted over the course of her trial to challenging the New York legal system. Newspaper reports from 1916 and 1917 often exaggerate or downplay Sanger’s work and personal interactions, but when read closely and in conjunction with one another, they demonstrate essential changes in Sanger’s activism. During this period Sanger switched from advocating broadly for birth control access to focusing in on the repeal of New York state’s

Comstock Law. This shift in her activism helped birth control become a legal and political issue, as opposed to just a moral issue.

Understanding the Brownsville Clinic is essential to both women's history and the history of medicine because of its superlative status as the first contraceptive clinic in America, but also because documentation about the clinic sheds light on the lived experiences of working class, immigrant women. Their stories are important simply because they existed. Additionally, understanding Sanger's trial shows how her political and social goals changed over the course of 1916 and 1917, two years that were essential to birth control history. Sanger's career has not been fully explored and examining the public perception of her early work helps paint a more nuanced picture of who she and her supporters were.

Larger Historical Context

Over the past four decades, a variety of scholars have studied the history of birth control. Women's historian Linda Gordon and medical historian Andrea Tone have covered how and why women have used birth control and how these decisions have been viewed by dominant political structures. I will explore how the popular media viewed the women who openly sought out and shared birth control information, filling a gap in the historiography. Gordon published the groundbreaking *Woman's Body, Woman's Right: A Social History of Birth Control in America* in 1976 which won numerous awards and fueled further academic interest in the topic. This book has been republished with additional research multiple times; the most recent edition was renamed *The Moral Property of Women: A History of Birth Control Politics in America*. In it, Gordon

explores how birth control has been politicized throughout American history and asks why some women made use of it more eagerly than others.¹ She argues that birth control has been both a symptom and a cause of larger social change throughout history.² Additionally, Gordon asserts that birth control use has increased over time as a result of two types of change: large-scale, structural economic and social change and, secondly, rapid social and legal change that has resulted from major social movements such as feminism.³ Examining Sanger's Brownsville Clinic reflects, among other things, how individuals played a role in these broader social changes.

Andrea Tone, an expert in the history of women and medicine, provides a foundation for examining Sanger's career and its impact, but does not examine how Sanger was portrayed by her contemporaries. Tone's *Devices and Desires*, published in 2001, covers how the American contraceptive market has changed since the 1873 passage of the federal Comstock Law, which outlawed the distribution of "illicit" materials. She asserts that the contraceptive industry went from a hidden trade operating out of basement workshops and pornography outlets to "one of the most successful legitimate businesses in American history."⁴ Until the late 1960s, most Americans got contraceptive devices and products not from physicians but directly from the marketplace through mail-order buying or purchases at pharmacies, at five-and-dime stores, at gas stations, at vending machines, or even from door-to-door peddlers.⁵ Tone describes the

¹ Linda Gordon, *The Moral Property of Women: A History of Birth Control Politics in America*, (Baltimore: University of Illinois Press, 2002), x.

² *Ibid.*, 3.

³ *Ibid.*, 359.

⁴ Andrea Tone, *Devices and Desires: A History of Contraceptives in America*, (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 2002), xvi.

⁵ *Ibid.*, xv.

legalization and medicalization of the contraceptive market, incorporating stories of ordinary people into descriptions of larger historical patterns such as the rise of industrialization. She argues that, starting in the 1920s, Sanger and a network of dedicated researchers, physicians, and activists made a once-radical movement “middle class and respectable” by establishing doctor-supervised clinics, promoting laboratory testing of contraceptives, and encouraging the use of physician-fitted diaphragms. They also lobbied the American Medical Association into reversing its longstanding ban on birth control as a form of medical treatment in 1937.⁶ Tone also cites data which demonstrates that Sanger’s advocacy for the medicalization of birth control did not create universal national change, given that only six percent of working-class families got contraceptive information from doctors as of the early 1940s.⁷

Historian Robert Wiebe and sociologist Theda Skocpol have examined the role of Progressive Era reformers in American history but have not contextualized birth control reform within this larger time period. Wiebe asserts that reformers may have had humane motivations but were either ineffective or helped “imprison” Americans in a bureaucratic iron cage.⁸ This stance does not account for the fact that Sanger went through different stages and types of activism throughout her life or the fact that the Comstock Law had a large impact on early birth control reform. Skocpol’s work sheds light on larger patterns of early twentieth century reform, but again does not examine birth control activism. She

⁶ Ibid., 117.

⁷ Ibid., 154.

⁸ Robert D. Johnston, “The Possibilities of Politics: Democracy in America, 1877 to 1917,” in *American History Now*, ed. Eric Foner and Lisa McGirr (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011), <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/southcarolina/detail.action?docID=714507>, 98.

contends that women activists in late nineteenth and early twentieth century America created the foundation for a “materialist” welfare state that provided for women and children.⁹

Historians already understand basic information about the Brownsville Clinic but have not examined its essential role in shaping Sanger’s activism or how it demonstrates public perception of birth control activism at this time. According to legal records and Sanger’s autobiography, 464 clients (both male and female) visited the Brownsville Clinic for services and advice during the several weeks it was operational.¹⁰ In late October 1916, Sanger and two of her coworkers were arrested by the New York Police Department for breaking New York’s Comstock Law, which, like the 1873 federal Comstock Law, prohibited the distribution of “obscene” or “immoral” materials.¹¹ During Sanger’s trial, thirty of the Brownsville patients were subpoenaed, most of whom appeared with their children in tow. Women’s rights scholar and biographer Ellen Chesler asserts that this image created “an indelible impression” of the birth control movement as a respectable alliance of wealthy women lifting up and helping their less fortunate sisters, and I explore this idea in detail later.¹² Additionally, Sanger’s lawyer, Jonah Goldstein, took multiple approaches to demonstrate how Comstock statutes were

⁹ Theda Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1992), https://web-s-ebscobhost-com.pallas2.tcl.sc.edu/ehost/ebookviewer/ebook/ZTAyNXhuYV9fMjgyNzIyX19BTg2?s_id=45bd2206-96c9-4f1e-9461-28ad8a36a544@redis&vid=0&format=EB&rid=1, 2.

