The Saviorism of Melinda Gates: Eugenics, Philanthrocapitalism, and the Perils of ‘Western’ Feminisms

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I aim to historically analyze and explicate long-lasting issues with philanthropic programs, specifically their health programs, by using Melinda Gates and her family planning programs at the Gates Foundation as a case study for the harms of philanthrocapitalism. Philanthrocapitalism was initially defined by Matthew Bishop and Michael Green in their book *Philanthrocapitalism: How the Rich Can Save the World* (2008) as a form of philanthropy conducted through a capitalist business-model by entrepreneurs. In addition to looking at the dangers of Melinda Gates’ philanthrocapitalism, this thesis also focuses on the specific history of family planning programs and outlines its history with eugenics to show how this history continues to shape Gates’ family planning programs. I analyze examples from the Population Council, a population control organization founded by eugenicists and funded by the Rockefeller and Ford Foundations among others. Comparing the Population Council’s eugenic research and programs to Melinda Gates’ work in the Gates Foundation, I show the throughlines between past eugenic movements and her work today. Finally, I do a close reading of Melinda Gates’ word choices in her book *The Moment of Lift* (2019), TedTalk, and the Gates Discovery Center, a public museum in Seattle, to dissect the saviorism underlying her philanthropic work. I connect the saviorism in her work to past and current philanthropy foundations as well as contextualizing her language choices as examples of Western feminist frameworks. Overall, this thesis shows the issues underlying Melinda Gates’ family planning programs by connecting them to past racist, imperialist programs of a similar nature.
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INTRODUCTION

This thesis focuses on Melinda Gates’ work in the Family Planning sector of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. I use Melinda Gates as a case study to understand United States philanthrocapitalism more generally. In this thesis, I will conduct a historical analysis of philanthropies in the US to show that Gates’ continues the imperialism of past philanthropists in the field of public health including Andrew Carnegie, John D. Rockefeller, and more.

As a double major in Global Gender Studies and Global Health, I found a lot of contentions between the two fields in my classes. The antiracist, anti-imperialist, and feminist critical lenses used in my Gender, Sexuality, and Feminist Studies (GSF) and International Comparative Studies (ICS) classes informed the ways I absorbed and responded to material in my Global Health courses. For example, I took issue with videos of Melinda Gates that we were assigned to watch in our Global Health classes. In these videos, Gates would talk about her family planning programs and use racist generalizations about Third World\(^1\) women. I decided to research and write a thesis to better understand and critically analyze her work while engaging with transnational feminist theories. As I worked on this project, I realized that Gates’ philanthropy continues a long legacy of billionaires using foundations to increase their profits

\(^1\) In this paper, I will use the phrase Third World as opposed to Global South. Additionally, references to ‘underdeveloped’ and ‘developing’ countries will be in quotes to indicate that these words are not my own, but are examples of racist implications from longstanding histories of colonialism and oppression more generally. I use the term Third World in solidarity with the politics of the students of the Third World Liberation Front strikes in 1968. As scholar Gary Okihiro says in Third World Studies: Theorizing Liberation, “Third World studies is not identity politics, multiculturalism, or intellectual affirmative action. Third World studies is not a gift of white liberals to benighted colored folk to right past wrongs; Third World studies is not a minor note in a grand symphony of US history” (1). Instead, Third World studies originate from revolutionary, radical student activists who wish to work towards liberation.
and power while disguising their private interests as public health programs. In Melinda Gates’
case, her work also reproduces an imperialist, racist and paternalistic mindset under the guise of
helping and empowering “less fortunate” women and children. Yet at Duke, she is presented as
exemplifying the model of excellence in global health by professors and scholars.

Melinda French Gates was born on August 15, 1964, in Dallas, Texas. She attended an
all-girls private Catholic high school and then Duke University in 1982-1987, earning
undergraduate degrees in economics and computer science and later an MBA. She worked at the
Microsoft software company following her graduation in 1987 as a marketing manager. She met
Bill Gates while working there, and they married in 1994. They divorced in 2021 but continue to
run the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation together.²

Establishing the Gates Foundation in 2000 with the stated goal of improving child health
in Third World countries,³ the foundation has since expanded its mission to global proportions in
the areas of public health and education. Their mission statement currently reads as follows:
“Our mission is to create a world where every person has the opportunity to live a healthy,
productive life.”⁴ The foundation defines its program strategies to include divisions of gender
equality, global development, global growth & opportunity, global health, global policy &
advocacy, and the United States.⁵ They list their locations to include their headquarters in

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² Kerri Lee Alexander, “Melinda Gates, 1964-”. National Women’s History Museum. URL:
https://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/melinda-gates.
³ “Our Story.” URL: https://www.gatesfoundation.org/about/our-story
⁴ “About: Committed to Fighting the Greatest Inequities.” URL:
https://www.gatesfoundation.org/about#:~:text=Our%20mission%20is%20to%20create,live%20a%20healthy%20productive%20life.&text=For%2020%20years%2C%20the%20Bill,greatest%20inequities%20in%20the%20world.&text=We%20can%20t%20achieve%20our%20goals%20on%20our%20own.
⁵ https://www.gatesfoundation.org/about/foundation-fact-sheet
Seattle, Washington, and offices in Washington, DC, Delhi, Beijing, Berlin, Addis Ababa, Abuja, and Johannesburg.⁶

The Gates Foundation defines their goals for family planning as “to empower women and girls to take charge of their own reproductive health, enable them to make informed decisions about family planning, and ensure their access to contraceptive options that meet their needs”.⁷ Their website outlines their areas of focus as expanding contraceptive choice, innovation and implementation research, broadening impact, data, and advocacy.⁸ Melinda Gates is quoted as saying, “contraceptives are one of the most powerful tools we have. It puts the power in the hands of young girls and women to plan their families, and quite honestly to plan their futures.”⁹

In my first chapter, titled “The Gates Foundation’s Continuation of US Philanthrocapitalism,” I show how Melinda Gates uses and disguises philanthrocapitalism. Building upon practices from the pioneers of philanthropy, such as Andrew Carnegie and John D. Rockefeller, Melinda Gates builds an image of herself and her philanthropy that disguises her power as selfless works. I will present my argument by starting with the history of philanthropies in the US to show that from the late nineteenth century, millionaires and billionaires have used philanthropic giving as a way to exert power and control.

In the second chapter, titled “Melinda Gates and the Eugenic Legacies of Population Control Programs,” I connect Gates’ family planning programs to US philanthropies’ historic involvement in eugenics. I do this by mainly focusing on the work of the Population Council which was created by John D. Rockefeller III in 1952. I use a variety of archival sources such as

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⁶ Ibid.
⁸ Ibid.
⁹ Ibid.
correspondences between eugenicists like Thomas Parran, Rockefeller, and others. I also look at original recommendation report documents for family planning programs including the Population Council’s recommendations to Pakistan’s government in 1960.

And lastly, in the third chapter, titled “Melinda Gates and “Empowerment” Colonialism,” I will analyze the ways in which Melinda Gates creates her public image and uses it to impose Western ideals on other groups. I focus heavily on her book, *The Moment of Lift: How Empowering Women Changes the World*, which was published in 2019. I examine her word choice in several interviews and her TedTalk. I also describe and analyze the visual aspects of the Gates Discovery Center, which is a public museum that displays the work of the Gates Foundation. I will also analyze specifically the wording she utilizes concerning development.” I will draw on feminist and socialist feminist scholars to further understand how her language promotes capitalist ideas and impacts Third World women. While the first chapter focused on the colonial structure of philanthropic work and the second chapter focused on the eugenic quality of her programs, this final chapter will analyze the common stereotypes Melinda Gates uses to bolster her public image as well as analyze how these stereotypes push for capitalist development.

To write this thesis, I looked at a variety of primary and secondary sources over the course of 2021-2023. I went to the Rockefeller Archive Center in Tarrytown, New York. There, I looked at documents from the Population Council and the Ford Foundation at the Rockefeller Foundation including grant proposals, meeting notes, and correspondence letters. I also went to the Gates Foundation Discovery Center in Seattle and took photos of their public displays. I read all publications and statements I could find by Melinda Gates on family planning and birth control including her memoir, *The Moment of Lift*. Additionally, I closely analyzed her TedTalk
on reproductive health. I also conducted two individual interviews with people that work at the Gates Foundation. Lastly, I read feminist scholars that both support and criticize reproductive health advocates like Melinda Gates.

**Saviorism and Imperialism in Global Health at Duke**

My interests in this project emerged from my experiences as a student at Duke University’s Global Health Institute (DGHI). I found that most of my global health classes at DGHI were entrenched in white Western saviorism. The classes are framed around group projects that create “health interventions” for a variety of health issues in low-income countries (LMICs). Usually, the professor will give each group of students a specific health problem in an LMIC, and the students will have a few class periods to work on a “solution” to the problem. This approach emboldens highly inexperienced Duke students to believe that they can ‘fix’ health disparities that often stem from long histories of systematic oppression, colonialism/imperialism, social issues specific to the region, or other complicated reasons. Students are expected to, and often believe that they can, understand these complicated histories in just a few class periods and then offer an intervention that supposedly addresses the nuances of the situation. Oftentimes, the professors themselves do not understand the histories or intricacies of the context for which they are requiring students to create a health intervention. This lack of knowledge from students and professors leads to class discussions usually out-of-touch with the reality of the situation or its historical, political, and material context and can reproduce racist stereotypes.

Additionally, global health classes at Duke rarely, if ever, discuss the colonial history of US and Western health interventions in the Third World, exactly like the ones we are expected to create in class. Sometimes, Duke professors attempt to distinguish themselves and their class
from past racist and problematic health interventions. However, this usually only consists of a quick mention of “keeping in mind” past colonial and imperial projects in the Third World without any critical thinking on how to actively avoid recreating similar paternalistic dynamics.

To give a specific example of the saviorism in DGHI, I will recount one of my personal experiences in class. In Spring of 2021, I took a class that was cross-listed in both Global Health and Public Policy. Over the course of the semester, I came to know my classmates better and realized that the majority of them were from higher income families. I remember that we had a class on Universal Healthcare, and I watched as the discussion quickly turned into a discussion of Duke college students debating what specifically forms of healthcare should and should not be free and accessible to all. Knowing that most of the students likely have access to any form of healthcare that they would ever need or want, I could not believe that my classmates believed that they could argue for certain forms of healthcare to be more inaccessible compared to other forms of healthcare. Even though the conversation was a theoretical one, I found it hard not to worry about how DGHI was preparing these students to graduate and potentially implement their ideas in the professional sectors that they would likely enter.

Instead of encouraging students to think critically about the Western saviorism present in the broad field of Global Health, DGHI uplifts and praises US wealthy white people who work to “change the world” and encourages us to do the same using their methods. One of these saviors is Melinda Gates, whose connections to Duke University are multifaceted and deep. She earned a B.S. double major in computer science and economics in 1986 followed by an MBA from the Fuqua School of Business in 1987.¹⁰ She served on the Duke Board of Trustees between 1996-

Additionally, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation is one of the largest benefactors to the university according to a *Duke Chronicle* article published in 2021. In 2002, the foundation gave $35 million to Duke to create the French Family Science Center, using Melinda Gates’ natal family name. In 2007, the BMGF donated $10 million for financial aid for undergraduate and business school students and $30 million to establish the DukeEngage program.

At the DGHI, advisors encourages Duke undergraduates co-majoring in Global Health to go on their own trips in the Third World in the Experiential Learning Activity (ELA) requirement. The ELA is mandatory for global health majors and requires students to participate in an 8-week “field-based” project. While there is no requirement that this project occur outside of the US, most of the options suggested by the department are DukeEngage programs sited outside the US. Similar to the DGHI, DukeEngage is designed to make students feel good about the work they are doing and tells students they are changing the world even if their project is unproductive, disconnected from the local community, or harmful in other ways. Additionally, many Duke students use DukeEngage as a form of travel and vacation for their summers.

