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Author(s): Matthew Connelly

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Population Control is History: New Perspectives on the International Campaign to Limit Population Growth

MATTHEW CONNELLY

Columbia University

The international campaign to control human fertility has inspired a vast interdisciplinary literature, but only in recent years has it become a subject for historical study and debate. New archives have opened, especially among the largest donors during its early, heroic phase. And scientists and activists are increasingly willing to be reflexive about their lives' work. Most importantly, with rates of fertility declining in every region of the world, it is now possible to begin to see the end of the story. As the period of unprecedented growth in world population draws to a close, international efforts directed at limiting that growth—as opposed to safeguarding reproductive rights and health—will inexorably pass from the domain of policy to history.¹

Yet even with new sources and the perspective that time's passage can provide, "population control" poses daunting challenges to historians. It touches on the history of technology and medicine, of demography and diplomacy, of political economy and cultural formation. Dozens of governments along with non-governmental and international organizations funded programs to limit population growth, and their impact can only be determined by studying how they played out in communities all over the world. Scholars must therefore consider an array of methods, frames, and levels of analysis. "A political economy of fertility is a multi-leveled field of inquiry," as Susan Greenhalgh has observed: "It combines societal structure and individual agency, both of which

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¹ This distinction suggests the nature and limits of the term "population control," which is itself fast becoming a historical artifact. As will be discussed anon, while it now denotes a shrinking subset of the "family planning" agenda, population control can be seen as encompassing the once wide-ranging efforts to shape the quality as well as the quantity of population. On this point see also Dennis Hodgson and Susan Cotts Watkins, "Feminists and Neo-Malthusians: Past and Present Alliances," *Population and Development Review* 23 (1997):471. The latest U.N. projections are presented in "World Population Prospects: The 2000 Revision," <http://www.un.org/esa/population/wpp2000.html>.

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generally escape the demographer's attention, and draws on both quantitative and qualitative research methods and materials . . . The objective . . . is to understand how a particular set of reproductive institutions and behaviors evolved and how its constitutive elements relate to each other."²

This article surveys this new and expanding area of inquiry by analyzing some of the most impressive studies emerging from different disciplines. Yet it also draws attention to how they are diverging, making Greenhalgh's objective appear increasingly distant. Historically minded population specialists as well as historians of population policy draw on their own experiences or elite archives, almost always in the United States. They rarely connect with scholars writing on the microhistory of reproduction, work that greatly complicates and enriches our understanding of agency in population policy. Yet these scholars, for their part, seldom ask how participants' choices might have had consequences beyond their own lives and communities. And whether written at the level of "world systems" or the individual clinic, studies all too often portray population control as a Cold War strategy the West foisted on the rest of the world, ignoring evidence that constituencies for interventionist policies emerged across Asia and Latin America decades earlier.

This essay will endeavor to show what might be gained if these different approaches were brought into dialogue and set in an international and comparative perspective. It will describe population control as a precociously international movement that served as a platform for an array of ideological projects. Episodes from its long history will help to illustrate how it can and should be seen as a key site of political contestation and cross-cultural learning, in which revolutionary leaders used international conferences to articulate new visions of North-South relations while "clients" treated birth control clinics as sites of negotiation and exchange. Examples such as these will demonstrate how one can use the politics of population to probe the tensions within and between feminism, eugenics, environmentalism, and "development" as they interacted in a global arena, and thus illuminate the full dimensions of a subject that scholars have scarcely begun to explore.³

POPULATION CONTROL FROM THE TOP DOWN

Some of the earliest attempts to put the politics of world population growth in historical perspective emerged from the field of population studies, though sometimes at its margins. These are disciplinary histories, both in the sense that

² Susan Greenhalgh, "Anthropology Theorizes Reproduction: Integrating Practice, Political Economic, and Feminist Perspectives," in *Situating Fertility: Anthropology and Demographic Inquiry*, ed. Susan Greenhalgh (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 13.

³ While the literature on some countries is quite rich, especially the United States, United Kingdom, and India, the focus here is on the cross-border networking and cooperative activities of international agencies, non-governmental organizations, foreign aid programs and the like that are often neglected in single-country accounts. States' efforts within their own borders will be considered to the extent that they influenced or interacted with that broader campaign.

they narrate the professionalization and institutionalization of theoretical and applied research in controlling fertility, but also in that they are concerned to uncover its hidden costs and encourage a self-questioning spirit. In one of the first such efforts, Dennis Hodgson set out to explain the oscillation between “orthodoxy” and “revisionism” in American demography, terms denoting scientists’ greater or lesser confidence in their ability to predict and control fertility. He used the classic rubric of internal and external factors, giving equal weight to the demonstrated inadequacy of theory and the demands of the political environment.⁴ By the time Hodgson wrote even a recent president of the Population Association of America (PAA), Paul Demeny, could be counted among the ranks of the “revisionists” in decrying how the power of the purse had driven researchers toward the politically determined goal of limiting fertility.⁵ Yet in a later article Hodgson went even further, pointing out that the PAA itself had been founded by activists as well as scientists who together were concerned about population’s racial and class composition no less than its quantitative growth or decline.⁶ Its founding president, Henry Pratt Fairchild, declared in 1930 that its purpose was to “present a united front” in preventing any narrower definition of population studies. The PAA’s first research project investigated the effects of contraceptive use on “the fecundity of the socially inadequate classes . . .”⁷

Chronicling the quarrels and marriages of convenience among anti-immigration activists, scientists, eugenicists, and feminists results in “a rich, but chaotic, history of population thought,” as Hodgson admitted.⁸ Other studies have focused on how specific developments in demography reflected both this ideological inheritance and a continually evolving political environment—and in

⁴ Dennis Hodgson, “Orthodoxy and Revisionism in American Demography,” *Population and Development Review* 14,4 (1988):541–69.

⁵ Paul Demeny, “Social Science and Population Policy,” *Population and Development Review* 14,3 (1988):451–79. Other retrospective accounts by influential figures include Robert C. Cook, “Forty Years of PRB” (Population Reference Bureau), Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., Manuscript Division, Robert C. Cook Papers, container 16, folder 3; Oscar Harkavy, *Curbing Population Growth: An Insider’s Perspective on the Population Movement* (New York: Plenum Press, 1995); Frank Notestein, “Reminiscences: The Role of Foundations, of the Population Association of America, Princeton University and of the United Nations in Fostering American Interest in Population Problems,” *Milbank Memorial Fund Quarterly* 49,4 (1971):67–84; Notestein, “Demography in the United States: A Partial Account of the Development of the Field,” *Population and Development Review* 8,4 (1982):651–87.

⁶ Dennis Hodgson, “The Ideological Origins of the Population Association of America,” *Population and Development Review* 17,1 (1991):1–34.

⁷ “Preliminary Conference on a Population Association for the United States,” 12 Dec. 1930, Rockefeller Archive Center, Sleepy Hollow, N.Y. (hereafter RAC), Bureau of Social Hygiene Papers, series 3, box 9; “Population Association of America, Minutes of Second Annual Meeting,” 12 May 1933, *idem*. On this point see also Adele E. Clarke, *Disciplining Reproduction: Modernity, American Life Sciences, and “The Problems of Sex”* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 184–85.

⁸ Hodgson, “The Ideological Origins,” 1. Hodgson’s article with Susan Watkins, “Feminists and Neo-Malthusians,” is a particularly rich account of the alliance politics within the population control movement.

some cases responded to particular conjunctures in international history. For instance, John and Pat Caldwell suggest that birth control's controversial origins and continuing sensitivity made the Ford Foundation reluctant to assume a leading role in establishing clinics abroad. Instead, it first concentrated on developing an international constituency for population studies and planning by funding new research centers and scholarships. Like Hodgson, the Caldwells emphasize both internal and external factors in the relationships that developed between Ford and demographers, including early failures to foresee rapid population growth as well as the beginning of large-scale development aid. Hinting at the very practical considerations that often go unmentioned in accounts of the field, they observe that this aid "had demonstrated that demographers could begin to commute to developing countries, to live there, and to command substantial funds." Indeed, in the three decades following the first grant in 1952, the Ford Foundation spent \$270 million in the population field.⁹

Similarly, Simon Szreter suggests that it was America's newly developed experience in social engineering and eagerness to apply it around the world that explains why "demographic transition theory" came to dominate demography beginning in the 1940s—even though some had drawn similar causal links between economic and population change decades before. Yet demographers discarded the original assumption that fertility was completely dependent on slowly changing socio-economic determinants after the "loss" of China. As limiting population growth in poor countries became a matter of national security, they quickly endorsed the dissemination of contraceptives.¹⁰

Greenhalgh agrees that for too long demography shared the agenda of Cold War-era modernization theory and served U.S. foreign policy interests. Yet she points out that this was hardly unusual among the social sciences, even though demography's late development presented practitioners with particularly difficult choices. Because of their early association with political activism, lack of an independent departmental home in the university, and continued dependence on funding from policymakers, they had to struggle to establish their legitimacy as a scientific discipline. The answer was "to practice science making with a vengeance," Greenhalgh notes, ". . . developing [demography's] identity as a highly quantitative and mathematical field."¹¹

Indeed, the reminiscences of leading practitioners suggest that they took the

⁹ John and Pat Caldwell, *Limiting Population Growth and the Ford Foundation Contribution* (London: Frances Pinter, 1986), 1, 25–34.