¹⁰ Ellen Chesler, *Woman of Valor: Margaret Sanger and the Birth Control Movement in America*, (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2007), 150.

¹¹ Brandon Burnette, “Comstock Act of 1873,” Middle Tennessee State University Free Speech Center, accessed October 23, 2021, <https://www.mtsu.edu/first-amendment/article/1038/comstock-act-of-1873>.

¹² Chesler, 156.

unconstitutional and unreasonable.¹³ While the subpoenaed mothers were originally called to the trial by the prosecution, their presence and Goldstein's focus on them demonstrates how Sanger's trial was about much more than her guilt or innocence under the law. I argue that Sanger's trial and the trials of her coconspirators signify a fundamental shift in her approach to birth control activism, indicating a new determination to change unjust laws.

Methodology

The opening of the Brownsville Clinic and the ensuing arrests of the women who ran it were covered by a variety of local and national news sources. Reports from Brooklyn papers published in 1916 and 1917 demonstrate how Sanger and her colleagues, particularly her sister Ethel Byrne, were viewed by popular media. The drawbacks of this approach include the fact that, at the time, these newspapers often did not credit individual reporters. Therefore, it is difficult to know if a particular column's attitude towards birth control and birth control advocates is influenced by a particular personal bias.

The original *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* was published between 1841 and 1955, although the brand was resurrected in 1996.¹⁴ From 1846 to 1848, this publication was

¹³ *Ibid.*, 152.

¹⁴ "About Us," *Brooklyn Eagle*, accessed October 20, 2021, <https://brooklyneagle.com/about-us/>.

edited by famed poet and journalist Walt Whitman.¹⁵ It also boasts four Pulitzer Prizes.¹⁶ The *Brooklyn Standard Union* ran from 1887, when the *Brooklyn Daily Standard* and the *Brooklyn Daily Union* merged, until 1932, when the *Standard Union* merged with the *Brooklyn Daily Times*.¹⁷ The *New York Times* also covered the Brownsville Clinic and the following trials, although it paid much more attention to the spectacles that occurred in court than the clinic itself.

Before the Clinic

Margaret Higgins Sanger was a woman who, with help from friends and supporters, created a poised, upper-class image that fought against the idea that birth control was radical or immoral.¹⁸ Sanger was born in 1879 into a poor Irish American family. She was the middle child of eleven, although her mother had multiple other pregnancies.¹⁹ Sanger wanted to become a doctor but could not afford medical school and therefore settled for training to become a nurse beginning in 1900.²⁰ She married William Sanger in 1902 and the two became involved in socialist politics after moving to New York City in 1910.²¹ This environment was very different from the one Sanger grew up in, and she was able to form relationships with many wealthy individuals. While

¹⁵ Jason Stacy, *Walt Whitman's Multitudes: Labor Reform and Persona in Whitman's Journalism and the First 'Leaves of Grass', 1840–1855*, New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2008.

¹⁶ “About Us,” *Brooklyn Eagle*, accessed October 20, 2021, <https://brooklyneagle.com/about-us/>.

¹⁷ “Brooklyn Standard Union Archives,” University of Pennsylvania, accessed October 20, 2021, <https://onlinebooks.library.upenn.edu/webbin/serial?id=brooklynstdunion>.

¹⁸ Chesler, 139.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 12, 22.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 45.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 56-7.

working as a nurse, one of Margaret's patients supposedly died as a result of a self-induced abortion. Sanger often reported how "Sadie Sachs'" death propelled her into birth control activism, although historians have not able to find any evidence of this woman.²² Over the course of the 1910s, Sanger separated from her first husband and turned her attention beyond her current patients. She visited the Netherlands in 1915 and was deeply inspired by her visits to birth control clinics which were part of an accessible, national network.²³ During Sanger's time in Europe, she became close with famed scholars such as Havelock Ellis, which increased her renown and social standing. This, along with other experiences in Europe, led to the opening of the Brownsville Clinic in October 1916.

Sanger saw women as having the power to eliminate poverty through family planning decisions but believed that working class women would only be frustrated by this knowledge unless they also had access to effective contraceptive methods which would help them put this knowledge into practice.²⁴ In other words, women's ability to transcend the conditions of poverty was contingent up on realistic access to contraception. The year 1916 was extremely busy for Sanger, beginning with an extensive nationwide speaking tour that started in April. All over the country, Sanger was "besieged by people of all classes" who wanted her advice.²⁵ This raises the question of whom Sanger saw as her primary audience when she opened her birth control clinic a mere six months later, a question which we will return to later.

²² Ibid., 62-3.

²³ Ibid., 145.

²⁴ Ibid., 68, 83.

²⁵ Ibid., 99.

Why did Sanger choose the community of Brownsville for her first clinic?²⁶

While there is limited scholarly literature about the history of Brownsville in the early twentieth century, we know that at the time, this Brooklyn neighborhood was primarily composed of working-class Jews. The community was made up of a mixture of foreign-born immigrants and their descendants, like other Jewish communities in New York, but Brownsville was devoid of many of the resources that these other communities had, such as public schools and synagogues.²⁷ In his monograph about Brownsville, urban historian Wendell Pritchett notes that it is impossible to ignore the presence of the Socialist Party in Brownsville.²⁸ Sanger may have taken advantage of their presence in order to attract community support for her clinic, while also publicly maintaining a respectable distance from “radicals.” Ellen Chesler asserts that Sanger’s single-issue focus on birth control as a panacea for poverty undermined the radical socialist agenda at the time, which advocated for widespread change in a variety of areas such as labor rights and social services. But this statement does not tell the entire truth.²⁹ While I agree that most, if not all, of Sanger’s decisions were well-planned and politically savvy, I also assert that socialism’s presence in the lives of Brownsville residents meant that individuals in this community were more likely to make use of Sanger’s resources than the average religious American. Historian Rebecca Davis has explored the idea of

²⁶ As of February 1917, Sanger lived about eight miles away in Greenwich Village (“MRS. SANGER GUILTY, FACES PRISON TERM: Court Will Sentence Woman in Birth Control Case Monday. MAY GO ON HUNGER STRIKE,” *New York Times*, February 3, 1917).

