Debating the Ethics of Population Control during the Cold War

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Abstract

Inspired by a Brazilian critique of overpopulation concerns emanating from the United States during the early 1950s, this project examines debates about the ethics of population control among staff of the Rockefeller Foundation and Population Council, from the late 1940s through the mid-1970s. The historical episodes highlighted include John D. Rockefeller, 3rd’s establishment of the Population Council in 1952; the council’s formation of an “ad hoc committee on policy” in the mid-1950s; reaction among population control advocates to the papal encyclical *Humanae Vitae* in 1968, after JDR 3rd and Population Council staff had worked to cultivate alliances with Catholic clergy, particularly Jesuits; and discussions surrounding the United Nations population conference and the simultaneous “population tribune” for representatives of non-governmental organizations, both held in Bucharest in 1974. There is brief discussion of the expansion of family planning initiatives within Latin America—often sponsored by the Population Council, the UN, and the Ford Foundation—during these decades. Among the figures discussed most frequently are John D. Rockefeller, 3rd, demographer Frank Notestein, and Population Council President Bernard Berelson. By the mid-1970s, there was a pronounced ideological split regarding population control between Population Council staff and the Vatican, as well as between advocates of population control measures in the industrialized world and representatives of developing nations who reframed concerns about poverty and resource scarcity to highlight other causes of global inequality. Feminist perspectives are largely absent or ignored early in the period analyzed but become much more evident by the 1970s.
The impetus for this project was a widely read 1952 book titled *The Geography of Hunger*, by Brazilian physician Josué de Castro, who was executive director of the UN’s Food and Agriculture Organization during the early 1950s. In that book, ultimately translated into more than twenty languages, de Castro condemned American and European promotion of population control. He believed that improvements in agricultural technology would compensate for rising global population by increasing the volume of food available. His central argument was that food scarcity, often cited as a central reason for trying to limit human population growth, was a political problem of distribution and access, not an environmental problem of “carrying capacity.” His 1952 book responded specifically to American conservationist William Vogt’s 1948 book *The Road to Survival*, but it had clear implications for the Rockefeller Foundation and other organizations invested in both agricultural improvement and population control. Researching de Castro’s career led me to wonder to what extent views like his were acknowledged by Rockefeller Foundation or Population Council staff, and whether critiques of the overpopulation paradigm influenced the work of such organizations. My research at the Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC) focused on evidence of internal debate among Rockefeller Foundation and Population Council staff regarding the ethics of population control measures.

There is copious material at RAC concerning population control, including detailed reports on initiatives in many countries and records of hundreds of regional and global conferences involving a range of organizations. All of these help to understand how population control efforts evolved during the second half of the twentieth century. The discussion below highlights moments when concerns about the ethics of population limitation are clearly articulated in the archival records. The citations to the documents from which these examples are drawn should help researchers with similar interests determine where to look for further discussion of the ethics of population reduction in various parts of the world. This report emphasizes Latin America as a regional focus, but scholars with an interest in Asia (in particular) would also find abundant material.
In 1946, Rockefeller Foundation administrators began discussing whether the foundation had an ethical obligation to examine population growth as a side effect of their efforts to improve public health. John D. Rockefeller, 3rd urged foundation officers to examine this issue in 1948, but RF President Chester I. Barnard and others expressed strong reservations about engaging in any endeavor that might be perceived as promoting birth control. An insightful memo by Warren Weaver, dated October 23, 1949, tried to outline the nature of the “population problem,” indicating that this did not have well agreed upon parameters at that time. Weaver’s colleagues often used the term “human ecology” to gesture toward the interdisciplinarity of the population issue and distance their reflections on it from birth control promotion. Several officers and board members expressed concern that misguided entry into the population field would damage the RF International Health Division’s excellent reputation.¹ In October 1951, Marston Bates submitted a fourteen-page report titled “Human Ecology and the Rockefeller Foundation” to President Barnard. This was the culmination of Bates’s two-year special assignment to evaluate the population issue, although the term “population” barely appears within it. However, additional documents in the same folder trace the foundation’s eventual involvement in reproductive physiology research and family planning as a component of public health during the late 1950s and 1960s.²