¹⁰ Simon Szreter, "The Idea of Demographic Transition and the Study of Fertility Change: A Critical Intellectual History," *Population and Development Review* 19,4 (1993):659–701. Bonnie Mass points out that the State Department blamed the Communist victory on Chiang Kai Shek's inability to cope with population growth, "An Historical Sketch of the American Population Control Movement," in *Imperialism, Health and Medicine*, ed. Vicente Navarro (Farmingdale, N.Y.: Baywood Publishing Company, 1981), 185–86.

¹¹ Susan Greenhalgh, "The Social Construction of Population Science: An Intellectual, Institutional, and Political History of Twentieth-Century Demography," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 38,1 (1996):26ff.

most pride not in their influence among policymakers but in their mathematical virtuosity. For instance, the long-time director of Princeton's Office of Population Research, Frank Notestein, once recalled that the Manhattan project had independently developed the same mathematics to track the birth, death, migration, age, and distribution of neutrons that demographers had long employed to analyze human populations. John von Neumann suggested to him that they should instead study the problems of equilibrium at the sub-atomic level "because the generations come so much faster, and besides, the mathematics is un-complicated by sex."¹²

Even researchers working directly on reproduction developed strategies to safeguard their reputations as scientists from any association with the political agendas of those who funded their work, notably the Rockefellers. As described by Adele E. Clarke, they resisted working on contraceptives while promising that basic research in such fields as endocrinology would yield applications, much to the frustration of their backers. As early as 1928 Rockefeller Foundation trustee Raymond Fosdick called one request for \$790,000 "sheer idiocy," suspecting it was "the work of a lot of college professors who have assumed that millions are at their disposal." Eventually researchers achieved a "contraceptive quid pro quo" in which they developed more "scientific" methods such as the pill and the IUD as part of a social control agenda that sacrificed the liberating spirit of early birth control advocates.¹³

"Mathematics complicated by sex" and applied to international politics has also created a rich history for students of public policy. Drawing on newly-accessible foundation and U.S. federal government archives, historians such as Donald Critchlow and John Sharpless have revealed the strategies and resources required to overcome Washington's reluctance to sponsor research and intervene abroad to shape reproductive behavior. The joint efforts of demographers, State Department officials, foundation leaders like John D. Rockefeller III, and gadfly Senator Ernest Gruening provide fascinating examples of public-private cooperation in advancing a politically controversial agenda. Yet the internal divisions that Hodgson highlighted continued into the Cold War era, as advocates quarreled over the direction of public relations campaigns, the ethics of more coercive measures, and the new demands posed by feminists and environmentalists.¹⁴

¹² Notestein, "Demography in the United States," 686.

¹³ Fosdick memo to Lawrence Dunham, 28 Mar. 1928, RAC, Bureau of Social Hygiene Papers, series 3, box 8; Clarke, *Disciplining Reproduction*, ch. six. Though it is limited to the American political context, the transformation of birth control from a radical to a conservative cause was also a key theme in Linda Gordon's pioneering study, *Woman's Body, Woman's Right: A Social History of Birth Control in America* (New York: Grossman, 1976).

¹⁴ Donald T. Critchlow, "Birth Control, Population Control, and Family Planning: An Overview," *Journal of Policy History* 7,1 (1995):1-21, and *Intended Consequences: Birth Control, Abortion, and the Federal Government in Modern America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); John Sharpless, "Population Science, Private Foundations, and Development Aid: The Transformation of Demographic Knowledge in the United States, 1945-1965," in *International*

Together the accounts of historically minded population researchers and historians of science and public policy constitute a coherent body of work that has contributed a number of key insights. It has “followed the money” to focus on academic, corporate, and foreign policy elites, with research in both their published writings and private papers. Along with interviews, these reveal how some key decisions were made and what kind of people made them in the development of contraceptive technologies and organizational tactics. They help show how scientists, activists, and philanthropists shaped demography and population studies as policy sciences with bases of support in foundations, advocacy groups, population studies centers, and international organizations. Initially concerned as much about the “quality” as the quantity of population growth, over time their focus shifted from the poor and ethnic minorities within the industrialized West to worries about the relative growth of poor countries. This was especially the case once the USSR began to exert influence in these areas, which finally brought massive U.S. government support for a worldwide campaign to control fertility. Even so, fears of population growth were in many cases still cast in terms of race and class conflict.¹⁵

Yet this work has the vices of its virtues, above all in its tight focus on American elites. There can be no doubt that by the 1960s American foundations and corporations as well as government agencies were vital in developing and marketing new forms of birth control in poor countries. At its peak between 1968 and 1972, the U.S. government provided four-fifths of all international assistance for population programs, and even a decade later public and private American sources accounted for 85 percent of funding for contraceptive research.¹⁶ Yet by locating the origins of the international population control movement among American elites and their anxieties, this work does not help us understand the origins of the demographic growth to which they were responding. These are instead to be found in both the larger, international history of public health programs that dramatically reduced mortality in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, as well as the microhistory of reproductive choice among the people living in these areas.

Development and the Social Sciences, ed. Frederick Cooper and Randall Packard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 176–200, and “World Population Growth, Family Planning, and American Foreign Policy,” *Journal of Policy History* 7,1 (1995):72–102. For histories of international population policy centered on the United States see also Peter J. Donaldson, *Nature Against Us: The United States and the World Population Crisis, 1965–1980* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1990); and James Reed, *The Birth Control Movement and American Society: From Private Vice to Public Virtue* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984).

¹⁵ On this last point see Matthew Connelly, “A Power Beyond Measure: How Fear of Population Growth has Changed the Way People Think About the World,” Population, Environmental Change, and Security Working Paper No. 1, Population-Environment Fellows Program, University of Michigan.

¹⁶ Donaldson, *Nature Against Us*, 48–49; Linda E. Atkinson, Richard Lincoln, and Jacqueline D. Forrest, “Worldwide Trends in Funding for Contraceptive Research and Evaluation,” *Family Planning Perspectives* 17,5 (1985):204.

Instead, these studies often imply that Americans monopolized agency and influence flowed only one way. Critchlow, for instance, asserts that “a small group of men and women, numbering only a few hundred, set the context of the policy debate . . .” Indeed, “the efforts of one man”—Rockefeller—actually “gave shape to the population movement as it emerged in the 1950s.”¹⁷ But other countries had vigorous debates about population and officially sponsored programs before either American foundations or the U.S. government felt able to intervene. President Eisenhower famously insisted that he could not “imagine anything more emphatically a subject that is not a proper political or governmental activity or function or responsibility.”¹⁸ In 1957 Rockefeller’s successor as president of the Population Council, Frederick Osborn, told Margaret Sanger that “it is the United States which is a backward country in respect to the control of population growth, and not the Asian countries . . .” since the governments of India, China, Egypt, and Japan were already working to limit fertility.¹⁹ She was still sometimes barred from mentioning family planning in public appearances in the United States, such as one in which she had guided her fellow chairwoman of the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) into darkest Santa Barbara. Sanger stalked off the stage, and Lady Rama Rao went home to India “with a better knowledge of America, the country and the people, their problems and their deep-seated prejudices and fears.”²⁰ As we shall see, the earlier history of population debates in more “enlightened” countries like India can help explain why they were receptive once the United States took the initiative and why they continued to consider population limitation a priority even when Washington became hostile or indifferent during the Reagan years.²¹

Critchlow’s own account also shows quite clearly that American elites often felt compelled to act with caution, even within the United States, for fear of provoking a backlash. The response or lack of response of “target populations” as measured by low levels of participation in family planning programs and high

¹⁷ Critchlow, *Intended Consequences*, 14–15. Similarly, Sharpless focuses on “a small but powerful group of scholars” which shared the same “methodology, analysis, and language . . .” According to Paul Demeny, they “spawned programmatic action, soon embraced by scores of countries, assisted by international development agencies . . . [providing] an exceptionally clear demonstration of the potential power of academic scribbling in affecting policy,” Sharpless, “World Population Growth,” 80–81, and Demeny, “Social Science and Population Policy,” 457.

¹⁸ Critchlow, *Intended Consequences*, 44. Privately he admitted that population trends were “a constant worry to him and from time to time reduced him to despair,” 408th meeting of the National Security Council, 28 May 1959, Dwight D. Eisenhower Library, Abilene, Kansas, Ann Whitman File, NSC Series.

¹⁹ Reed, *The Birth Control Movement*, 304.