²⁷ Wendell E. Pritchett, *Brownsville, Brooklyn: Blacks, Jews, and the Changing Face of the Ghetto*, Historical Studies of Urban America (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 18.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 29, 36.

²⁹ Chesler, 193.

contraceptive use within “companionate marriages” in the 1920s.³⁰ She argues that many clergy were opposed to this idea because they insisted that American democracy, religious values, and traditional lifelong marriage were inextricably linked. There was a parallel between those who stood outside the traditional political order and those who embraced radical ideas about family planning, and this connection needs to be explored further in later research.

During the Clinic

The Brownsville Birth Control Clinic opened on the morning of October 16th, 1916.³¹ The earliest news report of the Brownsville Clinic portrayed Sanger as a savvy businesswoman who almost comically evaded police attention. On October 22, 1916, the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* gave a detailed description of the unsuspecting exterior of the clinic and noted that “it took more than a week for the police to discover what was what.”³² According to the article, the police search for the location of the clinic caused Sanger and her associates “considerable amusement,” given that they had spent weeks handing out flyers in the neighborhood in the lead-up to opening the clinic.³³ The writer

³⁰ Rebecca L. Davis, “‘Not Marriage at All, but Simple Harlotry’: The Companionate Marriage Controversy,” *The Journal of American History* 94, no. 4 (2008): 1137–63, <https://doi.org/10.2307/25095323>.

³¹ Elizabeth Stuyvesant, “Brownsville Birth Control Clinic,” *The Birth Control Review*, March 1917,

<https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=k0IsAAAAYAAJ&pg=GBS.PA16&hl=en>, 6.

³² “CLINIC OPENED HERE FOR BIRTH CONTROL; CHALLENGES POLICE,”

Brooklyn Daily Eagle, October 22, 1916,

http://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/60020833/?terms=%22brownsville%22%20and%20%22margaret%20sanger%22&pqid=5_fcOCJGQ490buGjeEYzRA%3A118000%3A1326789310&match=1.

The *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* provided the most thorough coverage of the Brownsville clinic while it was open.

³³ *Ibid.*

noted that, when they sought out Sanger, she was relieved to see that the inquiring party was a journalist rather than a policeman. This report portrayed Sanger as a person who could not avoid the law but did not relish attention from the authorities. Furthermore, Sanger was featured in an article one day later which included the subtitle “‘I Like A Fight,’ She Says, When Told She May Be Arrested.”³⁴ This report painted Sanger as brave and charismatic, and approached this novel event with a sense of humor.

Media coverage of the Brownsville Clinic frequently focused on the patients’ appearance and quality of life. One article noted that mothers emerging from the building were “the worn, dragged-out, weary-faced wives of men whose incomes are small and never assured.”³⁵ This dramatic depiction of anonymous, struggling women evoked sympathy in the reader but also helped Sanger’s cause become an enthralling media story. Another article, appearing on October 24th, depicted Sanger’s clients as somewhat ignorant. The reporter stated that these women were unaware of the risks Sanger was taking by running the clinic: apparently, they were “unconscious that a problem might center around their coming.”³⁶ This article also noted that some women entered the clinic timidly, while a good number entered “smilingly,” painting a picture of working-class

³⁴ “MRS. SANGER KEEPS UP BIRTH CLINIC,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, October 23, 1916, http://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/60021424/?terms=%22brownsville%22%20and%20%22margaret%20sanger%22&pqsid=5_fcOCJGQ490buGjeEYzRA%3A118000%3A1326789310&match=1.

³⁵ “CLINIC OPENED HERE FOR BIRTH CONTROL; CHALLENGES POLICE,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*.

³⁶ “A Day with Margaret Sanger in Her Birth Control Clinic,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, October 24, 1916, http://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/60021585/?terms=%22A%20Day%20With%20Margaret%20Sanger%20In%20Her%20Birth%20Control%20Clinic%22&pqsid=zFIPF4Ta_7o2yIZ_yanMA%3A1835000%3A1746626128&match=1.

women obliviously taking advantage of a resource carefully presented to them. Some balked at having their picture taken, worrying “‘What will my husband say [if my picture appears in a newspaper?]’”³⁷ Overall, reports published while the clinic was open depicted the Brownsville patients as poor, unfortunate, uninformed, anxious women who were unaware of Sanger’s broader goals to destroy poverty and fundamentally change the American system of accessing birth control and were unaware they might be endorsing illegal activity. Without the heavy tone of pity taken by the reporters, it seems that these women simply wanted a better quality of life for themselves and their families.

On October 24, 1916, a woman who went by the name “Mrs. Whitehurst” visited the clinic and aroused suspicion by paying for a 10-cent pamphlet with a two-dollar bill. The staff took this as a sign that the police were attempting to gather information about the clinic and displayed the bill as a “contribution” from the NYPD. Indeed, the clinic was raided the next day.³⁸ As with many reports from New York papers, the *Chicago Daily Tribune*’s report of Sanger’s arrest and subsequent release described her as a woman who was deeply committed not only to her business but to a much broader cause. The *Tribune* asserted that “it was not without much persuasion that Mrs. Sanger was induced to accept her freedom,” noting that she strongly considered remaining in jail rather than paying bail.³⁹ At this moment in time, Sanger was portrayed as a woman who

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Chesler, 151.