Knowing that I did not want to participate in the voluntourism of most DukeEngage programs, I met with several DGHI advisors about other possibilities that would fulfill my ELA requirement. Each time, they advocated for specific DukeEngage projects they thought fit my interests and failed to provide other choices. Beyond the voluntourism, the ELA requirement advantages more privileged students since the project cannot be used for class credit.

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12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.
Furthermore, at one point, the DGHI website stated that an ELA would not count toward the major if the student was paid over a certain amount for their project. These two required components of the ELA assume that all Duke Global Health students have the money and time to work without payment or with minimal payment for eight summer weeks that also would not result in class credit. For many low-income students, this is not possible. While the DGHI has recently become more lenient about letting students get paid for their ELA, the ELA still cannot be counted for course credit. For my ELA requirement, I ended up working on a research team at Duke that aimed to record environmental justice movements in the Southern United States through oral history archives. I had several meetings with my DGHI advisor to convince her of the validity of this project. I received initial pushback since the project did not follow DGHI’s preferred health intervention format, but I was able to convince her that the project is still related to global health.

**Overview of Feminist Literature on Family Planning**

The Gates Foundation’s investments in “family planning” projects exist within a long history of colonialism, imperialism, and eugenics. Colonial and imperial powers, such as the United States, have worked with philanthropic, corporate organizations to encourage or discourage birth rates for different groups of people for political and/or economic reasons. While many feminist activists and scholars have long been interested in women’s sexual and reproductive agency, not all feminists agree about the ideas of reproductive justice. A specific group of feminists, that largely consists of scholars and activists of color, argue that fertility programs ranging from population control, to family planning, and even to reproductive justice programs often aim to control reproductive health. The motives of these programs have often
consisted of controlling growth rate of certain populations or conducting nonconsensual research for the purposes of profit or scientific advancement.

Since the literature on critical feminist perspectives on family planning is vast, I will focus on only a few examples to give perspective on the larger scope of the literature. In certain areas of the world, birth control projects were established by imperial and colonial actors and institutions, in many cases working with highly educated upper-class people in the same countries, such as scientists, demographers, and government officials. These projects often involved middle- and upper-class feminists motivated by desires to have more choices for themselves and less privileged women; reduce poverty; “modernize” the society culturally and economically; and/or eugenicist sensibilities. Now, I will outline a few examples of this and demonstrate tensions among feminists that critique birth control programs.

**Birth Control in India 1920s-1950s**

Nilanjana Chatterjee and Nancy E. Riley write that from the 1920s, the “earliest advocates of reproductive control” in India “were primarily male Indian and British bureaucrats, statisticians, social scientists, and other social reformers who had been influenced by new theories” beginning in the 1920s (Chatterjee and Riley 2001, 820). One of the prominent theories at the time that influenced Indian population control projects was neo-Malthusianism (ibid.). Chikako Takeshita defines the neo-Malthusian movement as a revival of “the idea of the late-eighteenth century British scholar Thomas Malthus, who predicted that overpopulation would cause famine, disease, and widespread mortality, and applied them to the contemporary economic situation” (Takeshita 2012, 9).

Many middle-class Indian women also took an interest in birth control because they wanted to control their fertility, which they linked to becoming more advanced and modern as a
society. Often, these were middle-and upper-class activists in organizations that advocated to increase women’s rights. The *Women’s Role in Planned Economy* (WRPE) *Report*, a study conducted in 1939 and published in 1940, involved anti-colonial, largely middle-class Indian women from the Indian National Congress Party (Sreenivas 2021, 96). The report addressed birth control in its “Family Life” section, saying that advocating for “knowledge of birth control will...help to reduce cases of abortion, infanticide, and suffering” (Indian Government 1939, 175). The report was unusual in its focus on the needs of working women in India. Since most of the report’s authors were Indian women, women’s independence was a central theme of the report which argued that the independent state should ensure that all Indian women have access to contraception (Sreenivas 2021, 94).

The section on “Family Life” in the 1947 Congress Party report also includes a subsection on “Birth Control or Limitation of the Family,” which argues that the “Importance of the limitation of family is being more and more realised in India as well as in other countries. Such a limitation is in the interests of the children, the parents as well as the nation” (Shah 1947, 174-175). Here, we see how family size came to be framed as important to the health and advancement of modernized countries. This section of the report additionally shows a eugenicist point of view in calling for only “the right kinds of persons [to] marry,” implying that there is still a desire for only certain kinds of Indian women to marry and reproduce (Shah 1947, 174-175).

Mytheli Sreenivas argues that although the WRPE report “did not focus on middle-class women and their agenda like most colonial era reports did but at the same time, the report was not that radical and emphasized things such as property ownership and citizenship” (Sreenivas 2021, 96). Her point is to illustrate that local women’s rights advocates took active roles in state
interventions concerning women’s reproduction. Sreenivas states that “overlooking this role leads to the assumption that population control was entirely a male-led enterprise, with its agenda and implementation set exclusively by male demographers, development experts, and bureaucrats” (Sreenivas 2021, 94).

**Sterilization and Birth Control in Puerto Rico**

Puerto Rico, during US colonial rule in the first half of the twentieth century, was one of many sites of US imperial and colonial repression whose people suffered violent projects of population control. Popular ideas of eugenics in the US affected policies that the US government implemented in Puerto Rico (Briggs 2002, 76). In 1937, legislation passed in Puerto Rico on birth control that included legalizing sterilizations for “health reasons” (Mass 1977, 68). After this legislation passed, “the Nationalist movement of Albizu began to argue that the existence of birth control on the island was part of a U. federal policy of genocide, a position taken up by the Catholic Church throughout the next several decades” (Briggs 2002, 76). Later, in the 1950s, Puerto Rico’s governor and commissioner of health opened 160 birth control clinics with the support of the US government with the intention that the clinics would show that Puerto Rican women preferred sterilization (Mass 1977, 71). Historian Bonnie Mass argues that the US encouraged sterilizations in Puerto Rico because they wanted to use the colony as a military base, and they believed controlling and minimizing the population size would create “social stabilization” and allow the US to use their land for military purposes (Mass 1977, 70-71).

In *Reproducing Empire: Race, Sex, Science, and U.S. Imperialism in Puerto Rico*, Laura Briggs shows that population control projects and resistance to their violence coexisted with radical leftist nurses and social workers who advocated for birth control methods that were safe and available to women as they wanted and needed (Briggs 2002, 93). These activists advocated
not only for birth control options, but for maternal and child health programs and increased rights for the poor and working-class women of Puerto Rico (ibid).

In Puerto Rico, the left feminism of the birth control movement additionally included complex characteristics that weakened the radicalism of their ideals. For instance, Briggs describes the leftist feminists as wanting birth control to create smaller, nuclear families which would essentially mimic similar values and structures as the US (Briggs 2002, 93-94). Even though these feminists were considered leftists and prioritized women’s rights, their specific views towards birth control did not stray too far from neo-Malthusian ideas. Overall, this snapshot into India and Puerto Rico’s birth control movements in the 1930s and 1940s illustrate the often complicatedness of feminists' involvement in reproductive justice.

**Feminist Science and Technology Studies on Reproductive Technology**

Science Technology Studies (STS) is an interdisciplinary field that seeks to understand the social and political values built into technologies historically and currently. Chikako Takeshita uses a definition from Susan Reynolds Whyte, Sjaak van der Geest, and Anita Hardon’s book *Social Lives of Medicine* (2002) to describe STS as following “the career of material things as they move through different settings and are attributed value” (2012, 13). Scholars such as Takeshita have expanded STS to include feminist, anti-imperialist and anti-racist theories and methods to understand the development and use of technologies, in this case, fertility control methods. Like the STS approach, these scholars challenge the idea that technologies are inherently neutral of power interests in their development, marketing, and use. Built into the design of these technologies and their distribution and use are material and ideological assumptions and interests shaped by gender, race, class, and geopolitical relations. I use such a feminist STS approach to better understand fertility technologies and projects,
showing how powerful individuals, groups, and institutions, including Melinda Gates through the Gates Foundation, develop, fund, and wielded them to control others and gain and consolidate their own wealth and power.

Numerous reproductive control technologies, especially long-acting reversible contraception (LARC), have resulted in the injury, permanent sterilization, and death of users who often do not have access to the full extent of the technologies side effects. These violent projects were shaped largely by the interests of their advocates, researchers, funders, and governments. One of the most infamous of such technologies is the Dalkon Shield. The Dalkon Shield was an intrauterine contraceptive device (IUD) created in the early 1960s by eugenicist Hugh Davis (Baker 2001, 1304; Takeshita 2012, 76). While many scholars have researched the intricacies and fallout of the Dalkon Shield, here I will use the work of Takeshita and Lisa Baker to outline the device, its damaging consequences, and the main players behind it. Discussing the violent history of the Dalkon Shield gives one example, out of many, of reproductive technologies that physically harmed hundreds and hundreds of users.

According to Baker, the Dalkon Shield was created with the main purpose of controlling women’s bodies (2001, 1306). A trial of the IUD before its release conducted experiments on women without their permission and found that less than 2% of them could withstand having the IUD inserted for 12 months (Baker 2001, 1306). Participants in the trial averaged only 5.5 months with the Dalkon Shield and most used other forms of contraception in addition to the IUD, although Davis neglected to include these facts in his report of the trial (Baker 2001, 1307). Despite the poor outcomes of the study, Davis’ framing led to the widespread introduction of the Dalkon Shield first in the United States and Puerto Rico and later to tens of countries around the world. Despite this trial and the majority of Dalkon Shield users complaining about the IUD for
years, Davis did not consider changing its design until men having sex with women who had the Dalkon Shield inserted started complaining of the attached string’s uncomfortable protrusion (Baker 2001, 1305). Takeshita notes that Davis and the Population Council, who worked with him to establish the IUD, were “mainly focused on the efficacy of the device; safety quickly became a secondary consideration” (Takeshita 2012, 81).

Showing how ideological assumptions matter to the design and implementation of technologies, the drug developers promoting the Dalkon Shield argued that certain groups of women, such as working class, Black, disabled, Third World, and other less privileged groups, could not be expected to follow the schedule of taking a pill everyday so they needed to have the Dalkon IUD, a long-lasting form of contraception (Takeshita 2012 79; Baker 2001, 1307). Arguing that only certain women would greatly benefit from the Dalkon Shield, a significantly more dangerous and long-lasting form of contraception, over pill forms of contraception illustrated eugenicist and selective population and fertility control agendas. In Takeshita’s words, the Dalkon Shield disaster was horrible but a “predictable outcome of the historical trajectory of IUD development and its introduction to the United States at that historical moment” (Takeshita 2012, 78-79). One also sees how power agendas are built into technologies that are seemingly neutral or even “advancements” that are supposed to help people.

**Cairo’s 1994 United Nations Conference on Population and Development**

In 1994, the UN-sponsored International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) was held in Cairo, Egypt. This conference is generally considered a turning point in the realm of reproductive justice because women of color and women from the Third World were highly involved at the conference. Attendees at the conference included members of
governments, UN organizations and representatives, and feminist activists in the non-governmental sphere (Takeshita 2012, 7).

This conference marked an international shift away from target-driven goals for fertility reduction to a more comprehensive understanding of reproductive health and women’s empowerment (Chatterjee and Riley 2001, 222), although many conflicts and disagreements occurred. For example, at the conference, feminists redefined the IUD as an option for contraception that should be available among alternative contraceptives for all women. While operating on the belief that access to family planning is a basic human right, these feminists wanted to acknowledge that the IUD and other forms of birth control had often been forced upon women all around the world and were not pieces of technology neutral of racist and imperialist agendas (Takeshita 2012, 7, 12).