²⁰ Dhanvanthi Rama Rau, *An Inheritance: The Memoirs of Dhanvanthi Rama Rau* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 272–75.

²¹ Gayl Ness and Hirofumi Ando suggest that one could more easily argue that “international population assistance is a set of values and demands that Asians have foisted upon the rest of the world than the other way around,” *The Land Is Shrinking: Population Planning in Asia* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), 182.

drop-out rates were a constant source of frustration and eventually drove Rockefeller to entirely rethink his approach.²² While in elite circles “birth control was discussed in abstract terms, remote from the lives of the women who would be recipients of such programmatic efforts,” as Sharpless asserts, any study that does not go beyond a reading of elite archives runs the same risk. Indeed, Sharpless identifies with those who set U.S. policy to the point that he uses the first person plural in explaining “our motives” as “we” contemplated intervention in areas formerly ruled by “our European allies.”²³

The concern here is not one of identity politics, and it should be emphasized that all these scholars are critical of aspects of U.S. policy and approach it with an array of different political commitments. Rather, it is that their vision of agency is too often limited by a lack of more international perspectives.²⁴ The very title of Critchlow’s book, *Intended Consequences*, is based on the assertion that population control programs “contributed significantly to a reduction in the rate of population growth in many parts of the world,” skirting an enormously complex debate over how significant that contribution really was.²⁵ If there is any consensus among demographers about the declines in fertility now occurring in every region it is that they resulted from not one but many different transitions that defy any global explanation.²⁶ In short, works limited to the history of science and elite decision-making will not reveal the consequences, intended or not, of ideas and policies in the population field, because their impact depended on how they were received and acted upon by program workers and participants.

POPULATION CONTROL FROM THE BOTTOM UP

The failure of classic transition theory to explain fertility declines in diverse communities with or without access to contraceptives has encouraged more interdisciplinary approaches that historians cannot ignore. David Kertzer and Tom Fricke explain that demographers reached out to anthropology—“the presumed repository of wisdom on the nature of culture”—because “culture” had been the repository for all that they could not easily quantify. It now appeared to hold the key to explaining fertility transitions.²⁷ Yet for cultural anthropolo-

²² Critchlow, *Intended Consequences*, 60–61, 83, 141–45, 178.

²³ Sharpless, “World Population Growth,” 76, 83, 88, 100.

²⁴ Perhaps because they are not American, the Caldwells are a notable exception, emphasizing the local origins of population concerns in India, for instance, in *Limiting Population Growth*, 37–41.

²⁵ Critchlow, *Intended Consequences*, 10, 226–27, 238.

²⁶ The literature on demographic transition theory is enormous, but Princeton’s European Fertility Project is most often cited for discrediting the search for a single model comprised of socioeconomic variables; see Ansley Coale and Susan Watkins’ summary, in *The Decline of Fertility in Europe* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1986). On the contribution of family planning programs specifically see, for instance, the exchange between Lant H. Pritchett on the one hand, and John Bongaarts, James C. Knowles, John S. Akin and David K. Guilkey on the other, in “The Impact of Population Policies,” *Population and Development Review* 20,3 (1994):611–30.

²⁷ David I. Kertzer and Tom Fricke, “Toward an Anthropological Demography,” in *Anthropo-*

gists and those they have influenced, beliefs and practices are not so easily contained. Culture cannot be viewed as merely helping or hindering people in recognizing and achieving the “optimal” number of children. Indeed, anthropologists had not viewed fertility per se as a central concern. Now that it has attracted their attention, they insist on situating it in particular societies with all their idiosyncrasies intact. Culture, agency, and interests are seen as mutually constitutive and can only be approached on their own terms and “on the ground,” case-by-case, through close observation.²⁸

Thus, whereas demographic theory had long been based on a one-mother-one-child paradigm, anthropologists emphasized the diversity of both family systems and the means of controlling fertility. Practices of fosterage, adoption, infanticide, and neglect are all part of a process of family formation that cannot be reduced to a one-off cost-benefit analysis of whether to bear a child. The value and status of children varies over time according to a mother’s relationship with their father and other men, for instance, and not just their projected expense and wage-earning potential.²⁹ Similarly, while demographers have for decades understood that motivated populations can practice withdrawal, abstinence, and prolonged breastfeeding to limit their numbers, anthropologists showed that greater ease and freedom in exercising choice did not necessarily lead people to reduce their fertility.³⁰

For instance, women sometimes use contraceptives at higher rates than survey data indicate, but for the purpose of spacing births or protecting their health rather than because they want smaller families.³¹ Others begin contracepting only after they have had children and attain greater financial independence. But it is too simple to equate family limitation with empowerment. It is not clear, for example, that education in itself is causally related to lower fertility, and educated women can be disempowered in other ways, such as domestic violence.

logical Demography: Toward a New Synthesis, ed. Kertzer and Fricke (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 1–25.

²⁸ Reyna Rapp, Foreword, in *Childbirth and Authoritative Knowledge*, ed. Robbie E. Davis-Floyd and Carolyn F. Sargent (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), xi–xii; Kertzer and Fricke, “Toward an Anthropological Demography,” 16; Susan Greenhalgh, “Towards a Political Economy of Fertility: Anthropological Contributions,” *Population and Development Review* 16,1 (1990):85–106; Susan Greenhalgh, “Anthropology Theorizes Reproduction,” 3–28; and Anthony T. Carter, “Agency and Fertility: Toward an Ethnography of Practice,” 55–85, both in *Situating Fertility: Anthropology and Demographic Inquiry*, ed. S. Greenhalgh (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

²⁹ Caroline Bledsoe, “Marginal Members: Children of Previous Unions in Mende Households in Sierra Leone,” in *Situating Fertility*, 130–53.

³⁰ Norman E. Himes, *Medical History of Contraception* (New York: Gamut Press, 1963); Anthony T. Carter, “Agency and Fertility,” 59–60; Peter and Jane Schneider, “High Fertility and Poverty in Sicily: Beyond the Culture vs. Rationality Debate,” in *Situating Fertility*, 179–201.

³¹ Allan G. Hill, Caroline Bledsoe, Umberto D’Alessandro, and Patricia Langerock, “Constructing Natural Fertility: The Use of Western Contraceptive Technologies in Rural Gambia,” *Population and Development Review* 20,1 (1994):81–113; Caroline Bledsoe, Fatoumatta Banja, and Allan G. Hill, “Reproductive Mishaps and Western Contraception: An African Challenge to Fertility Theory,” *Population and Development Review* 24,1 (1998):15–57.

As Candice Bradley suggests, “women of different ages may be coming to family planning for different reasons and through different routes”—and in ways that cannot be quantified and teased out by regression analysis.³²

Culture as understood by anthropologists has thus proven to be a Pandora’s box for demographers. The academic culture clash that resulted is reflected in Kertzer and Fricke’s scathing critique of those who would “study a society without (at least from an anthropologist’s point of view) knowing much of anything about it.” “[N]o need to speak the language, or even to meet a non-Ph.D.-holding native. Visits to the country, if required at all, could be confined to short stays in Western luxury hotels. Data came in categories provided by the demographer rather than by the local people so there was no problem understanding them . . .” They insisted that “Knowledge, Attitudes, and Practice” regarding fertility limitation—or KAP, as demographers designated the most common type of survey—instead had to be understood in categories relevant to the societies studied, even if that required long residence and ruled out “computer manipulation and cross-national comparison.”³³

Of course, these methods are not mutually exclusive. Quantitative data and analysis are also used at the “micro” level and, in conjunction with archival and ethnographic research, can contribute to more powerful and compelling explanations of such phenomena as infant abandonment in nineteenth-century Italy and China’s “missing” girls.³⁴ There is also considerable variety among different qualitative approaches, which rarely replicate anthropological research in the classic mold.³⁵ Thus, in his introduction to one of the most important collections of micro-studies John Caldwell favored “long, probing interviews with individuals and groups. . . . in order to build up files of information and observations about each household and the whole community.” However they differ, all these methods reflect dissatisfaction with learning “the same kinds of things about more and more societies,” as Geoffrey McNicoll described the multinational sample survey juggernaut in the same collection.³⁶

Ironically, the effort to instead learn more and more about the *same* societies opened demographers up to a very different but no less harsh critique. The same year Caldwell offered his approach as a model a sociologist named Agnes Riedmann examined his data and argued that it constituted an exercise in surveil-

³² Candice Bradley, “Women’s Empowerment and Fertility Decline in Western Kenya,” in *Situating Fertility*, 174–75. See also Greenhalgh, “Anthropology Theorizes Reproduction,” 23–25.

³³ Kertzer and Fricke, “Toward an Anthropological Demography,” 18–19.

³⁴ David I. Kertzer, *Sacrificed for Honor: Italian Infant Abandonment and the Politics of Reproductive Control* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993); Susan Greenhalgh and Jiali Li, “Engendering Reproductive Policy,” *Signs* 20 (1995):601–41.