³⁹ “NEW YORK BIRTH CONTROL CLINIC WHICH WAS RAIDED: Margaret Sanger, Advocate of Smaller Families, Taken Into Custody, and Many Women Held as Witnesses,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, October 28, 1916.

was willing to take any opportunity to confront the law – an approach that she later carried into her trial.

In mid-November, two weeks after being released on bail, Sanger reopened the Brownsville Clinic. Surprisingly, it seems there was very little media coverage of this event outside of New York papers, even though Sanger’s arrest and release were covered across the United States.⁴⁰ On November 13, the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* published an interview with Sanger in which she said “they may arrest me at any moment, but what is the use. I shall return to this place... the poor women of Brownsville need me.”⁴¹ When asked what she was doing at the clinic, the birth control champion supposedly said “What would you suppose I am doing. I am giving the women who come to my place the information they desire—they information they need.”⁴² According to the *Eagle* reporter, Jonah J. Goldstein, Sanger’s lawyer, had no idea that she reopened the clinic. When he was informed by the reporter, Goldstein quipped “You have to admire that woman’s

⁴⁰ “Birth Control Clinic Planned for Bay City; Woman Convicted Asserts That Information Is to Be Disseminated,” *Bakersfield Californian*, October 20, 1916, <http://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/5050081/?terms=%22margaret%20sanger%22&match=1>; “Police Seek Secret Clinic; Would Stop Birth Control,” *Oakland Tribune*, October 21, 1916, http://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/81284720/?terms=%22margaret%20sanger%22&pqsid=SG9dH_Ilt7hbDlylRtpRhw%3A98000%3A661541990&match=1; “Birth Control Clinics Start; Mrs. Margaret Sanger Opens the First of Its Kind in New York City,” *Bureau County Tribune*, October 27, 1916, <http://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/613035588/?terms=%22margaret%20sanger%22&match=1>.

⁴¹ “‘WIDE OPEN AGAIN’ SAYS MRS. SANGER; DEFIES THE POLICE,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, November 13, 1916, http://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/55289514/?terms=%22brownsville%22%20and%20%22margaret%20sanger%22&pqsid=5_fcOCJGQ490buGjeEYzRA%3A118000%3A1326789310&match=1.

⁴² *Ibid.*

pluck.”⁴³ These reports portrayed Sanger as a resolute and proud woman who was compelled to aid her sisters despite the threat of the law. The clinic’s reopening was also covered in the *New York Times*, albeit extremely briefly, in the corner of a page that mostly focuses on controversy surrounding the reelection of then-President Woodrow Wilson.⁴⁴

After the Clinic

In addition to newspaper coverage of the Brownsville Clinic, Sanger and her allies published a narrative about opening the clinic soon after it closed. Sanger conceived of a magazine entitled the *Birth Control Review* as an alternative to a national birth control organization. The National Birth Control League existed at the time of the magazine’s founding, but its activities and approach appealed to conservative minds and distanced birth control advocates on the liberal end of the political spectrum.⁴⁵ This magazine was published for a few years in the latter half of the 1910s until Sanger moved on to other projects. In the March 1917 edition of the magazine, Elizabeth Stuyvesant penned an article entitled “The Brownsville Birth Control Clinic.” Stuyvesant was a social worker who aided Sanger closely, and served as the treasurer, secretary, and one of the editors of the *Review* from its founding in February 1917 through May of the same year.⁴⁶ Stuyvesant opened her piece by stating the importance of the Brownsville Clinic – she claimed that Sanger and her associates launched “the most important sociological

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ “REPUBLICANS STILL REFUSE TO GIVE UP: Chairman Willcox Says Committee Will ‘Sit Tight’ Until Official Count Is Made,” *New York Times*, November 14, 1916.

⁴⁵ Chesler, 165-7.

⁴⁶ Shivani Patel, “Biographical Sketch of Elizabeth Stuyvesant,” accessed October 20, 2021, <https://documents.alexanderstreet.com/d/1009755086>.

experiment since the establishment of babies' dispensaries."⁴⁷ It is unclear exactly what she was referring to here, but medical dispensaries were often places where low-income individuals were treated for low or no fees. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, these individuals were often turned away from hospitals.⁴⁸ Additionally, Stuyvesant used the word "charity" repeatedly in this piece. She saw her and her colleagues' work as providing a necessary social service to poor women who could not take care of their and their families' health on their own. Stuyvesant reported that Sanger, her sister and fellow nurse Ethel Byrne, and their interpreter Fania Mindell knew the legal risks involved in opening the clinic. On the other hand, Stuyvesant herself struggled to imagine any illegality "in doing for Margaret Sanger's clinic what [Stuyvesant] had for several years done for the Associated Charities of a large city" – supervising children while their mothers obtained assistance.⁴⁹ Her role was to accompany Sanger as Sanger purchased the materials necessary to furnish and operate the clinic, including "articles" (likely images or diagrams) to demonstrate to foreign-born women what to ask for at a drugstore when searching for contraceptives. As with Sanger, Stuyvesant described her own work as absolutely essential to the larger community, regardless of what the law might say.

The *Birth Control Review* article also shed some light on the state of Brownsville and why Sanger chose it as the location for her first clinic. Stuyvesant described the neighborhood in a way that was quite depressing. She stated: "street after street, as far as

⁴⁷ Stuyvesant, 6.

⁴⁸ "The Eighteenth Century Dispensary Movement," Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh, April 16, 2016, <https://www.rcpe.ac.uk/heritage/eighteenth-century-dispensary-movement>.