Another topic that generated heated and persistent discussion before and during the ICPD was abortion. The conference concluded that abortion was acceptable but should not be widely advertised or used as the main form of “family planning.” According to one of the conference’s agreed upon statements: “governments should take appropriate steps to help women avoid abortion, which in no case should be promoted as a method of family planning, and in all cases provide for the humane treatment and counseling of women who have had recourse to abortion” (Bowen 1997, 178). The contours of this statement were largely informed by Vatican and Muslim organizational representatives at the conference. Many accused the ICPD of bowing to Vatican “hijacking” of the ICPD (Scully 2015, 226).

Black women from Egypt and other African countries, the Caribbean, Latin America, and the United States also attended the 1994 ICPD. Many of them argued that the reproductive justice conversations largely catered to middle- and upper-class women (Scully 2015, 229). They
stressed that the “‘reproductive choice’ framework emphasized a consumer-oriented approach to family planning” that assumed all women could afford and access the different family planning options discussed at the conference (Scully 2015, 229). They insisted that the options available to them were usually more dangerous forms of contraception that those available to non-Black women (Scully 2015, 230).

Here, these Black women invoke issues among family planning programs that have been around since the beginning of the twentieth century. Overall, it is important to note the aspects of this 1994 conference and how the ICPD is viewed as more inclusive and focused on women’s rights, while also still facing criticisms that family planning programs have had for decades. Understanding the nuances of this conference helps to understand broader issues in the current discourse of reproductive justice and therefore can help analyze Melinda Gates’ family planning programs. The history of ICPD, along with the Dalkon Shield, birth control in India and Puerto Rico in the 1920s-1950s all begin to situate Melinda Gates’ current work within a longstanding history of birth control technologies. I will now begin to go further in-depth and connect these histories of violence and imperialism to her work in family planning today.
CHAPTER 1: The Gates Foundation’s Continuation of US Philanthrocapitalism

Today, corporate philanthropists like Bill and Melinda Gates receive almost exclusively positive media coverage. For example, in a 2015 online account, they were called the “most generous humans ever.”\(^1\) In 2018, Business Insider listed them among the “25 Most Generous Philanthropists in America Today.”\(^2\) These evaluations are based on the immense private wealth that the family funnels into their private foundation for distribution. But this media coverage also shows us that the Gates, and their billionaire colleagues, are effectively framed as generous. They distribute foundation money in ways that make it difficult to criticize them, particularly since their funding is intensely sought after by many institutions, including Duke.

The first section of this chapter describes the origins of philanthrocapitalism in the United States and early ideological challenges to this approach. Philanthrocapitalism, which will be defined in more depth later on, is philanthropy conducted in a way that emulates the inner-workings of for-profit business. Unlike today, philanthropic foundations such as Carnegie and Rockefeller were widely criticized and even hated by a variety of social groups, including the poor and working classes. Many recognized that millionaires and billionaires established philanthropic organizations and used that money to consolidate profit within their families and exert symbolic and material power over larger society.

This chapter’s second section shows how such philanthropy shifted to a more international focus in the interwar period, especially in the areas of medicine and health. This


international orientation intensified during the Cold War, in alliance with US foreign policy interests. Cultural, gender, and population control concerns were intertwined in many such international philanthropic projects as Western imperialism and colonialism used philanthropy to target the reproductive rates of particular groups in countries deemed ‘underdeveloped’ or dangerous to US economic and political power.

The third and final section discusses the rise of humanitarian and empowerment philanthropy after the end of the Cold War, exemplified by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. This philanthrocapitalism, which presents itself as especially concerned with increasing women’s “agency,” shares many continuities with earlier forms and some differences, including a more direct relationship between its corporate profit-seeking and foundation interests. A substantial portion of this philanthropic work continues to be concerned with for-profit medical and health interventions in the Third World especially, including birth control programs. At the same time, the work is ideologically presented within feminist ideals of development, sexual health, and women’s empowerment.

I relied on a variety of primary and secondary sources in this chapter to write a history of philanthropy that plots the throughlines to Melinda Gates’ contemporary work at the Gates Foundation. For background research, I used books on the history of foundations in the US including *The Big Foundations* by Waldemar Nielsen (1972) and *U.S. Philanthropic Foundations* by Warren Weaver (1967). I analyzed primary sources such as Andrew Carnegie’s *Gospel of Wealth* (1889), information found on various foundations’ current websites, and many archival sources, including films and documents, that are digitized and available online. I also analyzed archival materials, including correspondence, that I gathered from the Rockefeller Archive Center in New York City. In the second half of the chapter, I used *Philanthrocapitalism:*

**Origins of US Philanthropy and Early Challenges**

Philanthropic foundations in the US were created to serve the interests of the wealthy families that created them and are largely funded by the multi-generational wealth of a specific family. Among the largest and oldest family foundations are the Carnegie Foundation (established by Andrew Carnegie in 1905), Russell Sage Foundation (established by Margaret Olivia Sage in 1907), Rockefeller Foundation (established by John D. Rockefeller, Jr., in 1913), and Ford Foundation (established by Edsel Ford, son of Henry Ford, in 1936). Each of these foundations frame themselves as doing charitable work for the good of society. For instance, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching original mission statement was to “do and perform all things necessary to encourage, uphold, and dignify the profession of the teacher and the cause of higher education.”17 The Russell Sage Foundation was concerned with “the improvement of social and living conditions in the United States.” While their foundation began with projects related to housing and urban planning in the US, it now supports research exclusively in the social sciences.18 The Rockefeller Foundation has a long history of conducting public health research and funding health programs in the US and internationally. Their mission statement remains the same as when the foundation was established in 1913: “Promoting the well-being of humanity throughout the world.” Per the foundation’s website, the Rockefeller

Foundation’s first grant was $100,000 to the American Red Cross in 1913. The original trustees of the Ford Foundation hoped to dedicate its work to the “advancement of human welfare through reducing poverty and promoting democratic values, peace, and educational opportunity.”

Most of these foundations arose from an increasing trend of monopolists deciding to give away some of their fortune at their own discretion. Oftentimes, public disapproval of unethical business practices prompted billionaires to engage in philanthropy distract from negative publicity. For example, in 1892 Carnegie’s steel mill workers went on a series of strikes that came to a head in the Pennsylvania Homestead Strike. To fight the Homestead Strike, Carnegie hired the Pinkerton National Detective Agency, which was a private detective agency created by Alan Pinkerton in 1851 (Hunt 2009). Carnegie also mobilized the Pennsylvania National guard to get the workers back under his control (ibid.). The Pinkertons ended up killing four strikers and caused innumerable injuries (Hunt 2009, para. 13; Kahan 2013, 74). After ending this strike, Carnegie kept his workers from unionizing and continued to lower workers’ wages. The public’s opinion of him greatly plummeted following the strike and his responses (McGoey 2015, 43).

Knowing that his public favor was dwindling, Carnegie acknowledged the outcome of the strike to his management team, saying that “the mass of Public Sentiment is not with us about Homestead on the direct issue of re-adjustment of the [wage] scale” (McGoey 2015, 44). Later, within just 13 years of the infamous events in 1892, Carnegie established the Carnegie Foundation with the mission “to catalyze transformational change in education so that every

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student has the opportunity to live a healthy, dignified, and fulfilling life” (Lagemann 1983, 11). The timing of the Carnegie Foundation’s establishment makes clear how the family company used philanthropy to reinforce its position. The establishment of the foundation distracted from infamous, violent, union busting events such as the Homestead strike. Furthermore, the foundation allowed profit to be funneled in ways that limited government taxation and public redistribution of private wealth, win some public favor, and continue to expand capitalist business ventures.

John D. Rockefeller, magnate of the Standard Oil Company, also started the Rockefeller Foundation after public opinion of him greatly declined. Firstly, Standard Oil faced a disaster in 1900 that caused a lot of damage. On July 5, 1900, lightning struck two Standard Oil tanks in Constable Hook, New Jersey, causing them to explode. The explosion severely burned about 13 people and caused 1-2 million dollars in damage. In a Thomas Edison film available at the Library of Congress, one can see hundreds of people fleeing their homes with their belongings as smoke trails behind them. A few years after this explosive disaster, renowned muckraker Ida Tarbell released an in-depth exposé in 1904 on the shocking details of Rockefeller’s creation of the Standard Oil trust, addressing exploitation, espionage networks, and more (Weinberg 2008, 216). She devoted years to researching the Standard Oil Company and their efforts to monopolize the industry and published an exposé in 19 installments in McClure Magazine that later became a book titled The History of the Standard Oil Company (Weinberg 2008, 223). In 1910, the US Attorney General sued the Standard Oil Company of New Jersey and 33 other

22 “Burning of the Standard Oil Co’s Tanks, Bayonne, N.J.” 1900 URL: https://www.loc.gov/item/00694164/.
corporations in the US Supreme Court for violating the Sherman Antitrust Act by forming a monopoly. The Supreme Court ruled in 1911 that Standard Oil needed to split up its company.\textsuperscript{23}

At the turn of the century, Rockefeller began giving some of his money to philanthropic organizations to improve his image and eventually created the Rockefeller Foundation in 1913, soon after the Supreme Court decision. Notably, health research was an early focus of Rockefeller philanthropy. Before the foundation was created, in 1901, he established the Rockefeller Institute for Medical Research, which became Rockefeller University in 1965. In 1909, he established the Rockefeller Sanitary Commission for the Eradication of Hookworm Disease, which aimed to increase the productivity of US agricultural and industrial workers in the southern states, where hookworm disease was rampant (Brown 1976, 898). Once the Rockefeller Foundation was established in 1913, all philanthropic health programs came to work under the foundation (Brown 1976, 899). The Rockefeller “philanthropic” programs included disease research, health, and education. These programs were designed to serve and strengthen the private economic and political power of already extremely wealthy families.

In addition to using their foundations to rebuild public trust in their work, billionaires like Rockefeller and Carnegie used philanthropy to exert control over those receiving their philanthropic “gifts,” especially the poor and working classes. The Carnegie Foundation, for example, emerged from ideas that Andrew Carnegie published in 1889 in two essays six months apart, “Wealth” and “The Best Fields for Philanthropy,” later consolidated and retitled, “The Gospel of Wealth.”\textsuperscript{24} These essays urged the wealthy to participate in philanthropy and give their


money for the betterment of society. Specifically, Carnegie wrote that rich men “have it in their power during their lives to busy themselves in organizing benefactions from which the masses of their fellows will derive lasting advantage, and thus dignify their own lives.”25 The essays made clear that only the “worthy” would receive such support. Furthermore, in the section, “Help Those Only Who Will Help Themselves,” he argued that the unworthy are those who will not help themselves and will waste their money. In the section that followed, titled, “Most of the Money Spent in ‘Charity’ Badly Spent,” Carnegie claimed that regular charities made “unwise” decisions by often giving money to “the slothful, the drunken, and the unworthy.”26

Notably, Bishop and Green describe Carnegie’s “The Gospel of Wealth” as “holy scripture” for Melinda and Bill Gates, his philanthropic successors in the twenty-first century. Bill Gates is said to have received a copy of the essay from billionaire investor Warren Buffet, reportedly inspiring Gates’ philanthropic endeavor (Bishop and Green 2008, 53). Like his wealthy compatriots, Carnegie believed that the philanthropy of the very wealthy must be targeted to different aims than those of religiously-motivated charities. This position was similar to mainstream sentiments among the middle and upper classes who believed charities were useless and even harmful (Zunz 2011, 10). Carnegie suggested that without exceedinly wealthy philanthropists like himself, othe general public would not know how to use large sums of money for the benefit of themselves. The “millionaire” should be “the trustee” for “the poor,” he explained: the “millionaire will be but a trustee for the poor; entrusted for a session with a great part of the increased wealth of the community, but administering it for the community far better

25 Ibid., p. 11.
26 Ibid., p. 15.
than it could or would have done for itself.”27 He believed that vast wealth made him and his class inherently superior and more capable than charities, governments, or workers of making executive decisions about the direction and amounts of redistribution. This kind of self-righteous and elite ideological mindset, which wants to control people and societies for private profit, continues with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

Unlike today, when the majority of the public in the US seem to believe that philanthropists are self-made, generous, and selfless, society generally criticized philanthropic trusts from the late nineteenth century onward. Before the Civil War and Reconstruction, when private giving grew significantly, government leaders and civil society elites expressed active concern and disapproval toward private giving. For example, in 1829 journalist William Ellery Channing wrote an essay for the Christian Examiner, a popular New England journal, cautioning against private giving by “trusts”:

[Trusts] ought to be suspected. They are a kind of irregular government created within our Constitutional government. Let them be watched closely. As soon as we find them resolved or even disposed to bear down on a respectable man or set of men, or to force on the community measures about which wise and good men differ, let us feel that a dangerous engine is at work among us, and oppose to it our steady and stern disapprobation. (Hall 2013, 143)

Channing’s beliefs were greatly influenced by the Enlightenment thinkers of the time (Schneider 1938, 3). He expressed a commonly shared fear of the time that trusts and monopolies had too much unchecked power in society.