³⁵ See the forum on “Qualitative Methods in Population Studies,” *Population and Development Review* 23 (1997):813–53, especially the contributions of Tom Fricke and John Knodel.

³⁶ Caldwell and Allan G. Hill, “Recent Developments Using Micro-Approaches to Demographic Research,” 7–8; and Geoffrey McNicoll, “On the Local Context of Demographic Change,” both in *Micro-Approaches to Demographic Research*, ed. John C. Caldwell, Allan G. Hill, and Valerie J. Hull (London: Kegan Paul, 1988), 10.

lance and control. “[L]ong, probing interviews” about attitudes toward fertility were, for Riedmann, a kind of push-polling intended to corral respondents into conceiving of children in terms of profit and loss. As such, Caldwell’s more qualitative demographic research was part of a neo-colonial project that policed core-periphery relations.³⁷

Riedmann’s *Science that Colonizes* is one in a long line of works that have subjected both the methods and the motives of population research to searching critiques. It should be read alongside Mahmood Mamdani’s classic 1972 account of the first, failed attempt to demonstrate the effectiveness of programs aimed at limiting fertility through both control and test populations, *The Myth of Population Control*. Whereas Riedmann limited her research to reading documents—albeit reading them “against the grain”—Mamdani also interviewed the north Indian villagers who defied the expectations of Harvard University and the Rockefeller Foundation. Quite simply, they had told researchers what they wanted to hear. Family size was not, in any case, just a matter of their individual preferences but also reflected a local political economy that, for complex and counter-intuitive reasons, created incentives for larger families among even the poorest and most ambitious—indeed, especially them. Rather than naiveté, the assumption that people had only to be informed about their best interests to see smaller families as the golden road to prosperity was “a weapon of the political conservative.”³⁸

Another powerful critique came a decade later in Donald Warwick’s *Bitter Pills*, the first cross-national field study of family planning programs. Originally sponsored by the U.N. Fund for Population Activities to demonstrate that it was sensitive to ethical considerations and cultural diversity, Warwick showed how resistant it was to hearing otherwise. When he finally managed to publish his results, they showed how much family planning programs as they were actually implemented differed from stated policies. Rather than “mechanical interventions whose course is set by programmed rationality,” their success or failure depended on the degree to which they were appropriate to and evolved with their social setting.³⁹

More recently still scholars like Greenhalgh and Nancy Rose Hunt have shown an acute sensitivity to how their research projects inevitably become part of the political context of fertility they are intent on studying. Greenhalgh, for instance, found that her mere presence in Chinese villages and efforts to determine why all too few births of girls were being recorded reinforced the role of

³⁷ Agnes Riedmann, *Science that Colonizes: A Critique of Fertility Studies in Africa* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Temple University Press, 1993).

³⁸ Mahmood Mamdani, *The Myth of Population Control: Family, Caste and Class in an Indian Village* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972).

³⁹ Donald P. Warwick, *Bitter Pills: Population Policies and their Implementation in Eight Developing Countries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), ix; and see also his “The Politics of Population Research with a U.N. Sponsor,” in *The Research Relationship: Practice and Politics in Social Policy Research*, ed. G. C. Wenger (London: Allen & Unwin, 1987), 167–84.

authorities in regulating fertility decisions.⁴⁰ In Hunt's investigation of birthing practices Zairians imagined her as "their latest colonial patron, redeemer, and taskmaster . . .," thus reproducing colonial categories even as she studied them.⁴¹ In the hands of less resolute researchers this exercise could degenerate into naval-gazing. But it represents the logical conclusion of a crucial lesson: fertility research and population programs reflect the culture and practices of their practitioners and cannot themselves be understood outside their political, social, and historical context.⁴²

By their very nature studies written against the imposition of a priori categories cannot be easily summarized. But they share a set of concerns and methods that could contribute much to the history of international efforts to limit population growth. They demonstrate, for instance, that population policy is not something that is only made in foundation meetings, legislative hearings, or international conferences. As Carole Joffe argued in her study of an American birth control clinic, "What family planning policy 'is' at any given moment must be understood as an outcome of negotiations taking place among a number of different actors—politicians, social activists, government bureaucrats, and birth control recipients and providers."⁴³ The nature and impact of a policy is even more contingent when these negotiations are international in nature and are carried out in multiple languages.

Compared to the aforementioned histories of demography and population policy, these works also make much greater use of gender as a frame of analysis.⁴⁴ Rather than entering the picture only at the point when demographers, foundation leaders, and government officials became interested in them, questions about how efforts to limit fertility both reflect and affect the status of men and women are at the heart of these works. In fairness, studies like those of Sharpless and Critchlow are more historical in nature and inevitably echo the concerns of their elite subjects. But their relative inattention to such issues as the nature of risk and control afforded by different contraceptives and modes of distribution is a missed opportunity. Future studies might also explore how elites coded population concerns and constituencies by, for instance, categorizing family planning as "women's work."⁴⁵ Conversely, pro-natalist, Malthu-

⁴⁰ "Methods and Meanings: Reflections on Disciplinary Difference," *Population and Development Review* 23,4 (Dec. 1997):822.

⁴¹ Nancy Rose Hunt, *A Colonial Lexicon: Of Birth Ritual, Medicalization, and Mobility in the Congo* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1999), 22.

⁴² This point is continually brought home to the author whenever family planning advocates remind him that his work—even his use of the term "population control"—can harm the cause. The absence of an explicit political commitment has been interpreted as itself reflecting an ideological position rather than a reluctance to prejudge the conclusions of an ongoing research project.

⁴³ Carole Joffe, *The Regulation of Sexuality: Experiences of Family Planning Workers* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Temple University Press, 1986), 9.

⁴⁴ Hodgson and Watkins' "Feminists and Neo-Malthusians" is an obvious exception.

⁴⁵ For instance, in 1961 George Ball wrote Secretary of State Dean Rusk "that the people who get so excited about population control are often 'garden club' types whose only concern about the

sian and eugenic discourses can construe “the biological reproduction of ‘the nation’” as something too important to be left to women.⁴⁶

Not surprisingly, studies that are motivated by such concerns assume that earlier research and reports are cultural artifacts that require interpretation and contextualization. When, for instance, family planning workers conceive of birth-spacing as an African tradition in the service of modernization, Hunt can point to innumerable earlier interventions—sometimes explicitly pro-natalist—that have repeatedly recast the categories of tradition and modernity.⁴⁷ If there is any constant in how those in power have viewed African populations, as David Cohen acidly observes, it is that they always seem to get in the way of progress: “there are too few people, there are too many people, they are not distributed correctly, there are too many women here, too many men there . . . as if a billion small acts variously rational, appropriate, meaningful, and comprehensible come to constitute an aggregate pathology, a sick continent.”⁴⁸

As we have seen, these scholars are conscious of how their own work might affect that which they study. This sense of responsibility sometimes tempers their critiques of existing population research and programs. For instance, Greenhalgh points out that, while an over-reliance on quantitative research has constrained our understanding of the full complexity and context of fertility, it has also provided a powerful tool to uncover injustice, as in the case of China’s skewed male-female ratios.⁴⁹ Similarly, Rachel Snow cautions that, while reliability was often the overriding criterion of those who directed contraceptive research, focus groups across cultures show it is a major concern for many poor women as well. Privileging “user control” regardless of the social context in which contraceptives are actually used might discourage the development of technologies like injectables, and thus deprive some women of the only means to limit their fertility without fear of retaliation. If, as Snow argues, contemporary researchers and activists are in “the awkward, but heady position of being asked ‘what women want’ without resources to investigate the question,” historians must be cautious in their claims as to what retrospective research can reveal about their preferences in earlier periods—especially given how the political implications of population research continue to weigh on our work.⁵⁰

underdeveloped areas is that the brown and black-skinned population seems to be growing so rapidly,” Ball to Rusk, 30 June 1961, U.S. National Archives, College Park, Md., RG59, Central Decimal Files, 800.401.

⁴⁶ Nira Yuval-Davis, “Women and the Biological Reproduction of ‘the Nation,’” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 19, nos. 1/2 (1996):17–24. France provides a particularly striking case of male dominance in all issues relating to population; S. Koven and S. Michel, “Womanly Duties: Maternalist Politics and the Origins of Welfare States in France, Germany, Great Britain, and the United States, 1880–1920,” *American Historical Review* 95,4 (1990):1099–100.

⁴⁷ Nancy Rose Hunt, “‘Le bébé en brousse’: European Women, African Birth Spacing, and Colonial Intervention in Breast Feeding in the Belgian Congo,” in *International Development and the Social Sciences*, ed. Cooper and Packard, 287–88.

⁴⁸ David William Cohen, “The Politics of Reproduction and Fertility Control,” Program on International Cooperation in Africa, 1993 Institute on Health and Demography, 12 Mar. 1993.

⁴⁹ Greenhalgh and Jiali Li, “Engendering Reproductive Policy,” 636.