⁴⁹ Stuyvesant, 6.

one can see in every direction, there is an endless stretch of dreary walls bursting with their excess of wretched humanity. Unkempt children swarm the alley ways [sic].”⁵⁰ But the women who inhabited this section of the community were apparently not the ones who heeded Sanger’s “clarion call.” Stuyvesant was surprised to note that, despite poverty, the women who visited the clinic were friendly, grateful, and joyous.⁵¹ Stuyvesant clearly pitied these people, which raises the issue of how Sanger and her staff saw themselves as saviors for the poor. This rhetoric likely fueled the eugenicist logic that the only way to save individuals from poverty was to make sure they did not reproduce. Scholars have written little about Sanger’s support of eugenics within the specific context of the Brownsville Clinic. This topic requires further study, because Sanger’s founding of the Birth Control Clinical Research Bureau (later Planned Parenthood) in the 1920s was supported in great part by eugenicists. The Brownsville Clinic paved the way for this future work and helped shape the national conversation about birth control for years to come. It is important to note that newspaper reports depicted Sanger using rhetoric in the courtroom that did not specifically mention eugenics – as elaborated later, she was more likely to defend herself with the idea that poor women desperately needed her protection and advice.

On January 4th, 1917, the trials of Ethel Byrne, Fania Mindell, and Margaret Sanger for breaking New York’s Comstock Law began, lasting about a month. A *New York Times* article describes the first of multiple eye-catching scenarios that occurred during the trials. According to this report, a group of society women were planning a

⁵⁰ Ibid., 6-7.

⁵¹ Ibid.

breakfast in Sanger's honor at the Woman's City Club at the Vanderbilt Hotel. Twelve or more of these women accompanied Sanger in automobiles to the Court of Special Sessions later in the morning. The image of a convoy of wealthy white women escorting Sanger indicates much about her supporters and their desire to be visible both in and out of the courtroom.⁵² Additionally, Sanger's willingness to participate in this event cemented her status as an upper-class woman. While the society women were identified by their husbands' names, many of them were famous in their own right. Gertrude Minturn Pinchot was the daughter of a shipping magnate and was a friend of Jane Addams.⁵³ Given her connections as a society woman and her marriage to social reformer Amos Pinchot, it is unsurprising that she supported Sanger's cause.⁵⁴

Rose Pastor Stokes, a union organizer and columnist for a Yiddish newspaper, also accompanied Sanger. Not born into money, Stokes began working in sweatshops at age eleven and later became a writer. Through this work, she met millionaire James Graham Phelps Stokes, whom she later married. In addition to her journalism, Rose Pastor Stokes also wrote plays with plots that advocated the importance of birth control access.⁵⁵ Her presence and the presence of other wealthy white women indicates that they felt that Sanger's cause was worth their time and attention, perhaps as much as the

⁵² "ESCORT FOR MRS. SANGER: Women to Accompany Her to Court in Birth Control Case," *New York Times*, January 3, 1917.

⁵³ Jean Zimmerman, *Love, Fiercely: A Gilded Age Romance* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012), <http://archive.org/details/lovefiercelygild0000zimm> and "Gertrude Minturn Pinchot to Jane Addams, January 11, 1913 · Jane Addams Digital Edition," Jane Addams Papers Project Digital Edition, accessed October 30, 2021, <https://digital.janeaddams.ramapo.edu/items/show/5782>.

⁵⁴ Amos' brother was politician Gifford Pinchot; "1943-1944 Obituary Record of Graduates of Yale University" (Yale University, 1944), 88.

⁵⁵ "Rose Pastor Stokes," Jewish Women's Archive, accessed October 28, 2021, <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/stokes-rose-pastor>.

more typical settlement house or missionary work. As sociologist Theda Skocpol has asserted, women in the early twentieth century got involved in a wide variety of public reform efforts—as long as an issue could be justified as connected to maintenance of moral and healthy homes and families, women of all classes would get involved.⁵⁶ The *New York Times* listed their names as if reporting for the social pages on individuals who were seen attending the opera, indicating that Sanger’s trial was by no means an average one. This event was a social spectacle, but it was also the result of what these women saw as essential and deeply necessary work. Their enthusiastic presence indicated they agreed with Sanger that birth control was both a social reform and a political reform issue.

Another *New York Times* article reported on Sanger’s patients who had been called as witnesses during the trials and described one woman in particular: “A poorly clad woman with six children ranging in age from sixteen months to ten years who said she was Mrs. Rose Halpern.”⁵⁷ Halpern was a Lithuanian immigrant and an early clinic patient who organized other Brownsville mothers in order to show support during Sanger’s trial.⁵⁸ Halpern continued to appear in records of Sanger’s trial and conviction – when Sanger was released from her 30-day sentence, Halpern was there to greet her with

⁵⁶ Theda Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1992), https://web-s-ebscobhost-com.pallas2.tcl.sc.edu/ehost/ebookviewer/ebook/ZTAyNXhuYV9fMjgyNzIyX19BTg2?s_id=45bd2206-96c9-4f1e-9461-28ad8a36a544@redis&vid=0&format=EB&rid=1, 337.

⁵⁷ “MRS. SANGER’S AID IS FOUND GUILTY: Mrs. Byrne Convicted on Technicality in First of Birth Control Trials. WOMEN NOISY IN COURT,” *New York Times*, January 9, 1917.

⁵⁸ “Who’s Who at the Brownsville Birth Control Clinic Trial?,” Margaret Sanger Papers Project, accessed October 20, 2021, <https://sangerpapers.wordpress.com/tag/trials/>.

a bouquet of flowers.⁵⁹ The January 9th article also includes details about how little money Halpern's husband made. This particular *Times* reporter was willing to show sympathy for the Brownsville mothers, but not for Sanger's breaking of the law. Here, the journalist reported only facts about Sanger and her sister, Byrne: the court convicted Byrne of selling articles prohibited by the law and set Sanger and Mindell's trials for January 29th, 1917. Additionally, "'disorder' in the form of violent handclapping by the women present, of whom there were nearly a hundred, interrupted the proceedings."⁶⁰ These women may have disrespected the court, but they used their power to disrupt and draw attention to a cause they held dear.