At the end of 1951, John D. Rockefeller, 3rd began working in earnest to determine how he might render “a constructive, useful service in this field [of population].” In December, he met with Johns Hopkins University President Detlev Bronk and Warren Weaver of the Rockefeller Foundation to discuss the relationship between world population and food supply. Additional conversations culminated in the June 20-22 “Conference on Population Problems” held at Williamsburg, which led to the formation of the Population Council in November 1952. The council’s stated purpose was to reduce human misery.³ Documentation from the Williamsburg conference outlines the arguments of optimists like Weaver, who emphasized potential technological innovations that would resolve current problems (such as by more efficiently converting solar energy for human use) and pessimists, particularly conservationists, who foresaw a looming crisis in the relationship between
population growth and food supply. In the closing sessions, Weaver urged everyone present to reflect more on the ethical questions raised by their explorations. “We are talking about [this issue] from the point of view of Western Protestant philosophy, and that is from the point of view of this planet, a minority point of view,” he cautioned.4

In its first year, the Population Council was oriented “toward the development of the scientific basis necessary for the effective planning and operation of programs for population control” worldwide. Funds came from JDR 3rd, who hoped the council would spend $250,000 per year from his contributions. The Ford Foundation offered another $600,000 in 1954, to be paid over several years. Grants were awarded by the council in three areas: demographics, reproductive physiology, and human genetics.5 By 1955, the council’s medical research program was examining physiological mechanisms of reproduction, with particular interest in the phases of reproduction “vulnerable/susceptible to interference” in both sexes. It had nearly two million dollars in assets and was sponsoring fellows from various parts of the world—predominately Africa and the Middle East—to study demography and related topics. The vast majority of expenditures recommended by an individual trustee were funded; there seems to have been little internal controversy or need to turn proposals down.6

In June 1954, Frederick Osborn (president of the American Eugenics Society), who would succeed JDR 3rd as the Population Council’s second president in 1957, proposed forming an “ad hoc committee on policy” to examine ethical questions surrounding control of family size. This initiative began in earnest the following year, and eight meetings were held between November 1955 and May 1957.7 Papers on various topics were pre-circulated and discussed by the group. Members of the committee included Rockefeller associate Donald McLean, Dudley Kirk (the Population Council’s demographic director), Dr. Warren Nelson (the Population Council’s medical director), Fairfield Osborn of the Conservation Foundation, committee chair Frederick Osborn, Population Council trustees Frank Notestein (a demographer from Princeton University), JDR 3rd, and Thomas Parran (a prominent Catholic physician, formerly
surgeon general). Demographer Frank Lorimer served as rapporteur. Guest discussants included Dr. Leona Baumgartner, Jesuits S. de Lestapis and Joseph P. Fitzpatrick of Fordham University, Dr. Alan Guttmacher of Mt. Sinai Hospital, and demographer Irene Taeuber of Princeton. Jesuit William Gibbons of Loyola University in Baltimore served as an ethical advisor to Frederick Osborn and was an occasional participant. Osborn compiled their discussions into a book entitled *Population: An International Dilemma*, published by Princeton University Press in 1958.\(^8\)

Despite some misgivings about the ethics of population control endeavors, the council supported the training of fellows from around the world and helped to establish centers for demographic study in several regions. In Latin America, the most prominent of these was CELADE in Santiago, established by the UN in 1956 with a $50,000 grant from the Population Council.\(^9\) Funds from the UN, the Population Council, and the Ford Foundation supported CELADE’s fellowships and conferences over subsequent decades. Cornell University sociologist Joseph Stycos also received support from the Population Council for his research into Latin American demography and fertility rates, including a study of differential fertility in Peru during the 1960s.\(^10\)

Population Council staff became briefly concerned about the safety of oral contraceptives when several reputable British studies concluded in the late 1960s that women using them experienced elevated risk of “thrombo-embolic disease.” This assertion was particularly threatening to population control advocates since media coverage of the findings coincided with promulgation of the papal encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, discussed below. However, further review of the data determined that they might have been misinterpreted and the studies’ results were inconclusive. By March 1969, the Population Council had begun funding numerous projects researching side effects and complications associated with oral contraceptives (some new, some underway since 1967).\(^11\)