⁵⁰ Rachel C. Snow, “Each to Her Own: Investigating Women’s Response to Contraception,” in

POPULATION CONTROL FROM THE INSIDE OUT

Together these works might be described as microhistories of reproduction and birth control, focusing as they do on particular localities, studies, and clinics and the interaction between researchers and research subjects. Some, such as Greenhalgh, have called for work that would relate these micro-level analyses to macro-level processes. A few have succeeded in situating fertility in a national and even international political economy, demonstrating the profound impact of such events as war, migration, compulsory education, and land legislation.⁵¹ But researchers usually have more limited horizons—whether they are demographers disinterested in “high politics,” anthropologists disinclined to comb official archives, or historians content to probe deeply into a particular case without much concern about how it might contribute to a grander narrative.⁵²

Ironically, we may therefore know more about attitudes and practices affecting the fertility of subnational communities, whether in Sicily or Gambia or Kerala, than we do about the ways in which that transnational tribe, the “international population community,” reproduces itself.⁵³ Some might assume we already know all too much, and to be sure demographers in particular have sometimes appeared to “tell all” with either embarrassment or reproach—especially after the “heady times” that marked the heyday of population control in the 1960s and 1970s, as former PAA President John Kantner described them: “something in it for everyone—the activist, the scholar, the foundation officer, the globe-circling consultant, the wait-listed government official. World Conferences, a Population Year, commissions, select committees, new centers for research and training, a growing supply of experts, pronouncements by world leaders and, most of all, money—lots of it.”⁵⁴

Yet such confessions respond to a different impulse than that which motivates historians, who cannot after all grant absolution but should consider whether and how all this made a difference. Kertzer and Fricke have suggested that itinerant lifestyles, lack of languages, and dependence on survey research reduced demographers’ understanding of culture to a set of constraints

Power and Decision: The Social Control of Reproduction, Harvard Series on Population and International Health, ed. Gita Sen and Snow (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994), 247, and Snow, et al., “Investigating Women’s Preferences for Contraceptive Technology: Focus Group Data from 7 Countries,” Harvard Center for Population and Development Studies Working Paper, Number 96.05, Nov. 1996.

⁵¹ See, for instance, Elisha Renne, “Houses, Fertility, and the Nigerian Land Use Act,” *Population and Development Review* 21,1 (1995):113–26; and David I. Kertzer and Dennis P. Hogan, *Family, Political Economy, and Demographic Change: The Transformation of Life in Casalecchio, Italy, 1861–1921* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989).

⁵² Susan Greenhalgh, “Towards a Political Economy of Fertility,” 85–106; and “The Power in/of Population,” *Current Anthropology* 36,5 (1995):878.

⁵³ The phrase is from Jason Finkle and Barbara Crane, “The Politics of Bucharest: Population, Development, and the New International Economic Order,” *Population and Development Review* 1,1 (1975):94.

⁵⁴ Kantner, “Population, Policy, and Political Atavism,” *Demography* 19,4 (1982):430.

on rational acting.⁵⁵ Greenhalgh argues that the perks, prestige, and travel made possible by generous external funding also isolated them from the academic mainstream and the gathering critique of modernization theory.⁵⁶ These criticisms suggest the stakes in such an inquiry, but they concern how demographers and demography fell short of a notional ideal rather than what they actually accomplished despite—or because of—their failings. Moreover, they do not extend beyond demographers to encompass the whole social milieu concerned with limiting population growth—“the activist, the scholar, the foundation officer, the globe-circling consultant, the wait-listed government official”—as it interacted and overlapped with other communities.

In the absence of an ethnography of the transnational communities involved in campaigns to control fertility, some have offered a rigidly functionalist interpretation. Thus, Betsy Hartmann’s influential critique, *Reproductive Rights and Wrongs*, asserts that, “Between the peasant ‘target groups’ and the population experts yawns a wide social gulf, which is rarely crossed. The family planners plan, the contraceptive deliverers deliver, the acceptors accept.” Yet was that social gulf really so empty? At the very least it would have been filled by the mutual perceptions of experts and their “targets.” And what was the nature of the crossings that did occur, however rarely? If, as Hartmann asserts, non-Western elites who directed these programs had far more in common with other “world managers” than they did with their poorer compatriots, such a successful process of recruitment and socialization merits further study. This would be even more worthwhile if, as seems likely, “population experts” and “target groups” cannot be so easily divided.⁵⁷

For instance, Riedmann’s book shows how a single family planning study could require hiring hundreds of local workers. Consistent with her interpretation of fertility research as “world-system demography,” these fieldworkers are depicted as “socialized, loyal”—indeed, as mere “emissaries of bureaucratic surveillance.”⁵⁸ While the reports they wrote to their employers may not have contradicted this image, should they be taken at face value? Riedmann does not consider the question, nor does she ask whether fieldworkers—like the participants described by Bradley—are “coming to family planning for different reasons and through different routes,” and may therefore have arrived at a different understanding of it than what their employers had in mind. In other studies, using different fieldworkers for follow-up visits without allowing them to compare data has proven “disastrous,” which should prompt doubts as to whether they are really so interchangeable.⁵⁹ One reason for the unreliability of their

⁵⁵ See note 33.

⁵⁶ Greenhalgh, “The Social Construction of Population Science,” 46–47.

⁵⁷ Betsy Hartmann, *Reproductive Rights and Wrongs: The Global Politics of Population Control Surveillance*, revised ed. (Boston: South End Press, 1995), 59, 123.

⁵⁸ Riedmann, *Science that Colonizes*, 33.

⁵⁹ John Cleland, “Demographic Data Collection in Less Developed Countries,” *Population Studies* 50,3 (1996):440.

data may be that questioning people about their sex lives often arouses resistance and sometimes ridicule. Riedmann herself shows how dependent researchers were on respondents' cooperation, and how many of the latter seemed to delight in demanding payment or even slamming the door in the faces of these "emissaries of bureaucratic surveillance."⁶⁰

To the extent that fieldworkers are loyal and diligent in carrying out their work they could indeed constitute an impressive example of centralized surveillance and control. But such studies can also be seen as making fieldworkers reliant on their respondents and providing opportunities for everyone concerned to subvert or reject what these exercises appeared to represent. If this is the case with an individual study, one would expect a nationwide population control program to be an even more multivalent phenomenon. Consider, for instance, the effort mounted by Bangladesh in the 1970s. It began with "several tens of thousands of workers," as Paul Demeny described it. "Besides the personnel—administrators, doctors, nurses, midwives, lady welfare visitors, supervisors, female family welfare workers, drivers, peons, and so on—there will be the bewildering paraphernalia of *things*—from buildings to flip charts, from battery operated slide projectors to four wheel drive vehicles, from motor launches to surgical equipment and supplies of pills, IUDs, injectables, and all the rest."⁶¹ Even if one accepted Demeny's depiction of this organization as "a small army" with all the discipline such an image is meant to convey, every army has its deserters, profiteers, prostitutes, and camp followers.

While Riedmann's portrayal of population studies as a *Science that Colonizes* may be an extreme example, few have challenged the view that local workers and participants in international programs can only react—albeit with creativity and determination—to what is imposed on them. Yet if population programs indeed change as they are implemented and elicit diverse responses depending on the context, these interactions could presumably change the international politics of population. At the very least, we need to know how these microhistories connect, and how they add up. While they have revealed complex and fascinating stories that had remained invisible in cross-national survey research, assessing their cumulative impact lies beyond the reach of micro-level analysis.

POPULATION CONTROL AS QUALITY CONTROL

What is needed, then, is a history of international efforts to limit population growth that would connect the micro and the macro, recognize agency and ini-

⁶⁰ Greenhalgh's study of "The Peasantization of the One-Child Policy in Shaanxi" shows what can be gained from a more nuanced analysis of how intermediaries adapt population policies in the face of popular resistance, in *Chinese Families in the Post-Mao Era*, ed. Deborah Davis and Stevan Harrell (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 219–50.