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27 Ibid., 16-17.
When the US government received a half-million-dollar gift in 1835 from the late James Smithson to create the Smithsonian Museum (Hall 2013, 142), arguments broke out among the House and Senate as politicians debated if the donation should be accepted and how it should be used. Senator William C. Preston of South Carolina adamantly argued that the federal government does not have the authority to execute Smithson’s trust and expressed his opposition to private endowments (Hall 2013, 142). Preston was a powerful and widely respected white man in South Carolina as a professor and trustee at South Carolina College (Wilson 2016, 2). He often argued against the federal government as it tried to impose tariffs and against federal officials who argued for the abolition of slavery (Wilson 2016, 224). Informed by his hatred of the federal government interfering in state affairs, he argued that the Constitution does not grant the federal government power to use Smithson’s trust under the specific guidelines that he desired while further arguing that Smithson’s status as a British foreigner contributed to the illegitimacy of the trust’s execution by the US federal government (Hall 2013, 42; Wilson 2016, 33).

From the Reconstruction era after the Civil War to the Gilded Age of the late nineteenth century through the early decades of the twentieth century, monopoly capitalists in the US amassed great wealth. Legal campaigns emerged to challenge the deep social ills produced by this period of capitalism. Both these legal campaigns and general public opinions of monopolists were informed by muckraking research journalism during the Progressive Era from the late nineteenth century to the early decades of the twentieth century. One historian defines the Progressive Era as “an attempt by various status-conscious groups within middle class and the old upper class to protect themselves from the twin evils of uncontrolled big business and potentially radical big labor” (Adams 1981, 245). As philanthropies and private giving grew, so
did distrust toward philanthropic organizations from different ideological directions by distinct
groups. Smaller business owners, for example, criticized Rockefeller’s Standard Oil Company
and called for antitrust laws to control its monopoly power and growth because the company had
put hundreds of smaller oil companies out of business in the early years of the twentieth century
(2018) that investigative journalists, in turn, viewed Rockefeller as the “dark archangel of
corporate capitalism, especially when brutally suppressing industrial unrest” (651). He was
commonly referred to as the “most hated man in the world” because of his brutal business
practices and union busting (Hall 2013, 145). Referring to the Rockefeller Foundation, Theodore
Roosevelt was quoted as saying that “no amount of charities in spending such fortunes can
compensate in any way for the misconduct in acquiring them” (Hall 2013, 146). Certainly, the
poor and working classes who were his victims also understood that Rockefeller created the
foundation to protect and consolidate his wealth and political power and gain favor (Hall 2013,
145; Rausch 2018, 651; Zunz 2014, 21).

“Public” Health, Imperialism, US Philanthropy in the Twentieth Century

Foundation-based philanthropy was substantially focused on public health and medicine
in the US and abroad for reasons tied into their material and ideological interests, as Richard
Brown shows for the Rockefeller Foundation in his essay, “Public Health in Imperialism: Early
Rockefeller Programs at Home and Abroad” (1976). He writes more generally:
The professional public health field today owes much of its growth and development
during the twentieth century to the needs of colonialism and neo-colonialism. Imperialist
powers were severely hampered by disease. Tropical diseases decimated the ranks of
"mother country" personnel and reduced the efficiency of native populations as imperialism's workforce. (Brown 1976, 897)

Whether it was the Carnegies or the Rockefellers, the goal of philanthropy at home and abroad was to reinforce the financial interests and political power of millionaires, especially by continuing to amass wealth and control labor.

For instance, in the first decade of the twentieth century, the Carnegie Foundation funded research for and published the 1910 Flexner Report, which examined and standardized medical school education in the US (Duffy 2011, 272). Flexner’s evaluations were based on German medicinal practices and framed medicine as technological advancements, moving the US system of medical education more firmly into a biomedical model (Duffy 2011, 275). Feminist scholar Moya Bailey, who coined the term “misogynoir” to describe the compounded effects of misogyny and racism that Black women experience, argues that the Flexner Report’s recommendations for “fewer and better doctors” was a covert way of saying that doctors should be white men from privileged Northern backgrounds (Bailey 2017, 3). The Flexner Report shows that from the beginning, the Carnegie Foundation had great interest in shaping and controlling the fields of public health and medicine to serve its private wealth and power-accumulating purposes. Moreover, it did so primarily through investments in scientific research and educational institutions.

In 1910, the Rockefeller Foundation established a Division of Medical Education to “strategically [place] medical schools in various parts of the world to increase their resources and to improve their teaching and research” (Duffy). Following this establishment of a Division of Medical Education, the Rockefeller Foundation gave grants to medical schools in England,
France, Canada, Brazil, and other places. From the start of these foundations’ involvement in medicine and health, one can see their powerful influences on research and practice in the US and abroad.

Foundation involvement and interests in health and medicine expanded substantially between the two world wars and during the Cold War. Major philanthropic foundations in the US used both world wars to assert their power and influence on a transnational stage. Before the US government officially entered WWI, the Rockefeller Foundation had already established war relief efforts in Europe (Zunz 2014, 64; Rausch 2018, 653; Hall 2013, 148). The foundation worked with the American Red Cross (ARC) and created their own War Relief Commission in October 1914, which had an office in Switzerland (Zunz 2014, 64). The ARC and War Relief Commission introduced the Rockefeller Foundation to international philanthropic efforts and shows their early links with US international geopolitical interests. For example, one of the biggest war relief programs implemented by the Rockefeller Foundation was an anti-tuberculosis campaign in France in 1917 (Rausch 2019, 655; Zunz 2014, 50). Their $8 million donation to this campaign and their work with ARC aligned with the US government’s goal to strengthen its alliance with France (Rausch 2018, 651). The foundation also led relief programs in Belgium and Serbia during WWI (Zunz 2011, 56). Rausch argues that the “extent that Rockefeller health interventions were straightforward exercises in domination placing the Foundation in the middle of an inter-imperial public health network with European powers is still in need of further historical scrutiny” (Rausch 2018, 656).

The Rockefeller Foundation continued to expand after WWI through its sponsored health programs. Using the 1910 Flexner Model established by the Carnegie Foundation, the foundation

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created health and medical education programs all over the world (Duffy 2011, 272; Matysiak 2014, 92). The Rockefeller Foundation’s annual report from 1945 shows that they funded health education programs at the University of Toronto, China’s National Institute of Health, the All-Indian Institute of Hygiene and Public Health, and the University of Chile’s School of Public Health (Matysiak 2014, 91-94). They used their money and influence to expand corporate, foundation and US government “soft power” through schooling programs and curriculum that in turn shaped future health professionals and institutions around the world.

The Rockefeller Foundation’s centennial series includes an article titled, “Health and Well-Being: Science, Medical Education, and Public Health,” which indicates that standardizing health education was not simply about health education or health philanthropy (Matysiak 2014). It was primarily about “centralization” and “perpetuation” of a global science and medical system dominated by US corporate and government interests. The foundation established “a centralized training and educational system…. [which] developed fellowship programs to ensure that students would have postgraduate opportunities, allowing the system to perpetuate itself for years to come” (Matysiak 2014, 92-93). The Rockefeller Foundation’s health programs became so widespread internationally that the US government reached out to them during WWII to report back on any suspicious activity relating to the war effort (Weaver 1967, 192).

Philanthropists’ interests in reproduction and population studies grew exponentially during the Cold War and many established and funded population control programs in the Third World, including in US colonies such as Puerto Rico. By 1951, the Rockefeller Foundation’s health programs existed in over 80 countries and mainly focused on virus, vaccine, and fertility research (McGoey 2015, 149-150; Matysiak 2014, 116; Weaver 1967, 367). Other U.S philanthropic foundations began dedicating more resources to fertility and population studies
beginning in the 1940s, spending over $3 million USD on population research by 1952 (Weaver 1967, 367). Many of these programs were presented under the guise of “preserving” democracy globally, following the message delivered from the highest level of political leadership. In 1949, Harry S. Truman gave his first inaugural speech where he famously talked about the “Four Points,” which primarily focused on attacking the “false philosophy [of] communism” and is considered to have initiated the Cold War. He encouraged US citizens in the fourth point:

We must embark on a bold new program for making the benefits of our scientific advances and industrial progress available for the improvement and growth of underdeveloped areas. More than half the people of the world are living in conditions approaching misery. Their food is inadequate. They are victims of disease. Their economic life is primitive and stagnant. Their poverty is a handicap and a threat both to them and to more prosperous areas. For the first time in history, humanity possesses the knowledge and skill to relieve suffering of these people. (Truman 1949, para. 45-47)29

This call to action was the driving force behind many US foundations’ participation in the Cold War (Zunz 2014, 155). Participating in this “psychological war,” many US philanthropies were determined to spread their “American ideals” of democracy and capitalism across the world to prevent the spread of communism (Schneider 2002, Hall 2013, Zunz 2014, Nielsen 1972).

However, under the guise of good will, US funded foundation health programs served as part of a war strategy to stave off communism and champion US capitalist dominance. Moreover, the Cold War explicitly intertwined the interests of the US government and its national capitalists’ interests, working through a variety of mechanisms, including tax-exempt private foundations. As discussed at length in the next chapter, many foundations turned to

29 Truman’s inaugural speech is available digitally at the Truman Library’s website: https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/public-papers/19/inaugural-address.
population control in their health services, especially in the Third World. They were driven by growing US fear of a “population bomb,” in other words, a fear that there would be growing populations in Eastern and developing countries which would turn to communism and eventually outnumber the capitalist powers in the world (Takeshita 2012, 40). Figure 1 shows the cover page of a pamphlet distributed by the Rockefeller Foundation in 1960 titled, “Voluntary Human Sterilization: Is it the Answer to the Population Bomb?”

Figure 1: In the image, a drawn rendering of planet Earth is covered with people filling all the terrain to a degree that they are falling off into what is presumably the universe. Notably, the image of Earth centers the continents of Africa and Asia, indicating the areas of the world that produced the most anxiety for the capitalist West. The pamphlet is located in the Rockefeller Archive Center’s collection titled “John D. Rockefeller III’s papers” in record group FA108, box 80, folder 670.

To address this “population bomb,” John D. Rockefeller III, among other wealthy and powerful philanthropists and scholars, created and funded the Population Council in 1952.
According to a *New York Times* article titled, “New Group Sets Up Population Study,” published on August 4, 1953, the Population Council goals were as follows:

- To study the problems presented by the increasing population of the world;
- To encourage and support research and the advancement and diffusion of knowledge resulting from such research;
- To serve generally as a center for the collection and exchange of information on ideas and developments relating to population questions;
- To cooperate with individuals and institutions having similar interests and to take the initiative in the broad fields that constitute the population problem. (*New York Times* 1953, para. 3)

Looking deeper, this population control strategy targeted areas that the “Western” world viewed as “underdeveloped” and posing a danger to its hegemony, including India, China, and South Korea. At the time, all of these countries had large population numbers and were relatively impoverished.