During the 1950s and 1960s, many Population Council staff (most, if not all, of whom were Protestant) considered the Catholic Church’s position on the morality of birth control very consequential for their efforts. Both John D.
Rockefeller, 3rd and Frederick Osborn went to considerable lengths to seek input for their initiatives from members of the clergy, particularly Jesuits at American universities. In early July 1968, when Pope Paul VI was rumored to be on the verge of releasing a statement regarding the morality of birth control, JDR 3rd had a forty-five minute private audience with him. This was facilitated by Rockefeller Foundation board member Fr. Theodore (“Fred”) Hesburgh, president of the University of Notre Dame, and some Jesuits at Fordham University. A week after the audience, Rockefeller sent a letter to the pontiff reflecting on their conversation. “Every man deserves the chance to lead a life of satisfaction and purpose, to achieve in life more than mere existence,” he postulated. Family planning has the capacity to enrich life, not merely to restrict it by limiting childbirth, Rockefeller insisted. The goal of family planning is to strengthen the family, which both he and the Pope viewed as a critically important social institution. Rockefeller hoped that the Church would exercise a leadership role regarding global population, an issue with significant moral implications. However, the Pope’s subsequent effort to do that ran counter to Rockefeller’s views.12

In late July 1968, Pope Paul VI released the encyclical *Humanae Vitae*. This “letter” to the Catholic faithful asserted that population control should be achieved by promoting social and economic progress—which would naturally lead people to desire smaller families—and not by adoption or promotion of “artificial” forms of birth control such as oral contraceptives or IUDs. Catholics were morally restricted to methods of birth control that did not run counter to natural law, such as the “rhythm method” based on monitoring a woman’s fertile and infertile periods each month. *Humanae Vitae* enraged many Population Council staff. In a letter to the *New York Times* published on July 30, newly elected president Bernard Berelson wrote, “With this decision the Church places itself in opposition to this movement [to control global population increase] which has been so clearly associated with the advancement of human rights by recent UN declarations.” Due to dramatic recent decreases in mortality rates, the Pope’s call for “social and economic progress” simply could not be met without population control, Berelson insisted.13 Population Council staff began collecting newspaper clippings from around the world
responding to *Humanae Vitae*. They hoped that by “documenting defiance,” including on the part of Catholic theologians and clergy, they could encourage Catholics to ignore papal teaching on the use of birth control. This marked a significant departure from the deference shown to Catholic teaching up to that point, including during discussions among members of the “ad hoc committee on policy” a decade before.

When he became president of the Population Council, Berelson began corresponding with academics whom he thought would have insights regarding ethical issues related to the population problem, including how to balance individual desire against the national or global good. By late 1969, the council planned to hold a weekly ethics seminar, and staff had generated a list of readings and speakers (unfortunately no longer in evidence). Berelson drafted a paper in March 1970 on “The Ethics of Population Control,” which he distributed for review and comment. The council also published a book in 1971 by (formerly Catholic) bioethicist Dan Callahan entitled *Ethics and Population Limitation*. In October 1973, Berelson gave a speech in honor of Planned Parenthood’s twenty-first anniversary that outlined some of his views regarding the ethics of family planning. In keeping with “demographic transition theory” first postulated by Notestein in the 1940s, Berelson described reduced fertility and economic development as mutually reinforcing trends. He viewed family planning as not only essential for women’s autonomy and empowerment (a view that the largely male world of demographers began to emphasize in the 1970s, spurred by second-wave feminists), but also as part of a historical trend toward greater valuation of individual children, which included child labor laws and mandatory education. Modern societies place greater emphasis on what parents owe to children than on what children owe to their parents, he noted.