⁶¹ Paul Demeny, "Observations on Population Policy and the Population Program in Bangladesh," *Population and Development Review* 1,2 (1975):308.

tative operating at each level of analysis, and not presume that efforts to shape population are necessarily neo-colonial projects in their origins or outcome. A model is readily at hand—though rarely grasped—in the increasingly sophisticated historiography of efforts to control the “quality” of population. One reason for this neglect may be that eugenics is most often heard as a term of abuse in the family planning community. For a long time historians did little to dispel this stigma, treating eugenics as a reaction to class and race anxieties and concentrating on its most coercive applications in the United States and Nazi Germany. Yet more recently scholars have shown that concerns about qualitative trends in population arose contemporaneously on several continents and inspired quite varied responses. Eugenists organized internationally, often through informal networking among leading proponents. But there was also an institutional basis, and it did not always reflect a “core-periphery” relationship. As Frank Dikötter has observed, though they have received less attention until recently, there were more—and more sophisticated—eugenics researchers at work in Tokyo, Shanghai, and Bombay in the 1920s and 1930s than in Finland or the Deep South.⁶² International eugenics congresses beginning in 1912 provided a natural meeting place, and by 1921 an International Federation of Eugenic Societies was trying to coordinate the work of eugenists in more than thirty countries.⁶³

Yet as Nancy Leys Stepan argues, the “institutional ecology” of the eugenics movement varied widely from place to place. In the United States it mobilized amateur enthusiasts as well as academics, in Brazil it was an almost exclusively elite concern; in Scandinavia women were prominent participants, in France a small number of male doctors, scientists and government officials monopolized leadership. In Britain eugenics rose as a reaction against the seeming failure of social-welfare policies, in France and Latin America concerns about public health were more often used to justify measures to ensure the “quality” of population. Indeed, in Sweden Gunnar and Alva Myrdal viewed sterilization of the “unfit” as a logical counterpart to making child-rearing easier for the poor.⁶⁴

⁶² “Race Culture: Recent Perspectives on the History of Eugenics,” *American Historical Review* 103,2 (1998):467, 472; see also Mark B. Adams’ preface to *The Wellborn Science: Eugenics in Germany, France, Brazil, and Russia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); William H. Schneider, *Quality and Quantity: The Quest for Biological Regeneration in Twentieth-Century France* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 4–6.

⁶³ Nancy Leys Stepan, *The Hour of Eugenics: Race, Gender, and Nation in Latin America* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991), 5. International coordination efforts are extensively documented in the Eugenics Society Papers, Contemporary Medical Archives Center, Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine, London (hereafter CMAC), boxes 26, 33, 42, 44, and 48.

⁶⁴ Stepan, *The Hour of Eugenics*, 35–39, 61, and ch. six; Stepan, *The Idea of Race in Science: Great Britain, 1800–1960* (London: Macmillan, 1982), 117–18; Schneider, *Quality and Quantity*, chs. three and four; Gunnar Broberg and Mattias Tyden, “Eugenics in Sweden: Efficient Care,” in *Eugenics and the Welfare State: Sterilization Policy in Denmark, Sweden, Norway, and Finland*, ed. Gunnar Broberg and Nils Roll-Hansen (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1996), 104–5; Allan Carlson, *The Swedish Experiment in Family Politics: The Myrdals and the Interwar Population Crisis* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 1990), 90–91.

Thus, eugenics embraced quite diverse constituencies, including pro-natalists, social hygienists, immigration opponents, and neo-Malthusians, who shared only the language of science and the goal of biologically reforming society.⁶⁵ The measures they proposed are often divided into “positive” and “negative” eugenics—not in the normative sense, but rather because they either improved the conditions for procreation or selectively prevented it. Treating infertility, promoting maternal and infant health, and providing parental leave would today fall under the rubric of holistic family planning. Conversely, targeting certain classes or communities for population limitation can be considered a form of negative eugenics. While one might draw a distinction between these efforts intended to raise the “quality” of a population and those acting on its quantity, motives are often mixed. For instance, how would one classify immigration restrictions against a particular ethnic group in a society that otherwise gives every sign of desiring population increase, or when newcomers are feared in part because of their fertility?⁶⁶

The argument here is not that the history of family planning should be subsumed within the history of eugenics, however broadly defined. Proponents have been motivated by concerns that have nothing inherently to do with the “quality” or even quantity of offspring—such as ensuring women’s rights and health. Yet when policy is intentionally pro- or anti-natalist it can be classified along with both “positive” and “negative” eugenics as forms of *population control*, since all are intended to shape population outcomes in specific ways. They are linked not only conceptually, but also in terms of concrete historical continuities and rather striking parallels. A comparison prompts research questions that could flesh out an agenda for a new international history of population control.

For example, and as noted at the outset, the same individuals and institutions concerned with the apparent degeneration of population in the United States and Great Britain—whether through immigration or differential fertility rates—were often the first to promote birth control at home and abroad. In the 1930s the major eugenics and birth control organizations in both countries not only overlapped but were on the point of merging.⁶⁷ In the 1950s the American Eugenics Society and Britain’s Eugenics Society agreed that it was wiser to pursue a policy of “crypto-eugenics” by backing birth control among the poor (their leadership also held top posts in the Population Council and the IPPF).⁶⁸ For other areas of the world the relationship between eugenics thinking among elite groups and their later advocacy of population limitation is only starting to

⁶⁵ Schneider, *Quality and Quantity*, 40.

⁶⁶ Hodgson, “The Ideological Origins of the Population Association of America,” 7–8.

⁶⁷ Clarke, *Disciplining Reproduction*, 180–85; Hodgson and Watkins, “Feminists and Neo-Malthusians,” 478; Richard A. Soloway, *Demography and Degeneration: Eugenics and the Declining Birthrate in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 209–15.

⁶⁸ Blacker to Dorothy Brush, 13 Apr. 1956, CMAC, C.P. Blacker Papers, box 11; “Eugenics Society: Memorandum by Certain Members of the Council of the Society,” 18 Jan. 1960, *idem*.

be scrutinized. Is there any relationship between the fact that the Scandinavian countries were the only European democracies to introduce forced sterilization laws in the 1930s and have also taken a leading role in international population assistance?⁶⁹ And is it only coincidental that eugenics was particularly influential in India and China, which later witnessed the most coercive measures to limit growth?⁷⁰ At the very least, and as Daniel Kevles observed in his classic account of eugenics, “[a]n important history remains to be written of the general relationship among eugenics, demography, and population control,” and that history should be international and comparative in nature.⁷¹

In addition to continuities, there are also important parallels between eugenics and population limitation—as might be expected of movements that shared intellectual origins, institutional links, and leadership. Both present scholars with a choice among levels of analysis or the challenge of trying to capture the interaction between elite concerns and how they play out in particular policies and programs. Studies of eugenics are sometimes limited to intellectual history, but there are also fascinating accounts of how these ideas and the measures they inspired could have devastating consequences for particular individuals.⁷² Moreover, the ways in which people thought about and acted on concerns about the quality of offspring have often escaped the control of elites.⁷³ And here too social welfare programs that were directed at eugenic and pro-natalist goals have sometimes been reshaped by “client activism.”⁷⁴

Like eugenics, the effort to limit population growth was international, indeed transnational in nature, but much less is known about its “institutional ecology.” Initially eugenics was the more mainstream movement, so birth control advocates had an even greater need for mutual support, and even shelter. Here

⁶⁹ Sweden funded the first such program in Ceylon in 1958 and over the following decade devoted the bulk of its foreign assistance to population programs. On the other hand, the Scandinavian countries have disproportionately funded all international aid programs—as have the Netherlands, which rejected more coercive eugenic measures; see Gunnar Broberg and Nils Roll-Hansen, ed., *Eugenics and the Welfare State*, 268; Peter J. Donaldson and Amy Ong Tsui, “The International Family Planning Movement,” *Population Bulletin* 45,3 (1990):14; Hannes Hyrenius and Ulla Åhs, *The Sweden-Ceylon Family Planning Project* (Göteborg: Demographic Institute, 1968).

⁷⁰ On eugenics in China, see Dikötter, *Imperfect Conceptions*, especially 124–25, 145; and Yuehtsen Juliette Chung, “Struggles for National Survival: Chinese Eugenics in a Transnational Context, 1896–1945” (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1999). For India see S. Anandhi, “Reproductive Bodies and Regulated Sexuality: Birth Control Debates in Early Twentieth-century Tamilnadu,” in *A Question of Silence? The Sexual Economies of Modern India*, ed. Mary E. John and Janaki Nair (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1998), 139–66; Mohan Rao, “An Imagined Reality: Malthusianism, Neo-Malthusianism, and Population Myth,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 29,5 (29 Jan. 1994): PE40—PE52; Sanjam Ahluwalia, “Controlling Births, Policing Sexuality: A History of Birth Control in Colonial India, 1877–1946” (Ph.D. diss., University of Cincinnati, 2000).

⁷¹ *In the Name of Eugenics: Genetics and the Uses of Human Heredity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985, 1995), 392.

⁷² Broberg, “Eugenics in Sweden,” 118–19; Stephen Jay Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man*, revised ed. (New York: Norton, 1981, 1986), 365–66.

⁷³ Dikötter, *Imperfect Conceptions*, 133–34.