The US Cold War philosophy that informed foundation work in population and fertility internationally had cultural and family dimensions expressed by W.W. Rostow’s "The Stages of Economic Growth” essay, originally published in *The Economic History Review* in (1959). Rostow was a professor in history and economics and worked for John F. Kennedy and later Lyndon B. Johnson (Simon 2006, 212). In 1961, he became the Deputy Special Assistant to the National Security Affairs (Simon 2006, 212). Working in National Security Affairs, Rostow worked closely with the US Central Intelligence Agency to stop communism in Indonesia (Bunnell, 1976, 147). Rostow’s “stages of development” were supposedly a formula for success that differentiates “developing” countries from “developed” countries, and as repeatedly referenced when discussing the superiority of consumption-based capitalist urbanization, to “modernize” (Jacobs 2015, para. 3; Rostow 1959, 3). He makes a case for the benefits of
colonialism and imperialism by Western imperialist powers, despite their violence, because they “develop” traditional societies. This development assumes a capitalist direction: “without the affront to human and national dignity caused by the intrusion of more advanced powers, the rate of modernization of traditional societies over the past century-and-a-half would have been much slower than, in fact, it has been” (Rostow 1959, 6). In 1960, Rostow republished the article with the new subheading "A Non-Communist Manifesto" (Jacobs 2015, para. 3).

In this argument, which posited itself as an empirically-based formula for economic success but was a Western capitalist vision, all societies go from the traditional society, to preconditions for take-off, to take-off, to the drive to maturity, and finally to the age of high mass consumption stages (Rostow 1959, 1). Rostow describes the “traditional society” as one that hits a “productivity ceiling” (Rostow 1959, 4). He imagines such societies to be rural, work is labor-intensive with little mechanization, capital investment or application of science and technology in production. In the next stage, “preconditions for takeoff,” either internally or by external forces, more technology is introduced in production, states encourage private investment, people save in banks, and economics is more internationally-focused. Rostow says that “without the affront to human and national dignity caused by the intrusion of more advanced powers, the rate of modernization of traditional societies over the past century-and-a-half would have been much slower than, in fact, it has been” (Rostow 1959, 6). He explicitly suggests that the intervention of “more advanced powers” can initiate the process of modernization and create the “preconditions for take-off” (ibid.). In the take-off stage, rapid economic growth occurs with the use of “modern industrial techniques” (Rostow 1959, 7). Rostow defines the drive to maturity “as the period when a society has effectively applied the range of (then) modern technology to the bulk of its resources,” is more urbanized, and has more production specialization (Rostow 1959, 8). The
pinnacle of stages is the “age of high mass consumption,” when there is increased private consumption and full urbanization is accomplished (Rostow 1959, 9).

Rostow’s theory has many critics, including US economist Paul Baran who argued in The Political Economy of Growth (1957) that colonialism and imperialism destroyed “developing” countries’ social, governmental, and economic structures and were, in fact, the causes of economic problems in Third World countries. In contrast, Rostow’s theory argued for a capitalist formula for development based on US interests (Foster 2007, para. 7). The Rostow essay includes components related to marriage, family size, and “modernity.” For example, Rostow writes that birth rates “reflect” each stage and that a “decline in birth rates, during or soon after the take-off, as urbanization took hold and progress became a palpable possibility” (Rostow 1959, 3). Here there is a direct causal relationship made between becoming “developed” and having small modern consumerist families in cities. Capitalist modernity is supposed to lead to small families and lower fertility. Many population control projects often marketed as themselves as leading to cultural and economic modernization and development, on the assumption that poverty was caused by larger family size.

The Rise of Humanitarian and Empowerment Philanthropy Since the 1990s

In 2000, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation formed from the merging of the William H. Gates Foundation and the Gates Learning Foundation. Bill and Melinda Gates say they were inspired to start the foundation after reading an article about children’s deaths around the world. They reportedly shared the article with William Gates, Sr., himself made wealthy by

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31 Ibid.
commercializing medical developments such as the heart defibrillator,\textsuperscript{32} saying, “Dad, maybe we can do something about this.” Per their words on their webpage, these “eight words changed [their] lives.”\textsuperscript{33} At the Gates Discovery Center, these eight words are in large, bold letters that span across an entire wall (Fig. 2). The Gates Discovery Center is a visitor center for the Gates Foundation near their headquarters in Seattle, Washington, where philanthropic work is shown off through interactive exhibits and tours. Lined up at the top of the wall are pictures of people’s faces, mostly people of color. The staging of this room implies that the pictures are faces of people that their philanthropy has already helped.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure2.png}
\caption{This is a photograph of a wall display at the Gates Discovery Center in Seattle, WA, taken during my visit on June 30, 2022. The picture shows a quote bubble saying, “Dad, maybe we can do something about this.” Above the quote, there is a line of images in black and white of people’s faces.}
\end{figure}


\textsuperscript{33} Ibid.
Just a year after the Gates family established the Gates Foundation, former President Bill Clinton established the Clinton Foundation in 2001. The Clinton Foundation defines their mission as “work to expand economic opportunity, improve public health, confront the climate crisis, and inspire citizen engagement and service.” In *Clinton Cash*, Peter Schweizer argues that the Clinton Foundation acts as a way for both Bill and Hillary Clinton to receive foreign money for their public campaigns (Schweizer 2015, 9). In many ways, the Clinton Foundation is similar to the Gates Foundation, and the two foundations represent the post-Cold War shift in the US where family philanthropy is more explicitly used to advance private material and ideological interests under US control nationally and internationally, working with governmental and non-governmental organizations as well as corporations. As Jacob Levich writes in an article about the Gates Foundation’s international call in response to the 2014 Ebola virus outbreak (2015), much of this work is undertaken under the idea of “global health governance”:

The concept of “global health governance” (GHG) was first articulated in the West in the early 1990s, reflecting Washington's confidence that the fall of the Soviet Union was about to usher in a unipolar world dominated by U.S. interests. President Bush’s concept of a “new world order” found its way into scholarship as “global governance,” describing a loosely defined transnational regime effectively led by the United States and consisting of both public institutions (the United Nations, the World Bank, NATO, the ICC, and so on) and some combination of private actors, including transnational corporations (TNCs), private foundations, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). (Levich 2015, 711-712)

34 “About the Clinton Foundation.” URL: https://www.clintonfoundation.org/about-the-clinton-foundation/.
Bill and Hillary Clinton and Bill and Melinda Gates established their foundations following in the footsteps of philanthropists like Carnegie and Rockefeller. US capitalism had “won” the Cold War against the USSR, although the People’s Republic of China remained the largest competitor to US hegemony. The Gates Foundation then emerged during the internet revolution from the massive and unprecedented wealth accumulated by a few US monopoly technology companies, among them the Microsoft Corporation established by Bill Gates. By their legal definition, these “trusts” sidestep capital gains and inheritance taxes which the government would partly use for social spending (Clark and McGoey 2016). Since massive personal wealth is transferred to tax-exempt foundations, that wealth is by definition subsidized by the government (Clark and McGoey 2016, 2458; Feldstein and Taylor 1976, 1221). Such subsidies are not available to 80 to 90 percent of the population, which does not hold large wealth or investments or property. That vast majority of people lose as well because taxes on this vast wealth are diverted from investment in health, education, and infrastructure projects that would be available to people irrespective of their class privileges. In other words, by avoiding the income tax and donating their money to a foundation, Melinda and Bill Gates take money initially acquired by monopoly extraction from users and not returned to benefit those same people through public sector investments (Clark and McGoey 2016, 2458; Yermack 2008, 122).

In No Such Thing as a Free Gift (2015), Linsey McGoey categorizes the Gates Foundation as a form of philanthrocapitalism, which she defines as “a novel way of doing philanthropy, one that emulates the way business is done in the for-profit capitalist world” (7). Similarly, Fortune describes the Clinton Foundation as following the “new turn in philanthropy, in which the lines between not-for-profits, politics, and business seem to blur.”35 McGoey adapts

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her definition of philanthrocapitalism from Matthew Bishop and Michael Green’s book, *Philanthrocapitalism: How the Rich Can Save the World* (2008). This form of philanthropy is more explicitly connected to corporate capitalism, as has been argued about the Gates Foundation’s substantial philanthropic work in US K-12 education (Baltodano 2017). For instance, when the Gates Foundation started, their work focused on connecting libraries in the US to the Internet from an initiative out of Microsoft’s development arm. As a result, some criticized the foundation as simply a marketing tool for Microsoft (Bishop and Green 2008, 54). While Microsoft and the Gates Foundation continue to target the privatization of K-12 education in the United States, a substantial proportion of the foundation’s work shifted to focus on non-US vaccine and family planning programs, which more effectively mask the foundation’s corporate and profit interests.

The Gates Foundation uses their wealth to generate massive influence in the public/global health fields. Continuing similar trends to the Rockefeller Foundation’s long history of international health programs, the Gates Foundation provides 11% of the UN World Health Organization’s (WHO) entire budget. This makes them the second biggest donor behind only the US government (Curtis 2016, 11). Despite their continued influence on international bodies such as the WHO and their documented private wealth-accumulating interests, McCoy et al. (2009) point out that the foundation “seems to be largely managed through an informal system of personal networks and relationships rather than by a more transparent process based on independent and technical peer review” (1650). This informal network, their status as a private entity accountable only to their board, and their political and economic power makes them as troubling as any of the traditional foundations and worthy of much more scrutiny.
As a private foundation donating funds to ‘developing’ countries, the Gates Foundation encourages the privatization of health care systems. In the past decade, Bill and Melinda Gates awarded two grants to the International Finance Corporation, whose mission is to support private sector development, including private healthcare, in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) (McCoy et al. 2009, 1651). Currently, the private sector already provides about half of healthcare services across Africa (Sehoole 2020, para. 1). When healthcare is provided largely by the private sector, the public sector devotes less funding and resources to health services (Rushton and Williams 2011, 17). Additionally, healthcare workers are drawn to work for the private sector (Rushton and Williams 2011, 18). This imbalance of resources and workers between the private and public sector only furthers health inequities due to the inaccessibility of private healthcare (Rushton and Williams 2011, 18). The Gates have also been accused of only growing development of healthcare in “narrow, verticalized programmes which have contributed to an overcrowded and fractured global health governance landscape, the fragmentation and disintegration of health systems, and the undermining of Ministries of Health” (Rushton and Williams 2011, 152). Therefore, the Foundation’s push for privatization of healthcare can be harmful for the different communities they target.

Additionally, nothing obligates the Gates Foundation to continue to provide funds for any project, which creates uncertainty for long-term planning and likely leads to pressure to “perform” according to this private entity’s requirements (Stevenson and Youde 2021, 403). The Gates Foundation can pull out their funding from a project or organization whenever they like depending on decisions made by the three trustees: Bill Gates, Melinda Gates and Warren Buffet. Despite the significant size and influence of the Gates Foundation, or probably because of it, there is little public criticism of this inconsistent, subjective, and thoroughly unaccountable
process (McGoey 2015). Instead, the Gates Foundation revels in frequent positive media coverage of their health endeavors and projects. Mark Curtis writes that the Gates Foundation has likely “bought the silence of academics, NGOs and the media who might otherwise be expected to criticize aspects of the foundation’s work” (Curtis 2016, 6). Since their funding and influence also heavily influences the World Health Organization in addition to research and public health efforts, the Gates Foundation’s decision-making process should be studied at length and held more accountable by public bodies and governments.