While proponents of fertility reduction in the United States were increasingly articulating an ethical basis for their work, gynecologists in Josué de Castro’s native Brazil were growing concerned about “epidemic” levels of induced abortion, which many of them deemed “comparable to murder.” In the mid-1960s, these (mostly male) physicians established BEMFAM, headquartered in Rio de Janeiro (the acronym stands for “Family Well-being” in Portuguese). The
organization’s goal was to promote family planning—particularly the use of condoms, oral contraceptives, and IUDs—as a moral alternative to abortion. BEMFAM staff found that they had to combat both Catholic opposition to modern birth control methods and suspicion on the part of many Brazilians that family planning was part of a genocidal plot promoted by foreign imperialists—a fear spurred by instances of coercive sterilization conducted by North Americans in several places throughout the Americas. BEMFAM hoped to improve family welfare by helping parents to space and limit childbirth in keeping with their own desires regarding family size.¹⁷ At the time, condoms were sold in Brazil to prevent disease transmission (but of course used for birth control as well) and pills were available at pharmacies to regulate ovulation (again, often used as contraception). IUD sales were banned but subject to ongoing political debate, and abortion was illegal except when the mother’s life was in danger or when pregnancy was the result of rape.¹⁸

The UN’s 1974 population conference in Bucharest, and the “Population Tribune” held simultaneously for representatives of NGOs, generated significant debate regarding the need for and aims of population reduction. One goal of the conference was to draft a World Population Plan of Action (WPPA), and much discussion focused on this document.¹⁹ The Population Tribune, held for about 1,400 representatives of NGOs, was intended to provide a forum for free-flowing debate, including about contentious issues like abortion, less stymied by the formal strictures of a UN-sponsored event for official government delegations. Debate about the Bucharest conference’s goals began well in advance of the events held in late summer of 1974. At a UN Population Commission session in October 1973 focused on early WPPA drafts, the Brazilian representative took issue with American and European assertions regarding natural resource constraints and “limits to growth.” In his view, slackening world demand for raw materials as a result of successful population reduction and/or first-world conservationism were greater threats to developing countries than population growth. In Brazil during 1971-72, fully sixty percent of infants whose mothers had taken “modern hormonal [sic] or chemical contraceptives are either physically or mentally deficient,” he asserted.²⁰
In April 1974, the Catholic think tank Center of Concern, which tried to educate religious leaders on global issues related to social justice, invited clergy and representatives of developing nations to meet in Washington, DC, in preparation for the Bucharest conference. Gerald O. Barney of the Rockefeller Brothers Fund and Joan Dunlop, assistant to John D. Rockefeller, 3rd, were invited to observe discussion among thirty-some participants. Barney’s notes emphasize that there was considerable suspicion about the first world’s motivation for trying to reduce third world population, and some participants equated such initiatives with genocide. There was also skepticism regarding the safety of contraceptives. Some in attendance criticized the ecological impact of first-world consumption on third-world landscapes, but others (including Brazil’s representative) rejected advocating reduced first-world consumption, since this would harm their own export economies. Dunlop summarized one theme of the conversation as: “Growth rate of consumption in developing countries is far higher than population growth in underdeveloped countries.”

During the Bucharest conference, one point of contention (as reported by the Wall Street Journal) was “whether the major problem is too many people on the globe or imperialism. Either way, the U.S. is a prime target.” Other newspapers summarized the debate in headlines reading “Birth control or wealth control?” (Kayhan, Tehran) and “Population: les pauvres contre les riches” (Vie Moderne, France). Coverage by the Washington Post examined amendments to the WPPA introduced by Margaret Mead and Germain Greer to promote sexual equality. Only the Vatican refrained from adopting the revised WPPA (accepted by acclamation), due to the document’s implicit support for contraception. An hour-long report on the Bucharest meetings produced by National Public Radio (US) emphasized tension between the economic development goals of third-world nations and the family planning interests of the industrialized world. A compromise position was well articulated by a Swedish representative who noted that “people who see little promise in their future will not plan it,” so family planning initiatives should be integrated into economic development strategies. One significant difference of opinion concerned whether technological advances such as those comprising the “green
revolution” in agriculture would make it possible to meet the needs of a growing population. Countries like China believed that they would, while population control advocates (including John D. Rockefeller, 3rd) hoped that the green revolution would buy time to allow for realistic assessment of resource limits, but that ultimately human population growth would have to decelerate. Several speakers warned of the risk of a “global class war” between over-consuming, wealthy nations and impoverished nations if resources worldwide were not better managed to meet the essential needs of all people for food and energy.24