⁷⁴ Koven and Michel, “Womanly Duties,” 1084.

again the international linkages were often informal, though no less influential for that reason. For instance, when Margaret Sanger went into exile to escape prosecution the practical education she received in the Netherlands completely transformed her view of the organizational requirements of providing birth control. She also began to create a network abroad that also included England, Sweden, India, and Japan, a network that would continue to grow throughout her life.⁷⁵

But early on—even earlier than was the case with eugenics—such linkages took institutional form. The year 1900 marked the first in a series of international population conferences. Proceedings of the third such conference, in 1910, were published in Esperanto. By 1925 the sixth meeting included delegates from India, China, Japan, and Mexico as well as most countries of Europe.⁷⁶ After World War II major American foundations and the U.N. Fund for Population Activities consciously worked to foster such international linkages and build up regional centers for demographic research, but population limitation was a precociously international movement from its inception.⁷⁷

All along members of this emerging population movement exchanged ideas and money, and learned from one another's experiences, but they also disagreed. Just as concerns about the quality of population provoked proposals for everything from in-vitro fertilization to state-sponsored day-care, concerns about the quantity of population occasioned calls for licensing childbearing, adding contraceptives to public water supplies, and increasing women's access to health care and education. And like eugenics, population limitation offered a platform for an array of other political projects—including anti-colonialism, sexual liberation, maternalism, and environmentalism—and inspired the most unlikely alliances, uniting Communists and Catholics, Malthusians and feminists, environmentalists and anti-immigration activists. Acting to shape population was not in itself a conservative or progressive impulse, but it always had potentially enormous implications for good or ill.⁷⁸

GETTING DOWN TO CASES

Rather than account for the full complexity of population control it is easier to assert that it was “essentially” one thing or another—neo-colonial, statist, patriarchal, and so on. Similarly, the networks that grew up around it, by their very

⁷⁵ Ellen Chesler, *Woman of Valor: Margaret Sanger and the Birth Control Movement in America* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 145–46, and ch. 17.

⁷⁶ Rosanna Ledbetter, *A History of the Malthusian League* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1976), 193–94.

⁷⁷ Caldwell and Caldwell, *Limiting Population Growth*, 29–30, and ff.; Harkavy, *Curbing Population Growth*, 87–89.

⁷⁸ Maternalism, or the promotion of motherhood as a model for the welfare state, was also distinguished by its “protean character,” as Seth Koven and Sonya Michel put it, “the ease with which it could be harnessed to forge improbable coalitions”—perhaps because they were often pronatalist or eugenic in purpose; *Mothers of a New World: Maternalist Politics and the Origins of Welfare States* (Routledge: New York, 1993), 4–5.

nature, do not lend themselves to a simple narrative, which usually requires one or a few protagonists to advance the story. Thus, what makes population control so interesting is also what makes its international history difficult to capture and convey. It calls for work that would occupy a field of scholars, but describing a few episodes might indicate the direction and potential of such an effort. An individual, an idea, and a debate are presented here not to represent population control in the 1920s, 1940s, and 1960s, respectively, but rather to illustrate the political innovation and internationalism it has always inspired.

While he may have been listed as representing India at the Sixth International Neo-Malthusian Conference in New York in 1925, it would be hard to imagine a more idiosyncratic figure than Taraknath Das. Born in 1884 to a lower middle class family in present-day Bangladesh, he had earned a Ph.D. in political science from Georgetown and married a wealthy American widow. Yet he was also a committed revolutionary, having participated in 1917 in a plot to blow up the British Viceroy, and served twenty-two months in an American jail for arms smuggling. According to British intelligence, he was at various times in contact with agents of Imperial Germany, the Irish Republican Army, and Soviet Russia. By the time Das arrived at the McAlpin hotel in New York to present a paper on "The Population Problem in India" he was in a precarious position. American authorities had initiated proceedings to cancel his citizenship papers "on the ground that he was not a white man within the meaning of the law."⁷⁹

Das must therefore have spoken with feeling when he began by deriding the idea of a "yellow peril" advanced by some other conference participants. Will Durant, for instance, cited it as reason for the United States to promote birth control abroad. But Das pointed out that the European peoples were then growing far more rapidly than the population of Asia. Considering that since 1848 they had acquired some thirteen million square miles—three times the area of Europe—he argued that there was instead a "white peril." India, on the other hand, had lower population density than most European countries and great industrial potential, but only if granted independence. Instead, hunger, unsanitary conditions, early marriage, and lack of education for women led to infant mortality at a rate of well over 200 per 1,000. Das endorsed the dissemination of birth control, but only as part of a program that aimed at the poverty and ignorance that were the root causes of India's population problem. Indeed, he thought that its use would increase the size of population by reducing mortality. Yet it would also "afford greater freedom to women and greater opportunity for real education . . ." thus inculcating the ideals of peace.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ The quote is from a British surveillance report, "Tarak Nath Das," 24 Mar. 1925, British Library, London, India Office Records, L/P&J/12/166; and see also "Record of Tarak Nath Das," undated, idem; "Das, Taraknath (1884–1958)," *Encyclopedia of the Indian Biography*, ed. Nagendra Kr. Singh, Vol. 2 (New Delhi: APH Publishing, 2000), 391–93.

⁸⁰ Durant quoted in David M. Kennedy, *Birth Control in America: The Career of Margaret*

While Das' biography was unusual—he went on to have a distinguished career as a political scientist at Columbia University—he was only one of a number of Indian intellectuals arguing that independence was a necessary prerequisite for addressing population problems. Moreover, he was not the only one to employ the statistics generated by the British-administered censuses. At the same conference the founder of the Indian Birth Regulation Society, Ahluwalia Gopalji, pointed to Indians' abysmal life expectancy of twenty-three years as “. . . proof, if one were needed, of the wonderful progress of sanitation and medicine in that unfortunate land of the Hindus, under the benign British rule.” Thus, population concerns provided a platform for anti-colonialism and gender equality, as tools of “bureaucratic surveillance” were used to subject the Raj to unforgiving scrutiny.⁸¹

One or a few individuals do not by themselves demonstrate the international and multivalent nature of population control, but the same themes come through in the development of its most important idea: demographic transition theory. It emerged in Europe as well as the United States before World War II as a way to explain the relationship between declines in mortality, declines in fertility, and socio-economic change in industrial countries. Even so, it is usually credited to Princeton demographers Frank Notestein and Kingsley Davis. In their original 1945 formulation such factors as urbanization, mass education, and new means of communications were associated with a preference for smaller families, so the population growth that occurred following mortality declines was not amenable to a quick fix. But by 1949 the theory had changed: Notestein now argued that one might lower fertility rates in rural, non-industrialized societies merely by distributing contraceptives.⁸²

As we have seen, Szreter argues that this shift can be located in a particular time and place: when Notestein, Davis, and their Princeton colleague, Irene Tauber, conducted a Rockefeller-funded tour of Asia in the period in which Communists came to power in China. He infers that Notestein felt the need to offer policymakers a solution and changed the theory in response to political imperatives.⁸³ This is plausible, but Szreter offers no direct evidence. Moreover, according to Notestein's own recollection his most vivid memory during the tour was not having any new contraceptives to meet the demand expressed

Sanger (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1970), 122; Taranath Das, “The Population Problem in India,” in Margaret Sanger, ed., *Religious and Ethical Aspects of Birth Control* (New York: American Birth Control League, 1926), 195–98.

⁸¹ Gopalji, “Working for Birth Control in India,” in Sanger, ed., *Religious and Ethical Aspects of Birth Control*, 184; and see also Pyare Kishan Watal, *The Population Problem in India: A Census Study* (Bombay, London: Bennet, Coleman and Co., 1934). For earlier precedents for using health statistics to measure the failures of the colonial state, see David Arnold, *Colonizing the Body: State Medicine and Epidemic Disease in Nineteenth-Century India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

⁸² Szreter, “The Idea of Demographic Transition,” 661–75.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 675–80. Greenhalgh also credits this account, “The Social Construction of Population Science,” 39–41.

by Chinese peasants. "I've never," he later declared, "been in another situation in my life that made me feel so helpless."⁸⁴

But the team's experiences in Japan may have been even more significant. The country's demographic history defied the expectations of transition theory. The death rate and birth rate both fell in the 1920s and 1930s, as would be expected in a society with improving living standards, yet there had been no such improvement. As Deborah Oakley writes, they engaged in "vivid discussions" upon discovering low fertility persisting in the countryside even among the poorest peasants. For Taeuber, it suggested "the possibility of obtaining results in Japan which are not to be expected on the basis of precedent." Similarly, Notestein became "more and more convinced that a situation exists in Japan which is conducive to [a] snowballing of any campaign searching for a solution to population problems." Otherwise, they feared that people might revert to high fertility at a time in which population was already growing rapidly due to improvements in public health and an influx of repatriates from Japan's former colonies.⁸⁵

This was a concern shared by many Japanese, especially birth control advocates like Dr. Ota Tenrei and Kato Shizue, who had fought official pro-natalism at home and proselytized abroad for decades. They now allied with occupation officials and seized the opportunity to overturn pro-natalist policy. In 1949 they succeeded in implementing the most liberal abortion legislation in the world, though it was justified as a "Eugenic Protection Law." While the law was permitted and perhaps made possible by the American occupation, it was a joint effort. Because of concerns about domestic political ramifications in the United States, occupation officials left the bill's introduction to a private member of the Diet—the first such initiative independent of any ministry.⁸⁶

The Japanese case thus illustrates both the cross-cultural learning and the transnational alliances occasioned by population control. While Cold War imperatives may have demanded adaptations in demographic transition theory, Notestein and his colleagues were demonstrably struck by how Asians had disproven some of its core assumptions—whether poor and illiterate Chinese eager to obtain contraceptives, or Japanese consciously regulating their fertility without any change in living standards. Japanese and Americans then worked together behind the scenes to overcome the opposition of their compatriots. The outcome was also politically ambiguous—not only because eugenic goals were used to justify free access to abortion, but also because the liberality of the law and the constituencies that it fostered hindered the introduction of contraceptives in Japan for decades afterward.⁸⁷

⁸⁴ Reed, *The Birth Control Movement and American Society*, 305.