**Conclusion**

While foundation spending on public concerns can seem beneficial on the surface, further investigation reveals that the priorities and investments of private philanthropies have largely negative systematic consequences for people, communities, and the world. They are substantially intended to benefit their private beneficiaries. During an international conference in Edinburgh, Scotland, Linsey McGoey presented her research on the Gates Foundation. She included a quote from Michael Klonsky, an educator involved in the US “small schools” endeavor supported by the Gates Foundation: “if it wasn’t for Gates, half of the countries in Africa wouldn’t have a medical system” (as quoted by McGoey 2015, 170). The room full of scholars and health workers from all over the world started laughing. Not everyone in the world is naïve to the workings of these foundations or believes they owe gratitude to the Gates Foundation for their “help.” Although it seems like philanthropists are and always have been unquestionable forces of good, their history shows otherwise. Philanthropy has been used by arrogant, wealthy individuals who give portions of their wealth primarily to consolidate and control their wealth and further establish their social and political power. Much of this work includes an undercurrent that distrusts the poor and working classes and democratic government.
I show in this chapter that from their establishment in the US, family philanthropies were used by the very wealthy to consolidate wealth, repress popular demands for justice and redistribution, and keep up a positive public image to deflect from the exploitative practices of their businesses. In the next chapter, I will trace the history of eugenics and family philanthropies’ roles in population control programs to show connections from its history to Melinda Gates’ work in the present.
CHAPTER 2: Melinda Gates and the Eugenic Legacies of Population Control Programs

Melinda Gates calls her birth control projects the “Family Planning” sector of the Gates Foundation using a politically neutral phrase that emerged internationally after World War II to replace the phrase “population control.” This chapter demonstrates how the Gates Foundation’s family planning programs are similar to birth control programs that over many decades have been motivated by eugenicist concerns that aim to control or manage the reproduction rates of certain countries, classes, or groups within a society for political or economic purposes. I will first outline a history of eugenics mostly centered around the periods of the World War I (WWI) and World War II (WWII). Then I will investigate the creation of the Population Council and its ties to private foundations such as the Rockefeller and Ford Foundations. Looking at specific Population Council programs in the 1950s and 1960s, I aim to show that Melinda Gates’s philanthropy is strongly rooted in a eugenic history oriented to controlling or managing the growth of particular populations in the world.

Many of the sources I use in this chapter are archival materials from the Population Council and their international programs that I located during research at the Rockefeller Archive Center in Tarrytown, New York. To build an analytical background of eugenics before the creation of the Population Council, I used books such as Eugenics: A Very Short Introduction by Philippa Levine (2017) and Essays in Eugenics by eugenicist Francis Galton (1909). I also used sources from feminist researchers like Chikako Takeshita and Matthew Connelly to help construct my own analytical criticisms of population studies and programs.
Early Twentieth-Century Eugenics

The term eugenics was first coined by Francis Galton in 1865 in his essay titled “Hereditary Talent and Character.” Building his argument off of the research of his cousin, Charles Darwin, he argued that if one could breed plants to have certain characteristics, then one could also breed people to have certain favorable characteristics (Bulmer 2003, 79-80). He created the word eugenics from Greek roots meaning “good birth” (Bulmer 2003, 80). In his later work, titled Essays In Eugenics published in 1909, he said that the “aim of Eugenics is to bring as many influences as can be reasonably employed, to cause the useful classes in the community to contribute more than their proportion to the next generation” (Galton 1909, 38). Eugenics grew into an entire field of study with ideas widely taken up by governments, societies, and public health programs that believed certain populations should reproduce less.

As early as 1903, President Theodore Roosevelt articulated the elite class’s fear of “race suicide” in a letter to Mrs. John Van Vorst and Marie Van Vorst (Levine 2017, 93). They had published the letter as a preface in The Women Who Toils: Being the Experiences of Two Gentlewomen as Factory Girls by sisters Bessie and Marie Van Vorst,36 which tells a story of class oppression gleaned through undercover work by these two elite white women in US factories. The Van Vorst sisters were part of a group of upper-class writers who at the time pretended to be poor to understand the suffering of the lower classes (Pittenger 1997, 40). In the letter, Roosevelt insisted that “what is fundamentally infinitely more important than any other question in this country—that is the question of race suicide, that is complete or partial” (Van Vorst and Van Vorst 1904, 10). Roosevelt’s letter reflected growing nativist concerns that immigrants would outnumber white people in the US and therefore lead to ‘race suicide.’

letter challenges upper-class men and women to do the work and make the sacrifices of getting married and having children for the sake of the “nation” and its “fundamental virtues” in order to avoid ‘race suicide.’

Many public “health and hygiene” projects of the Progressive Era were concerned with improving public health by developing “health code standards, as well as health education for physicians, government, and the public,” but were also informed by eugenicist, racial, class, and imperialist concerns related to biological reproduction. Some campaigns fell into the category of “positive eugenics,” defined by the Eugenics Archive as “promoting the idea that healthy, high-achieving people should have children, or have larger families.” For example, during state fairs held in many capitals, “Better Babies” exhibits included experts who examined and measured babies brought in by parents and concluded with contests that showed off the “best” and “healthiest” examples (Stern 2002, 748). In 1911, Mary T. Watts, founder of the Fittest Families Contests at the Iowa State Fair, said “you are raising better cattle, better horses, and better hogs, why don't you raise better babies?” (as quoted by Stern 2002, 748). The babies at these contests were exclusively white, showing the ideological commitment to “racial betterment” in a context of growing middle-class and elite white fears that immigrants, many of them poor, reproduced faster than this elite, changing the demographic composition and “quality” of the country (Stern 2002, 748; King and Ruggles 1997, 347).

37 The Smithsonian Institution holds material from the New York City Department of Mental Health and Hygiene campaigns during the Progressive Era: https://www.si.edu/spotlight/antibody-initiative/nyc-health-dept.

38 Eugenics: Positive vs. Negative by the Eugenics Archive at https://eugenicsarchive.ca/discover/tree/5233c3ac5c2ec5e00000000086
While “Better Babies” contests show an example of positive eugenics, or measures to improve environmental and population health, there were also several examples of negative eugenics in the US. The Eugenics Archive defines negative eugenics as “discouragement or prohibition of marriage and family life for those with eugenically undesirable traits; and sexual segregation, sterilization, and euthanasia of those with such traits.” The US has a long history of forcibly sterilizing people incarcerated in mental institutions and prisons as well as Black and Brown people in the US and elsewhere. In 1927, the Supreme Court legalized the sterilizations of patients at mental institutions in the court case Buck v. Bell. Rates of forced sterilizations were particularly high in North Carolina from the 1940s through the 1960s. The North Carolina Eugenics Board used a state law that allowed women determined to be “feebleminded”, or mentally ill, to be forcibly sterilized, which led to the sterilization of over 8,000 people (Schoen 2005, 128). Women sterilized in the US were overwhelmingly Black, Indigenous, and poor (ibid.).

Eugenic and selective pronatalist sensibilities fed into nationalistic and imperialistic agendas during the interwar period. In the 1930s, fascist Italy under the leadership of Benito Mussolini focused on “people’s social duty to contribute to the national ‘stock’” (Connelly 2006, 214). Japan, an imperial power, took measures to create and maintain a purified ‘Yamato race’ (Connelly 2006). And Hitler said that his intended conquest in Eastern Europe was the “planned control of population movements” in order to preserve the purity of the ‘Aryan race’ (Connelly 2006, 215). These forms of population control exhibited overt preferences for certain racial groups that were inextricably tied to the totalitarianism of certain fascist leaders.

39 Ibid.
Although eugenics is commonsensically strongly associated with the Axis Powers and fascism during WWII, Allied countries, or Western imperialist powers, were also major players in the eugenics movement. During the war, while Nazis were killing and torturing millions during the Holocaust, the US also held concentration camps where they arrested people of Japanese descent in the US. After Japan bombed Pearl Harbor, Franklin Roosevelt signed the Executive Order 9066 which legalized the capture of Japanese peoples (Renteln 1995, 619). Over 100,000 Japanese Americans were forced into concentration camps in the US (Renteln 1995, 619). General attitudes towards the internment camps exposed eugenic motivations behind people’s support of the camps. In 1942, Senator Rankin read a letter to Congress written by the daughter of an American naval officer which said, “We can rid America of this... danger now. We must insist on keeping the sexes [of Japanese Americans] separate, or they will use this internment time as an incubating period and in five years each family may emerge with five more children” (Tyner 1998, 264). This letter reflected many people’s desire to keep people in these camps from having children and ‘multiplying’ (Tyner 1998, 265). The Japanese internment camps in the US show one example of how the Axis Powers were not the only side of the war implementing eugenic programs.

Additionally, although rarely discussed, there are numerous similarities between the Holocaust and Jim Crow in the US. Some scholars argue that Jim Crow laws and systemic racism in the US more generally inspired many Nazi policies and practices during the Holocaust. As Whitman points out in *Hitler's American Model*, the *National Socialist Handbook of Law and Legislation* from 1935, Nazis praised the US legally policed racial hierarchy while noting that Germany needed to create something similar (Whitman 2017, 135). Additionally, members of the Nazi party regularly commented on the Civil War in the US and looked favorably towards
the Confederacy. In *Volkischer Beobachter*, the Nazi Party’s newspaper from 1920-1945, author Franz Haiser noted that at the end of the Civil War, the “uncultured democratic-capitalistic North had suppressed the brave, knightly and highly cultured large estates of the South” (as quoted in Grill and Jenkins 1992, 674). These two examples give a glimpse into the many Nazi discussions admiring the racism in the US. Despite the continual condemnation of Nazis in the US, racist policies and violent histories from the US are the basis for many Nazi policies during the Holocaust.

Ignoring their similarities to racist ideals of the Holocaust, white people in the US staunchly denounced the Nazis in consensus with global attitudes after WWII. After the Nuremberg trials, explicit advocacy of eugenics came to be seen as inappropriate and problematic due to its association with Nazism, the Holocaust, and fascism more broadly. Therefore, eugenicists had to choose their words and actions carefully to avoid intellectual and legal backlash and restrictions on funding. To give an example of public attitudes towards eugenics during this time, the United Nations (UN) tried and failed to create family planning programs. In 1952, Brock Chisholm, the first director general of the World Health Organization (WHO), tried to establish a connection between the WHO and family planning programs (Connelly 2006). This led to the disapproval from various Catholic countries such as Ireland and Italy and some countries threatened to even leave the UN (Connelly 2006). Chisholm then had to publicly state that the WHO would not participate in family planning programs to calm the waters. The reaction to Chisholm’s actions informed the WHO’s decisions regarding anything related to fertility rates which might be viewed as eugenic. Afterwards, the WHO decided to tell governments requesting WHO assistance regarding birth control that doing so would be outside
of their mandate (Connelly 2006). This controversy set the stage for eugenic research and eugenic programs in the following decade.

“Welfare” and “Health”: Eugenics by Another Name

To reach their goals, eugenicists had to employ strategies to present their programs and research in an acceptable manner. In a correspondence from March to April 1956 between Dr. Dorothy Brush and C.P. Blacker, they discussed this relationship between eugenics and public opinion. C.P. Blacker was a psychiatrist and eugenicist who published numerous articles and books on eugenics from the 1920s to around the 1950s. Dr. Brush was a birth control advocate and women’s rights advocate who worked closely with Margaret Sanger. In a letter to Blacker dated March 31, 1956, Dr. Brush argues that, “What scares people off eugenics is that emphasis on the undesirable hereditary qualities and diseases….There is a machine-like robot sounding affect in these forms. A lack of common humanity” (“Dr. C.P. Brush to Dr. C.P. Blacker” 1956). She points out that the specific wording around ‘undesirable hereditary qualities’ might explain the drawbacks of a eugenicist orientation. In agreement, Black responds by referencing Frederick Osborn, a noted American eugenicist and one of the founding fathers of American Eugenics Society in 1926:

Osborn’s book Preface to Eugenics should also provide an abundance of vigorous stimulus. Much more than my books. His idea of (what I call) crypto-eugenics is, I am sure, sound for the USA. You seek to fulfill the aims of eugenics without disclosing what you are really aiming at and without mentioning the word (“Dr. C.P. Blacker to Dr. C.P. Brush” 1956).