John D. Rockefeller, 3rd chose to speak during the Population Tribune, although he presented his own views as an established advocate for population reduction rather than representing the Population Council or any other organization with which he was affiliated. Rockefeller’s talk, later published by the International Union for the Scientific Study of Population (IUSSP) as “Population Growth: the Role of the Developed World,” argued that population growth should be acknowledged as “a multiplier and intensifier of other problems rather than the cause of them.” Development plans should be “determined primarily by a country’s aspirations and its own physical and human resources,” not imposed from the outside. He emphasized the need to empower women, both in the interest of economic development and to reduce the centrality of childbearing to their social status. Rockefeller’s speech was well received by Catholic clergy since it recommended that population control advocates pay more attention to economic development initiatives, as worthwhile in themselves and likely to spur eventual population decline. Records indicate that it frustrated demographers like Frank Notestein. They felt that both Rockefeller was capitulating to some of his ideological opponents and that the media overstated the degree to which he had changed his mind about the relationship between population policy and economic development. In fact, the Population Council had long seen the two as closely intertwined.25

One speaker at the Population Tribune who was vocally opposed to the industrialized world’s consensus regarding overpopulation was Dr. Dora Obi Chizea of Nigeria. She proposed an alternative, positive program for Africa that eschewed developed world paternalism. “I know what I am talking about
because I am what I am talking about,” she insisted. Her identity as a woman who had grown up in rural Africa was an indisputable form of expertise, different from the limited vision of “the expert who watches my people from afar with telescopes, in colonial houses and hotels protected from the mosquitoes by air conditioning.” In a published reflection on her speech, Obi Chizea wrote that her goal was to promote honest, equitable, peaceful solutions to global needs, avoiding the catastrophism of language like “population crisis.”

Donald Warwick of the UN Development Program sent Joan Dunlop notes from the Bucharest meetings which he had typed up for the Hastings Center Report. These included: “Third world confidence in population research will rise only when the present clubbiness and elitism give way to genuine international collaboration and the entire field is marked by greater candor.” The missionary zeal of family planning is misguided; it needs more self-criticism and honesty. “Demographic paternalism must end;” stop diagnosing from DC & Geneva. The movement to curb global population growth needs a “guiding moral vision” rather than a technocratic orientation; for example, if people are starving, begin by feeding them—offer birth control later and secondarily. “To threaten poor countries with reduced food aid unless they establish population control programs [as American biologist Paul Ehrlich had done] seems...reprehensible.” Anthropologists who attended Bucharest, including Margaret Mead, cautioned against the cultural disruption that family planning programs and their accompanying values often incited.

Population Council Vice President W.P. Mauldin, Population Council President Emeritus Frank Notestein, Nazli Choucri of MIT’s political science department, and Ford Foundation Program Associate Michael Teitelbaum circulated a lengthy formal report on the UN’s Bucharest conference and the Population Tribune. In their view, both gatherings were “very political and politicized” but “participants were reluctant to acknowledge openly the strong political undercurrent that dominated” them. Nonetheless, there was consensus around the need for greater attention to women's role and status as an aspect of economic development. The meetings affirmed principles of both national
sovereignty and international responsibility which are often in tension with each other.28

The growing feminist concerns which were evident at the Bucharest meetings—both during the Population Tribune and in the drafting of the WPPA—also impacted professional culture at the male-dominated Population Council. The near absence of women from demography and population policy-making is striking throughout the archival record, but perhaps most jarringly in a letter sent by Berelson in advance of the 1966 International Conference on Family Planning, held in Geneva: “A number of participants are bringing their wives.... We are glad to invite wives to the opening and closing banquets..., but since we expect to carry on informal discussions over the mid-day break, the wives are not being invited to the lunches.” Apparently, women (and perhaps anyone not professionally involved in the relevant fields) were assumed to have nothing to offer in informal conversation about family planning.29