⁸⁵ This section relies on Deborah Oakley, "American-Japanese Interaction in the Development of Population Policy in Japan, 1945–1952," *Population and Development Review* 4, 4 (Dec. 1978): 619–20, 630–31.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 620–23, 628.

⁸⁷ On the eugenic aspects of the 1949 law and its legacies see Tiana Norgren, "Abortion Before

In other countries contraceptives were widely distributed based on the rationale provided by the new version of demographic transition theory, which posited that tapping into unmet demand for birth control might reduce fertility even without more structural and institutional changes. But even by the late 1960s, when population limitation programs were under way in more than thirty countries, advocates had little to show for their efforts: in most poor countries birth rates were steady or even rising, and there was no convincing evidence that, where fertility was declining, it was attributable to official programs.⁸⁸ This occasioned a debate in the pages of *Science* that provides one more example of the complex and contradictory nature of population control.

In 1967 Kingsley Davis, one of the most influential American demographers, blamed their failure on the fact that they had evaded the “basic question” of population policy, which was not how to give couples the number of children they want, but “how to give societies the number of children they need.” Citing survey data from several countries showing that poor people continued to prefer large families, he called for the deployment of “political power” to bring about “painful social changes.” But while he hinted broadly at “the enormity and unconventionality of the task,” he did not explicitly endorse any particular measure. Indeed, he admitted that a policy to change people’s preferences for large families by, for instance, reducing housing and requiring women to work “reads like a catalogue of horrors . . .” The task of policy, he concluded, was to develop attractive substitutes, though it was a task he left for others.⁸⁹

The following year the biologist Garret Hardin responded with the now classic article, “The Tragedy of the Commons.” He argued that, if individuals did not voluntarily limit their numbers, “we need to reexamine our individual freedoms to see which ones are defensible.” Indeed, it was inevitable that people pursuing their own interests would produce a population far surpassing what could be sustained by available resources. The only alternative was “mutual coercion mutually agreed upon by the majority of the people affected.” Appealing to conscience would not only prove futile in lowering overall fertility, the selfish would then propagate at a relatively greater rate, thus setting up “a selective system that works toward the elimination of conscience from the race.” Hardin was therefore interested not only in the quantity of population, but also its quality. Indeed, he spoke menacingly of those who would not go along with the collective good. “In a welfare state,” he asked, “how shall we deal with the family, the religion, the race, or the class (or indeed any distinguishable and co-

Birth Control: The Interest Group Politics Behind Postwar Japanese Reproduction Policy,” *Journal of Japanese Studies* 24,1 (1998):59–94.

⁸⁸ Dudley Kirk, “Natality in the Developing Countries: Recent Trends and Prospects,” in *Fertility and Family Planning: A World View*, ed. S. J. Behrman, Leslie Corsa, Jr., and Ronald Freedman (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1969), 78–81; Mamdani, *The Myth of Population Control*, 15–17, 27–28.

⁸⁹ Kingsley Davis, “Population Policy: Will Current Programs Succeed?” *Science* 158, no. 3802 (10 Nov. 1967):734–39.

hesive group) that adopts overbreeding as a policy to secure its own aggrandizement?"⁹⁰

Yet others responded not to the coercive implications of Davis' article, but rather to its critique of social norms. Indeed, it fell to his wife, Judith Blake, a fellow demographer at Berkeley, to draw out the feminist argument for new population policies in another article for *Science*. She too was concerned about the failure of family planning programs to inspire popular support, in this case marshalling survey data collected among poorer Americans. But she argued that it was because they ran counter to coercive population policies that were already in place: "a definition of reproduction as a primary societal end and . . . an organization of social roles that draws most of the population into reproductive unions." Rather than "a catalog of horrors," policies to reduce population growth could therefore involve "the lifting of penalties for antinatalist behavior . . ." She called for ending sexual "indoctrination" in schools, lifting legal and social sanctions against homosexuality, and eliminating tax breaks and housing policies that rewarded procreation. Indeed, she urged "those who have the power to guide our country toward completing the vital revolution."⁹¹

Blake's article was widely debated and helped convince Rockefeller to embrace the cause of empowering women and addressing economic and social problems rather than population control per se. When he announced this shift in 1974 at the first governmental conference on population in Bucharest he joined a chorus of critical voices. The official U.S. delegation found itself isolated as a majority led by Third World states succeeded in passing a platform that embodied a new slogan: "development is the best contraceptive."⁹² It would be years yet before Blake's critique of gender roles entered the mainstream. Indeed, in 1970 Notestein provoked laughter at the National War College when he noted with exasperation that "One even sees homosexuality defended on the grounds that it helps curtail population growth!" Yet the mere fact that flag officers had to consider this perspective was perhaps more noteworthy than the alacrity with which they dismissed it.⁹³

Since these examples are illustrative rather than representative, they can only underscore rather than explain some of the key themes suggested at the outset. How then do we account for the international and transnational nature of efforts to control population? And why does population control lend itself to so many and such diverse kinds of political projects and give rise to such unlikely alliances? Grappling with these questions demands the attention of many schol-

⁹⁰ Garrett Hardin, "The Tragedy of the Commons," *Science* 162, no. 3859 (13 Dec. 1968): 1243–48.

⁹¹ Judith Blake, "Population Policy for Americans: Is the Government Being Misled?" *Science* 164, no. 3879 (2 May 1969): 522–29.

⁹² Critchlow, *Intended Consequences*, 159–60, 177–83; Finkle and Crane, "The Politics of Bucharest," 87–114.

⁹³ Notestein, "Population as a Factor in National Power," 1 Sept. 1970, Seeley G. Mudd Manuscript Library, Princeton, N.J., Notestein Papers, box 5, National War College file.

ars, but certain strategies could prove manageable for the individual researcher. For instance, one way of exploring how population control emerged and evolved as an international movement would be to trace the professional, social, and intellectual relationships linking its leading figures—whether the French race theorist Georges Vacher de Lapouge and his American admirer, eugenicist Charles Davenport; the anti-immigration sociologist Henry Pratt Fairchild and his former student and future minister of family planning, Sripati Chandrasekhar; or the one-time eugenicist and founder of India's Family Planning Association, Lady Dhanvantri Rama Rao, with her American patron and sometime rival, Margaret Sanger. Again, rather than being presented as representative, a prosopography might show how and why population growth inspired so much intellectual and political innovation.

Another approach might compare how population control policies play out in different contexts. If it is indeed the case, as critics argue, that internationally-funded programs are products of a "machine model" and thus share the same assumptions and methods, such a comparison might highlight the historical legacies that help determine their outcome.⁹⁴ The possible influence of eugenics across cultures has already been mentioned. Alternatively, a comparison of India, Tunisia, Korea, and the Philippines, all of which were foci of international efforts, might reveal how these efforts were inflected by different colonial experiences.

Finally, we have seen how particular population studies in such places as western Nigeria and the rural villages of Punjab could shape policy debates and provoke controversies about the ethics and effectiveness of research practices, subjecting researchers themselves to critical scrutiny. Focusing on these and other studies with such ramified consequences would bring the first and third worlds into the same analytic field and demonstrate how "target populations" could exercise influence through the choices of individual participants.

These approaches would lead in many different directions, but they would start with the recognition that population control was an arena rather than an agenda, one that was international and even transnational in nature. Considering the contradictions and paradoxes it embodied, we should not be surprised. After all, it involves bringing the most intimate area of human activity into the public arena. It offers people the liberating potential to control their own procreation while at the same time opening them up to unprecedented forms of oversight. It leads states to count the costs and benefits of individual citizens, or even to imagine "improving" whole populations. It has already inspired a rich, inter-disciplinary literature, but we have only begun to write its history.

⁹⁴ Hartmann, *Reproductive Rights and Wrongs*, 126. Demeny describes demographic research as also being "industrial" in nature, "quantitative, standardized, replicable, and packageable for multi-country use," "Social Science and Population Policy," 464. There are, of course, multi-country program analyses such as Warwick's *Bitter Pills*, and Ness and Ando's *The Land Is Shrinking*. While they were undertaken for the purpose of developing more effective policy, they are also valuable sources for historians.