Blacker coined the term ‘crypto-eugenics’ to encompass the roundabout ways that eugenics had to employ to continue. As Osborn says years later in another one of his books, “eugenic goals are
most likely to be attained under another name than eugenics” (Osborn 1968, 84). Both Osborn and the correspondances between Dr. Brush and Blacker show that eugenicists were acutely aware of their work’s controversial potential.

In this period of ‘crypto-eugenics,’ eugenicists focused on “welfare” and “health” rather than overt racial supremacy, as demonstrated by Osborn’s “eugenic hypothesis” in Preface to Eugenics. In the book’s conclusion, Osborn writes, “Eugenics is no panacea for human ills. . . Social services, public health, housing, recreation, education take on new significance in the light of their relation to such a distribution of births as will improve man’s hereditary qualities” (Osborn 1951, 321). Here, Osborn is distinguishing a “welfare” and “health” orientation to populations and reproduction from the violent negative eugenics associated with the Holocaust.

He advocates policies that control fertility rates of certain groups for the betterment of the larger society, including improved “quality of life” for everyone.

After the WHO’s failed attempt to get involved with family planning in 1952, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, NGOs and private foundations took charge in population control movements since they had less constraints than governmental bodies like the UN. In “The Third Sector as a Protective Layer for Capitalism,” Joan Roeffs argues that the nonprofit world is dangerous because its funders, leaders, and actors are neither taxed nor accountable for their operations. Roeffs says that “if philanthropic capital were taxed, its disposition would be subject to political debate. Nonprofit organizations, on the other hand, are directed by self-perpetuating boards, and there is no democratic control over their private policy-making” (Roeffs 1995, para. 4). Being tax-exempt, private foundations were able to continue activities that more closely resembled eugenics after WWII. For example, the Rockefeller Foundation held a conference in 1952 with notable researchers and academics to discuss the ‘population problem’
and its threat to Western civilization. This conference led to the creation of the Population Council, an organization intended to implement population control programs and research. The Rockefeller Foundation and the Ford Foundation were the two main funders for the Population Council (Connelly 2006). The creation of the Population Council showed that foundations were able to continue working on eugenic programs and research when governmental bodies could not.

Takeshita in her book, *The Global Biopolitics of the IUD*, also refers to this shift in eugenics framing as ‘crypto-eugenics’ that eugenicists used to continue their agenda post-war. She argues that they “pursued their goals without using the word eugenics, instead pushing it by other means, which often involved coalescing with, or being sheltered by, the neo-Malthusian movement” (Takeshita 2012, 9). The neo-Malthusian movement shifted the conversation around eugenics after WWII to focus on fears of global overpopulation. Takeshita defines the neo-Malthusian movement as a revival of “the idea of the late-eighteenth century British scholar Thomas Malthus, who predicted that overpopulation would cause famine, disease, and widespread mortality, and applied them to the contemporary economic situation” (Takeshita 2012, 9). Eugenicists then achieved their goals by decentralizing their actions to further protect themselves from public attacks. In “Seeing Beyond the State: The Population Control Movement and the Problem of Sovereignty,” Matthew Connelly argues that key leaders in the eugenics movement would sit simultaneously on different boards for overlapping organizations to “steer ostensibly independent organizations in the same direction” (Connelly 2006, 221). This way, they were able to better cover their actions from a public to which they were not accountable in any case.
Tension surrounding eugenics appeared during the creation of the Population Council in 1952 as population scholars debated the proposal wording in back and forth correspondence. The Population Council is an organization founded by John D. Rockefeller III that focuses on population control research and programs implementation globally. Details about the council’s specific programs and research will be discussed in more depth later in the chapter. In 1952, during the council’s creation, Thomas Parran, Dean of the University of Pittsburgh, wrote to John D. Rockefeller III about his concerns with the wording of the council’s proposal document. He begins this letter saying, “Thank you so much for sending me the revised statement ‘Proposed...
Establishment of the Population Council.’ I still am troubled about some of the implications in it.” Using a concerned tone, Parran directly references the fear that people will associate population control with Nazism. Putting this worry bluntly, he says, “Frankly, the implications of this, while I know they were intended to have a eugenic implication, could readily be misunderstood as a Nazi master race philosophy.” While Parran supports the Population Council’s eugenic mission, he wants to ensure that the public will not associate its work with the Holocaust. His concerns reflect the shift towards crypto-eugenics during this post-war period.

The Ford Foundation is another example of a group that deliberately tried to hide their involvement in population control due to its political controversy in the 1950s. The foundation first dipped its toes in the population field in 1952 as some board members expressed interests in making population control a central goal for the foundation. However, they only provided some funding for the Population Council and smaller grants to individual researchers. In Limiting Population Growth and the Ford Foundation Contribution, John and Pat Caldwell note that “the Ford Foundation’s entrance to direct activities in the population field was so low-key that there are virtually no records of decisions taken or of the envisaged program” (Caldwell and Caldwell 1986, 52). A shift occurred in the 1960s as the Ford Foundation became a more prominent supporter of population control. They began to implement their own population programs in the Third World because the “battle for placing Third World family planning on the public agenda was slowly being won” (Caldwell and Caldwell 1986, 77). This shift in the Ford Foundation’s involvement in the field of population control reflects a potential desire to engage in the field but

41 Ibid.
an initial period of hesitancy due to the politically charged international environment of the 1950s.

To summarize, the Holocaust in WWII forced eugenicists to shift their strategies to distance themselves from similarities to Nazis’ racial supremacy ideals in a period commonly referred to as ‘crypto-eugenics.’ They had to consider and anticipate public opinions of their work more than before. Reframing discussions around eugenics, eugenicists were careful about how they presented their work to the public and when applying for program and research funding. Eugenicists employed this new caution to ensure that no one would associate their work with Nazism or the Holocaust.

**Drawing a Line between the Population Council and Melinda Gates Philanthropy**

This section begins to draw connections between Melinda Gates’s work on family planning from 1999 to the present time and population control efforts in the 1950s and 1960s sponsored by the Population Council. As mentioned earlier, the council was created in 1952 in New York with a board of trustees that included John D. Rockefeller III and Frank Notestein, Thomas Parran, Frederick Osborn, Lewis Strauss, Karl Compton, Detlev Bronk, and Donald McLean, Jr. (McCann et al. 1952). According to the council’s original bylaws and certificate of incorporation, the Population Council’s purposes are “exclusively charitable, scientific and educational and are to stimulate, encourage, promote, conduct and support significant activities in the broad field of population” (McCann et al. 1952, 1). Documents from the Rockefeller Archive Center reveal that the board of trustees took serious issue with the growing population around the world. Their main concern was that the number of people in certain areas of the world were outpacing the available resources in areas of South Asia and Africa. In its work, the council divided methods for “family limitation” into four categories: abstinence, contraception,
sterilization, and abortion (Balfour and Harper 1960, 28). The council’s mission was to encourage the decrease of population numbers in such areas to align with the amount of resources in a community, indicating the Malthusian orientation.42

One cannot fully understand the motives of the Population Council without contextualizing their work with a Cold War context. Fueled by the competition between capitalism and communism, Western capitalist powers became concerned with the “population bomb” and controlling geopolitics for their own gain after WWII. In 2016, the *East Asian Science, Technology and Society: An International Journal*, released an issue titled “Population Control and Reproductive Politics in Cold War Asia.” In the introduction to the issue, Aya Homei & Yu-Ling Huang argue that Asia was a geographical focus of the Cold War because it was seen as ‘underdeveloped’ and “a breeding ground for babies and communism, which prevailed in the international discussion on population buttressed by demographic transition theory” (Homei and Huang 2016, 348). The demographic transition theory views modernization as being tied with fertility, arguing that “societies progress from a pre-modern regime of high fertility and high mortality to a post-modern regime of low fertility and low mortality” (Kirk 1996). Since rates of fertility were seen as vital to the process of modernization, the US and the USSR became interested in controlling fertility rates in their competition to modernize and control ‘underdeveloped’ Third World countries.

Matthew Connelly, in “The Cold War in the *longue durée*: global migration, public health, and population control,” discusses the two common fears during this time period: that

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“nuclear war would wipe people off the face of the earth, whereas population growth would make the world explode with people” (Connelly 2010, 467). In 1964, John D. Rockefeller III talked about the population bomb in a speech at the second international conference on the IUD, which was sponsored by the Population Council. He mobilized conference participants by arguing that preventing the ‘population bomb’ was going to be harder than preventing nuclear war (Takeshita 2012, 40). These fears surrounding increased and uncontrollable population growth in the Third World threatened major powers like the US and led to a strong desire to control this population growth.

Most scholars of the Population Council concerned with race, class and imperialism consider it a neo-eugenicist organization. Informed by neo-Malthusianism, the Population Council‘s goal was to exercise ‘population control’ and ‘family limitation’ in the Third World to limit ‘undesirable’ populations. After WWII as the eugenics movement began to lose popularity, Takeshita argues that “differences in reproductive practices filled in as the proxy for racial differences in defining hierarchical relationships among groups of people, especially between the global North and the South” (Takeshita 2012, 37). Many members of the Population Council were self-identified eugenicists. John D. Rockefeller III inspired Kingsley Davis, Clyde Kiser, Frank Notestein, Dudley Kirk, and Frank Lorimer, all eugenicist demographers previously working at the Office of Population Research, to go work for the Population Council instead (Gordon 2002). Frederick Olsen, one of those who originally organized the Population Council, was a well-known eugenicist (Gordon 2002). And before the Rockefeller Foundation started funding the Population Council, the foundation funded many eugenic research projects preceding the council (Gordon 2002). Since many members were eugenicists themselves, it is not hard to see how their belief in eugenics informed their work at the Population Council.
This eugenicist mindset was especially apparent when the council addressed matters of sterilization in 1960. In “Report and Recommendations to Ministry of Health and Social Welfare, Government of Pakistan for Family Planning Program,” the Population Council insisted that sterilization of mainly women through salpingectomy, but also men through vasectomy, was a successful strategy by noting its voluntary regular use in the US (Balfour and Harper 1960). The report says that “voluntary sterilization as a means of family limitation is widely used in the United States, Japan, India, and Puerto Rico” (Balfour and Harper 1960, 35). Notably absent in this document is the frequent forced sterilizations of Black women and other minority women in the US and US colonies such as Puerto Rico.

The Population Council report for Pakistan’s government also states that some people believe that “countries with a high degree of illiteracy among their population cannot hope to achieve a rapid decline of the birth rate without widespread use of sterilization” (Balfour and Harper 1960, 35). Immediately following this statement, the council vaguely says “whether this be true or not, it is certain that the decline will be more rapid with sterilization than without” (Balfour and Harper 1960, 35). This push for sterilization in countries with high levels of illiteracy and non-white populations demonstrates the eugenicist targeting of population control. They used illiteracy to advocate for sterilization of certain groups by insinuating that less imposable contraception methods are too complicated for them to use properly. Overall, the Population Council was created as a eugenic organization funded by private foundations amidst a period of crypto-eugenics and the Cold War.