During a lull in the trial proceedings, fifty to seventy Brownsville mothers gathered on January 24th in the Brownsville Clinic in order to protest Byrne's prison sentence.⁶¹ Sanger and multiple other speakers informed the women of Byrne's hunger strike by saying that Byrne was "starving herself for the knowledge that she has given the mothers of Brownsville."⁶² Byrne employed a tactic that was frequently used during this time period by suffragists. Hunger strikes played upon the idea that the female body was fragile and vulnerable, and Byrne's strike associated these values directly with poor

⁵⁹ Melissa R. Klapper, "The Drama of 1916: The American Jewish Community, Birth Control, and Two Yiddish Plays," *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 12, no. 4 (2013): 510.

⁶⁰ "MRS. SANGER'S AID IS FOUND GUILTY: Mrs. Byrne Convicted on Technicality in First of Birth Control Trials. WOMEN NOISY IN COURT."

⁶¹ "BROWNSVILLE WOMEN HAVE PROTEST MEETING," *Standard Union*, January 25, 1917,

http://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/544125961/?terms=%22brownsville%22%20and%20%22margaret%20sanger%22&pqid=5_fcOCJGQ490buGjeEYzRA%3A118000%3A1326789310&match=1 and "Hold a Protest Meeting," *The Chat*, January 27, 1917, <http://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/576400773/?terms=%22brownsville%22%20and%20%22margaret%20sanger%22&match=1>.

⁶² "BROWNSVILLE WOMEN HAVE PROTEST MEETING."

urban mothers in order to draw sympathy for their cause.⁶³ It is worth noting that suffragist Alice Paul became famous for a hunger strike in the same year, but hers occurred about nine months after Byrne's.⁶⁴ Byrne's hunger strike got increasingly more attention throughout the last week of January. Five days after the protest meeting, Sanger and Mindell's trials began. The *New York Times* published an article that both announced this event and also covered Ethel Byrne's hunger strike.⁶⁵ This choice certainly garnered media attention and horror, even if it did not always evoke sympathy, leading Byrne to believe that she achieved her goal.

Reports of the trial also announced upcoming events. While Mindell was supposed to be tried first for breaking New York's obscenity laws, five hundred Brownsville mothers would supposedly show up to court "with baby carriages" in support of Sanger and her cause.⁶⁶ The image of Sanger as a shepherd, flanked by mothers who were tied to their responsibilities but were taking a political stand, nonetheless, was a planned stunt. It is unclear who organized this action, but it may have been the aforementioned Rose Halpern. This performative gathering demonstrated both the importance of Sanger's cause and also the political power of working-class women. Additionally, arrangements were being made for a mass meeting at Carnegie Hall that

⁶³ Victoria Wolcott, "Suffragists Used Hunger Strikes as Tool of Resistance," UBNOW, accessed October 31, 2021, <http://www.buffalo.edu/ubnow/stories/2020/08/wolcott-conversation-suffragists.html>.

⁶⁴ "Dr. Alice Paul," U.S. National Park Service, accessed December 8, 2021, <https://www.nps.gov/people/alice-paul.htm>.

⁶⁵ "MRS. BYRNE TO HAVE A FEEDING SCHEDULE: Workhouse Physicians Decide Not to Wait Again Till She Is Near a Collapse. DIET IS MILK, EGGS, BRANDY Mrs. Sanger's Trial Set for Today; Birth Control Mass Meeting at Carnegie Hall Tonight," *New York Times*, January 29, 1917.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

evening, hosted by suffragist and workers' rights advocate Helen Todd. Fifty Brownsville women were to be seated on the stage as guests of honor and six boxes had been reserved for the judges who sentenced Mrs. Byrne.⁶⁷ As discussed below, Sanger spoke at the Carnegie Hall event and multiple other Brownsville support events between November 1916 and January 1917. She may not have originally proposed these events, but she used them as a key part of her carefully crafted public image during this time. In the above story, the women of Brownsville are portrayed by the *New York Times* as independent individuals with their own political agency and are treated with less pity than they had been previously by papers such as the *Daily Eagle*. Sanger was at least partially using these women as a political prop, but in taking this bait, the *Times* reminded the reader just how many working-class women from Brownsville were willing to support Sanger publicly. The Carnegie Hall event was a publicity stunt, especially given that Sanger used the event to distribute the first edition of *The Birth Control Review*. It is difficult to say how this event fueled readership of the magazine, but it was significant nonetheless for how it physically demonstrated support for Sanger.

The next morning, the *Times* published a dramatic and detailed report of the Carnegie Hall event. The reporter started by stating that "Three thousand persons in mass meeting at Carnegie Call [sic] last night started a concerted movement for the repeal of the law forbidding the dissemination of birth control knowledge."⁶⁸ The crowd, mostly women of all ages and classes, filled the two upper galleries because the admission

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ "MRS. SANGER DEFIES COURTS BEFORE 3,000: Carnegie Hall Mass Meeting Pledges Support in Her Birth-Control Fight. WOMEN CHEER HER SPEECH," *New York Times*, January 30, 1917.

charge there was only 25 cents.⁶⁹ The most scandalous part of this event seemed to be the fact that “many girls were in the audience who might have been high school students – few of them had escorts.”⁷⁰ This is one of the few places where the *New York Times* takes an overtly judgmental tone. Assuming that she would be convicted that afternoon, Sanger had prepared a speech appropriate to that situation. When it turned out that her trial would continue into the rest of the week, she deviated from her planned text to make dramatic historical associations between birth control supporters and witches of the seventeenth century. She stated “I come not from the stake of Salem, where women were burned for blasphemy, but from the shadow of Blackwell’s Island, where women are tortured for ‘obscenity.’”⁷¹ Blackwell’s Island was a part of New York known for its prisons and asylums, and her language conveyed the idea that women who had not committed any real sin were being unjustly isolated from society.⁷² Sanger evoked sympathy for herself and for other women in order to indicate her belief that using birth control, whether or not with eugenics in mind, was morally correct. Dr. Mary Hunt, another speaker, evoked witch trial imagery as well in order to remind the audience that class played a role in this issue: “they [doctors] practice birth control among the women who can pay for it, and the poor women can go hang.”⁷³ These descriptions played on collective American memory to evoke a dark and embarrassing period which most

⁶⁹ Approximately \$5.40 today.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² “Blackwell’s Island (Roosevelt Island), New York City,” U.S. National Park Service, accessed November 1, 2021, <https://www.nps.gov/places/blackwell-s-island-new-york-city.htm>.