Just over a year after the Bucharest meetings, Anna Quandt sent a memo to her Population Council colleagues accusing them of over emphasizing female contraceptive methods (the pill and IUDs) in comparison to male methods (e.g. condoms and vasectomies). She felt that the council dismissed research on possible harm from female contraceptives due to concern that this would undermine their population control goals, although those goals should include prioritizing women’s safety. A year later, Quandt reported to the UN Fund for Population Activities that the Population Council was changing from a “traditional male establishment” to “an organization open to women and women’s rights.” She herself had witnessed misogyny and dismissiveness of women’s autonomy by some of her colleagues, epitomized by their enthusiasm for inserting IUDs during the post-partum period (on the grounds that women were particularly vulnerable at that point to any intervention that would spare them future childbirth). Quandt cautioned that an “old boy” network still governed recruitment in the population field, especially due to the dominance of Princeton’s demography program (the university enrolled only male students until the 1960s). A Committee on Women’s Role and Population was
established at the Population Council in 1976, thanks to advocacy by Quandt and others.30

By the mid-1970s, debates about global population reflected the concern raised by Weaver during the 1952 conference at Williamsburg, namely that population control initiatives should not project what he termed “Western Protestant philosophy” onto the rest of the world. Representatives of industrializing nations preferred to categorize that ideology as capitalist and imperialist; they sometimes labeled the underlying intentions genocidal. In the same decade, growing feminist demand for sexual equality and women’s autonomy were increasingly evident, both at conferences and within the Population Council itself.

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2 RF admin., Program & Policy, SG 3.1 & 3.2, ser 900, Box 57, Flldr 312: Prog. & Policy – Population Reports (1949, 1951...).
3 Rockefeller Family Archives, JDR 3rd Personal Papers, sub. 1, Box 7, Flldr 62: Diaries 1951. The quotation is from the summary of JDR 3rd’s December 1951 meeting with Bronk and Weaver. See also Pop Council, Acc 2, RG 2, series 9: Board of Trustees Meetings, box 1, “Minutes 20 Nov. 1952” on the formation of the Population Council.
4 RG 5 Rock. Family Archives, JDR 3rd papers, ser 1, sub 5: Pop. Interests, Box 85, Flldr 718: Williamsburg “Conf. on Pop Probs” documentation, June 1952. Flldrs 720-723 in the same box contain full transcripts of the conference proceedings. Weaver’s quote is on p. 38 of the closing session transcript.
5 Pop. Council, Acc 2, RG 2, series 9: Board of Trustees Meetings, box 1. See minutes from 4 Dec. 1953; also, minutes and agenda from 11 March 1954.
7 See Minutes, Pop. Council Board Trustees, 24 Jan. 1955, appendix B.
The status of contraception and abortion in Brazil can be found in several sources:


Additional information on the legal status of contraception and abortion in Brazil can be found in Pop Council Central Files, Acc 2, RG 2 (ser 1-4), Admin File, ser. 3, Box 305: Hugo Hoogenboom; folders 2839-2840, Brazil - Beyond Fam Planning.


JDR 3rd papers, Associates, Joan Dunlop, Pop. Council - World Pop Conf (’74) subseries 5.4.5. Box 34, Fldr 439: Pre World Pop. Conf. Issues Work-up, Center of Concern, 1-4 April 1974. See G. O. Barney’s notes (10 April) and J. Dunlop’s (17 April).


Pop Council records, Central Files, Acc 2, RG 2 (ser 1-4), Admin file (ser 3), Box 443, Demeny, Fldr 4166: Demeny World Pop. Conf ’74 Bucharest – clippings.

Rockefeller Foundation Audio, Series 3, box 2, Reel AV 15332, NPR “Options: Report from Bucharest - UN World Population Conf.,” 29 September 1974 [1 hr].


29 Pop. Council Central Files, Acc 2, RG 2 (ser 1-4), Box 161, Fldr 1548: International Conference on Family Planning Programs, Geneva, August 23-27, 1965: Plans. A later memo offered to arrange for tours and activities that “wives” could participate in during the day.