The Legalization of Birth Control in North America: A Historical Reflection on the Emergence of this Social Innovation

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Abstract

Please note that this paper is part of the session entitled "Histories of Innovation and Transformation in Complex Systems" and it is part of the Transformations theme.
The legalization of birth control is an example of a successful social innovation that has had, and is expected to continue to have a huge impact on the lives and livelihood of women and families across North America. This case study considers the evolution of the constructed social phenomena surrounding the legality of birth control use and dissemination from the 1700’s through to the present time. Questions that are asked include: What is the social phenomena that seems to govern norms and values on contraception? What combinations of events contributed to the development of the social innovation and its adoption? Who was involved in the change? What discrete moments mark tipping points that ultimately contributed to the social innovation? What new social phenomena is formed as a result?

In this case, social innovation emerged through persistent efforts that rode the waves of changing social conditions and concerns, technological advances, and legal rulings that each served to open up windows of opportunity for social entrepreneurs to pursue an adjacent possible – those new realities that are now, but were not previously, acceptable due to a change in present conditions and create a new social phenomena. With regard to this particular case study, it seems that an adjacent possible can be instrumental in gaining momentum towards ultimately achieving a social innovation in one of two ways: by either building capacity for the social innovation or by weakening the capacity of the competition to resist the innovation.

This particular case study reveals a strong theme of competition between those who fought for the innovation and those who fought against it. It seems that the ability to capitalize on a window of opportunity is strongly associated with the strength of the coalition in relation to their competition at the time that the opportunity becomes available. Strength seems to be related to how organized the group is, the amount of financial and social resources that they have and their relative power and reputation. In addition, it seems that incremental attempts to pursue an adjacent possible are most likely to be successful when coupled with a window of opportunity. Without it, no matter how organized, attempts to make change seem to be met with resistance and, in this case hostility and legal action.

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