⁷³ “MRS. SANGER DEFIES COURTS BEFORE 3,000: Carnegie Hall Mass Meeting Pledges Support in Her Birth-Control Fight.”

Americans regretted. Sanger and Hunt's statements were warnings about the possibility that the nation might repeat past mistakes if change did not occur. These associations also removed blame from women who sought out birth control information and moved it to society overall.

Sanger's conviction on February 2nd and her sentencing on February 5th fueled even more news coverage. When the court pronounced Sanger guilty, she announced that whether she went on a hunger strike would depend on the court's action: according to a *New York Times* reporter, "if the court allowed her to go on the payment of a fine or a suspended sentence while the constitutionality of the anti-birth control law was being tested, everything would be all right."⁷⁴ Sanger's main goal now became the repeal of the state Comstock law. The reporter's paraphrase of Sanger's words, saying "everything would be all right," in addition to reports of Byrne's hunger strike, hinted that the legal system felt compelled to return Sanger and her assistants to their adoring public intact. The word choice in these reports emphasized that going to jail and/or clashing again with the law might result in danger to Sanger's health and well-being, which could upset those who believed in Sanger's cause in addition to anyone who saw women as needing protection. Furthermore, New York Governor Charles Seymour Whitman ordered Commissioner of Correction Lewis to release Byrne from prison, despite the fact that she had only served part of her sentence. Byrne was moved to Sanger's home to recover. It seemed that Byrne's popularity insulated her from punishment.

⁷⁴ "MRS. SANGER GUILTY, FACES PRISON TERM: Court Will Sentence Woman in Birth Control Case Monday. MAY GO ON HUNGER STRIKE," *New York Times*, February 3, 1917.

A few days later, Sanger was sentenced, fueling questions in the media about whether Sanger would replicate Byrne's hunger strike. These *Daily Eagle* and the *Times* gave notably different accounts of the event. It is important to note that Byrne told the *New York Times* that she did not conduct a hunger strike in order to gain attention for the cause of birth control, but to protest the conditions of the workhouse where she was supposed to serve her sentence.⁷⁵ According to the *Eagle*, the court gave Sanger the opportunity to avoid jail time if she promised to stop breaking the law but she "resolutely declined" to take advantage of their leniency and turned her back on freedom.⁷⁶ The subheadline of the article claimed that she told reporters she was not strong enough for a hunger strike, but this was not the full truth. The article quoted Sanger as saying: "I am not going on a hunger strike... because Mrs. Byrne's condition has convinced me that I can do far more good by noting everything there [at the workhouse] carefully for the purposes of an investigation."⁷⁷ Sanger maintained the image that her work was always to uplift downtrodden women, but privately she may never have seriously considered associating herself with the radical, disturbing image created by suffragist hunger strikers. Byrne was never as famous as Sanger was, and likely did not see herself as responsible for the portrayal of the entire birth control movement. I argue that, while Sanger was still at the beginning of her career, she knew that her behavior during and

⁷⁵ "MRS. SANGER STARTS TERM.: Her Sister, Mrs. Byrne, Condemns Conditions on Island," *New York Times*, February 7, 1917.

⁷⁶ "MRS. SANGER GETS 30 DAY SENTENCE," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, February 5, 1917, http://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/54439845/?terms=%22brownsville%22%20and%20%22margaret%20sanger%22&pqsid=5_fcOCJGQ490buGjeEYzRA%3A118000%3A1326789310&match=1.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

after her trial would set an example for the nation and did not take this responsibility lightly. Seeing how the public responded to Byrne's hunger strike led Sanger to take a conservative, measured approach to her activism. This would endear her to a larger part of the American public and would convince people that she had the moral high ground, not the Comstock laws. Again, this shows that Sanger saw birth control as both a moral and a political issue.

The *New York Times* report of the Sanger's sentencing included valuable additional remarks from Sanger and quotes from the judges. In response to the offer that Sanger pay a fee and promise to obey the law, she replied that it would depend on the decision of an appellate court. One of the justices of the court responded impatiently "We are not prosecutors looking for blood. We are simply here to judge conservatively, with an eye for the whole people."⁷⁸ This quote raises the question of whether this "whole people" included poor women or immigrant women. Sanger reportedly returned with "this is a test case," demonstrating full commitment to getting New York laws changed.⁷⁹ Sanger's last public comment in court was "I cannot respect the law as it exists today," which was followed with "a ripple of applause" throughout the courtroom, likely from Brownsville mothers and birth control reformers who were following the case.⁸⁰ This description painted Sanger and her supporters as dignified and respectful. The *Daily Eagle* printed this quote as well but added no comment about Sanger's followers – for smaller papers, Sanger was the main focus of attention but, in reality, she

⁷⁸ "MRS. SANGER GETS 30 DAYS.: Refuses Alternative of a Fine, but She Will Not Go on Hunger Strike," *New York Times*, February 6, 1917.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

never acted alone at any point during the clinic's operation or her trial. Examining multiple primary sources demonstrates how she relied on her friends and her supporters in order to further her political and legal agenda.

On February 7th, Sanger was moved from Raymond Street Jail in Brooklyn to a prison on Blackwell's Island to begin her thirty-day sentence. The *New York Times* reported on this event while also making mention of Byrne's earlier hunger strike, continuing the association between Sanger's cause and this particular protest tactic. Whether or not Sanger and Byrne colluded on their messaging to the media, at this point they both shifted their focus to the unfortunate women on Blackwell's Island whose physical and intellectual needs were not being met. The *Standard Union* published a piece that reported on a letter Sanger sent to Byrne. Supposedly, Sanger wrote that "there are six hundred women here who are just the ones in need of our propaganda."⁸¹ Sanger may have been using the term "propaganda" sarcastically here, or may not have used it at all, but because the *Standard Union* was the only source to report about this, it is difficult to know for sure. Regardless, she was reemphasizing the need for disadvantaged women to receive information about birth control.

On March 6th, 1917, Sanger completed her sentence and left the Queens Jail. The *Daily Eagle* covered this event with a long article written in elaborate, detailed prose. It began with a description of twenty-five of Sanger's adoring fans from various

⁸¹ "MRS. SANGER KEEPING UP HER PROPAGANDA," *Standard Union*, February 7, 1917, http://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/544129363/?terms=%22brownsville%22%20and%20%22margaret%20sanger%22&pqid=5_fcOCJGQ490buGjeEYzRA%3A118000%3A1326789310&match=1.

socioeconomic classes huddled against the wind, waiting for her release. This took much longer than expected because Sanger had had a physical struggle with jail staff who attempted to take her fingerprints. “I was not a cut-throat or a murderer and to take my finger prints as a criminal was wrong,” Sanger purportedly announced.⁸² Despite Sanger’s desire to aid and educate less fortunate women while in jail, she refused to place herself in the same social group as them. She felt that there was a difference between going to jail for a political reason versus a criminal reason: the former was honorable while the latter was below her station as an activist for poor women. Even after serving her sentence, she still saw herself as a member of the upper crust. This paper portrayed Sanger and her supporters as joyous and included a detailed section about Sanger’s glowing review of the conditions in the jail. This was exactly the opposite of the conditions Byrne faced in jail, so we must ask whether Sanger was treated differently, perhaps because of the media attention Byrne had received when her jailers could not break her hunger strike. The *Eagle* reporter asked Sanger if she was ready to go to jail again for her cause, and Sanger responded, “I don’t know... Jails aren’t pleasant.”⁸³ Sanger may have spoken with less confidence here than she did during her trial, but other reports demonstrate that she was still committed to drawing attention to her cause.

Brooklyn’s *Times Union* gave a much more succinct account of the event.

According to the *Times Union*, Sanger gave a slightly different response about why she

⁸² “MRS. SANGER FREE; FINGER-PRINTS NOT TAKEN, HER BOAST,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, March 6, 1917, http://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/686923553/?terms=%22brownsville%22%20and%20%22margaret%20sanger%22&pqid=5_fcOCJGQ490buGjeEYzRA%3A118000%3A1326789310&match=1.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

refused to have her fingerprints taken: “I said that it was about time that the State began to discriminate between political prisoners, serving for a principle, and cutthroats and burglars.”⁸⁴ This article portrayed Sanger as more resolute and victorious, but still showed that Sanger felt jail was only worth it if she were making a political statement. The reader is reminded again of Sanger’s socioeconomic status and bravery when the reporter mentions “at first she did not enjoy the molasses, bread, tea and hash which was served her, but later she was able to eat it,” implying that Sanger only ate low-quality foods when necessary to survive.⁸⁵ The *Times Union* lists the high society members who were present to greet Sanger, but the article mainly focuses on her and her struggle to defy the prison staff’s attempts at taking her prints. We must ask how much change Sanger actually affected during the six months following the Brownsville Clinic’s opening. In the ensuing year, Sanger appealed her conviction, but New York’s Court of Appeals upheld the decision in January 1918. Despite this, presiding Judge Frederick Crane included the opinion that doctors and pharmacists could prescribe contraception on broader medical grounds, rather than for the specific prevention of pregnancy or venereal disease.⁸⁶ While this did not satisfy Sanger’s dream of nurse-run clinics providing birth control to women of all classes, this ruling did set the stage for later essential cases such as *Griswold v. Connecticut*.

⁸⁴ “NO FINGERPRINTS OF MRS. SANGER AS SHE IS FREED,” *Times Union*, March 6, 1917, http://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/556180514/?terms=%22brownsville%22%20and%20%22margaret%20sanger%22&pqsid=5_fcOCJGQ490buGjeEYzRA%3A118000%3A1326789310&match=1.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ Chesler, 159-160.

Conclusion

From the time that Sanger opened the Brownsville Clinic until the end of her thirty-day sentence, she and her supporters demonstrated an increasing willingness to challenge the legal status quo. Coverage of these events proves that she could not and did not take this stance alone. Some individuals supported her in order to fulfill their middle- or upper-class desire to aid those less fortunate than themselves, and some supported her because of their desperate desire to have more control over their health and the health of their families. Regardless, there is much to learn from this historical moment. Scholars like Ellen Chesler have written about Sanger's role in the politicization of birth control, but historians rarely focus on the Brownsville Clinic as an important part of Sanger's activism. My research shows that this event and its fallout were transformative for Sanger and her allies. In light of these findings, it would be wise to reassess our understanding of birth control activism between the 1920s and the 1970s. Historians must ask what it meant and continues to mean for contraception to be both a moral and a legal issue. Additionally, it would be beneficial for future researchers to explore whether and how contemporary Yiddish papers covered Sanger's activism.

As indicated by the passage of Texas Senate Bill 8, other legal challenges to *Roe v. Wade*, and the responses to this legislation, we cannot avoid ongoing conversations about reproductive rights. The Brownsville Clinic reminds us to ask not whether birth control advocates are breaking the law, but why.

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