Salpingectomy is defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary as “surgical excision of a fallopian tube.”
Controlling Fertility in the Third World: Comparing the Gates Foundation with Earlier US Projects

This section draws connections between the Gates Foundation’s pharmaceutical and medical fertility control initiatives in the Third World since 1999 and earlier US population control efforts. The foundation’s “philanthropic” efforts on birth control and health in African, Asian, and other Third World countries, I argue, fit within longstanding Western imperialist interest in eugenicist and racist population control projects for the purposes of reinforcing their own geopolitical and economic power. We saw earlier in the chapter that the figures involved in the Population Council and the Rockefeller Foundation have historically been powerful, wealthy and directly connected at the most elite levels with US military, political, scientific, and academic institutions. The Gates Foundation and Population Council are similar in their use of language such as “aid” and “philanthropy” to soften the edges of these undemocratic and power-accumulating projects. They are also similar in how they use “modernization” and “advancement” to push their interests, although the Gates Foundation is more likely to focus on the gender dimensions of this, e.g. “empowerment,” especially of women. One major difference between the earlier established and post-Cold War fertility control projects is how much the Gates’ are much more intensely focused on using the foundation to accumulate private family profit and influence through investments. The corporate as opposed to governmental dimensions of the goals are much more manifest and blatant.

In terms of similarities between the Population Council’s work on “family limitation” in the 1950s and 1960s and the Gates Foundation’s work on “family planning” since 1999, both push specific types of contraception that they believe women in the Third World should use based on stereotypes and generalizations about the Third World woman and the Third World
man. In a memorandum to the Population Council dated September 9, 1952, by John D. Rockefeller III, Rockefeller argued that the Population Council should focus on the “development of a more effective, cheap and simple contraceptive, having in mind particularly the people of under-developed areas” (John D. Rockefeller, III 1952). This quote makes it clear that they are focused on a “simple” contraceptive for people who cannot handle a “complex” form of contraception.

This belief is especially apparent in decades of intrauterine device (IUD) contraceptive technologies developed by scientists and corporations with the support of the Population Council. In 1962, the first international conference on the IUD was held, sponsored by the Population Council. At the conference, Alan Guttmacher, later to become the head of the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF), said “the reason the restraint of population growth in these areas is moving so slowly is the fact that the methods we offer are Western methods, methods poorly suited to [non-Western] culture[s] and to the control of mass population growth. Our [Western] methods are largely birth control for the individual, not for a nation” (quoted by Takeshita 2012, 33). Population scientists emphasized that people in Third World countries need to have less individualized birth control methods that are more effective at controlling fertility at the “national” or population levels. In her analysis of this quote, Takeshita states: Guttmacher “implied that the available nonsurgical birth methods at the time, such as barrier methods and the newly developed oral contraceptives, were suitable only for Westerners, who were presumed to be educated and motivated enough to use them correctly and consistently” (Takeshita 2012, 33). They viewed the IUD as a “simple” form of contraceptive

44 This memorandum can be found on the Rockefeller Archive Center’s online database (https://dimes.rockarch.org/). Available in the John D. Rockefeller III Papers collection in folder Population Council, Inc. - Bylaws and Certificate of Incorporation, 1952.
because it was injectable, imposable, and difficult to remove in comparison to oral contraceptives, which depend more on voluntary and daily compliance to work properly.

In a similar vein but with a feminist discursive angle over seventy years later, Melinda Gates argues for injectable, long-lasting forms of contraception that women in Africa “prefer” because “they can hide it from their husbands, who sometimes want a lot of children” (Melinda Gates 2014, 3:10). At face value, it appears that she is concerned with empowering African women in relation to their husbands, who are assumed to be violent and controlling. But this statement also suggests that most African women are unable to stick up for themselves in their relationships. She does not reveal her profit or ideological goals in advocating for long-lasting forms of contraception. While she doesn’t use the same exact language as the Population Council, both are operating on racist stereotypes of people in Africa and other Third World countries while hiding how these technologies primarily serve their material and ideological interests.

Another parallel between the Population Council and the Gates Foundation is the recurring argument that limiting a family’s size will lead to family members becoming better educated, healthier, happier, wealthier, and having an overall better life. In a preliminary report from 1952 on recommendations for setting up a family limitation program, the Population Council told the Government of Pakistan that “for the individual family, population control means better health and more opportunity for education of the children.”45 Melinda Gates pushes a nearly identical argument in her 2019 book, *The Moment of Lift*:

We want our kids to be safe, to be healthy, to be happy, to do well in school, to fulfill their potential, to grow up and have families and livelihoods of their own—to love and to be loved. And we want to be healthy ourselves and develop our own gifts and share them with the community. Family planning is important in meeting every one of those needs, no matter where a woman lives. (Gates 2019, 47)

In this quote, Gates lists generic goals that everyone wants to achieve such as being happy and healthy and fulfilling individual potential. She claims that family planning will achieve these goals. As I discuss in the Introduction, family planning differs from reproductive justice, which would consider racism, classism, imperialism, and the other structural factors that truncate people’s lives and shape their health, happiness, and choices. These health and happiness factors would include high quality infant and maternal healthcare, access to abortion and birth control services that align with individual health needs, and safe and whole communities and environments that offer quality healthcare, food, housing, education, and infrastructure. Oftentimes, Melinda Gates makes such empty promises without any basis or recognition that structural issues will need to be addressed. While the Population Council uses “family planning” interchangeably with “population control” in the early 1950s report, Melinda Gates occasionally states that her “family planning” programs are not about population control. However, the similarities between her language and the language used by the Population Council suggest otherwise.

The Population Council and Melinda Gates arguments are both informed by the idea of cultural and economic “modernization” as signaled by a smaller urbanized heteronormative family, drawing on neo-Malthusianism and Rostow’s theory of development, discussed in the previous chapter. Specifically, smaller family size is implied to cause or lead to the end of
poverty and underdevelopment, to lead to wellbeing and economic advancement. Visitors at the Gates Discovery Center in Seattle, Washington, can see an example of Melinda Gates framing her work as helping countries modernize in a similar way to Rostow’s vision. One of the first panels that can be seen when walking into the Gates Discovery Center says, “Melinda is using her voice to raise awareness about the importance of investing in women and girls to improve health and opportunities for everyone—Research shows that when women participate in the economy, poverty decreases, and productivity grows.” She believes that because women are not working outside of the home that they are not contributing to the country’s economy and therefore are still in the “developing” stage towards modernization. She argues that family planning will fix this problem and increase capitalist development. Like Rostow, she attributes poverty and “underdevelopment” to deficient cultures, gender ideologies, and family forms. A small family with a mother working full-time in the formal economy will lead to wealth and advancement in this vision. Melinda Gates’s talks, book, and other public pronouncements express the idea that her work gives non-Western women especially the opportunity to become more Western, which in her eyes means more capitalistic and advanced.

Like US imperialist ideology as reflected in Rostow’s essay and Population Council programs, Melinda Gates is a billionaire capitalist who seeks to further capitalism in Third World societies. She claims her philanthropic work is important because family planning improves the economy. In Moment of Lift, she writes that in Africa she saw many “rights and privileges that women and girls are denied... The right to go to school. Earn an income. Work outside the home… Spend their own money. Shape their budget. Start a business. Get a loan. Own property…” (Gates 2019, 3). This is an individually-oriented neoliberal vision of rights that aims to recreate capitalist structures. She does not address economic issues attached to
colonialism and imperialism. Rather, she equates owning property and a personal business as evidence of rights absent in Third World societies, and therefore advocates that granting these ‘rights’ will result in empowerment and liberation.

Because of the violent history of Western birth control projects targeting the Third World and women of color, Melinda Gates uses rhetoric to try to reframe the subject. She states in her book, “We had to change the conversation around family planning…. Advocates for family planning had to make it clear that we were not talking about population control” (Gates 2019, 60). She makes it seem as if she has put a lot of work and public advocacy into “changing the conversation.” However, without even mentioning race or eugenics, this is one of the only times she explicitly mentions and dismisses “population control,” for the purpose of separating her work from it.

In comparison, Gates discusses repeatedly in speeches and her book the religious disapproval of family planning while reinforcing the legitimacy of her Catholic identity. She often argues that birth control is not abortion and therefore its use is religiously legitimate. Her stance goes against the Catholic Church’s historical opposition to contraceptive use, including condoms (Benagiano et al. 2011, para. 1). She also uses religious figures to justify and validate her position and work. For example, she writes, “I have felt strong support in this from priests, nuns, and laypeople who’ve told me that I am on solid moral ground when I speak up for women in the ‘developing’ world who need contraceptives to save their children’s lives” (Gates 2019, 74). In her TedTalk, she gives around a two-minute anecdote about her Catholic upbringing to indicate that her work aligns with Catholicism. In the same talk, she briefly states, “We’re not talking about population control” (Melinda Gates 2014, 4:57). This one instance of discussing the eugenicist history of family planning in comparison to the longer time she sets aside for
defending her work’s alignment with Catholicism feels dismissive. This TedTalk is one example of many where Melinda Gates briefly mentions her work is not population control without doing the work of showing how her work differs from the violent history of population control programs.

In addition to neglecting further acknowledgement of family planning programs eugenicist history, the Gates Foundation works to advance the family’s wealth goals mainly when it promotes certain birth control medicine and health interventions. Critics have continually brought attention to the fact that the foundation has close ties with pharmaceutical companies and thus is never selflessly engaging in work that improves global health (Wilson, 2013). For example, the foundation invests in chemical and pharmaceutical companies such as BASF, Dow Chemicals, GlaxoSmithKline, Novartis, and Pfizer (Shaw and Wilson, 2020).

The foundation’s push to distribute the unsafe Depo-Provera, an injectable form of birth control, in African countries is likely due to the benefits they would reap from Pfizer selling the drug to governments or USAID to provide in these settings (Hamilton 2011). After investing millions of dollars in researching this drug, Bill and Melinda Gates promoted its distribution in Third World countries where they knew they could more easily hide its risks. When the drug was distributed in Africa, India, and Latin America, women were not provided with information about the side effects (Loffredo and Greenstein 2020), which is much less likely to occur in US markets, especially if the consumers are white and middle-class.

The Gates Foundation announced in 2014 a partnership with Pfizer “to expand access to the drugmaker’s long-acting Sayana Press contraceptive to women in 69 of the world’s poorest countries, for $1 per dose.” The drug had “previously been introduced under the program to only a few of the poorest countries, including Burkina Faso, Niger and Bangladesh.” Donors included
the US Agency for International Development and the UN Population Fund, among others. Their stated aim was to provide Sayana Press to “69 of the world’s poorest countries at little or no cost.” They hoped that “In addition to assisting with procurement, the consortium will support wider introduction of the drug and drug-delivery system to health facilities and community-based distribution networks and will work with local governments to include injectable contraceptive methods in their reproductive health plans and budgets, coordinate health worker trainings, and raise awareness of the availability of the contraceptive.”

Currently, the Gates Foundation is in the process of switching from using Depo-Provera to Sayana Press. The main difference between the two is that Depo-Provera needs a health worker to inject the drug whereas Sayana Press is designed for self-injection (Gibney 2015; Doughton 2014; Pfizer 2017). Sayana Press is currently not approved or available for use in the US (Pfizer 2017). There is no information publicly available to explain the US Food and Drug Administration’s decision to refuse the approval of a drug that has been available since 2011 (Gibney 2015). Are there unsafe side effects? Is there not enough evidence to prove the drug’s efficacy? Whatever the reasons, why is this information not easily accessible by the public? One

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46 https://www.reuters.com/article/us-pfizer-gates-contraception-idUSKCN0IX1WF20141113

47 Sayana Press is the brand name for DMPA-SC and Depo-Provera is the brand name for DMPA-IM. ‘SC’ stands for subcutaneous and ‘IM’ stands for intramuscular (Jain J, Jakimiuk AJ, Bode FR, Ross D, Kaunitz AM 2004). Health workers normally inject DMPA-IM in a patient whereas DMPA-SC is designed to be self-injectable (Askew 2018). DMPA-SC has a lower dosage of 104 mg compared to DMPA-IM’s dosage of 150 mg (Askew 2018; Kohn et al. 2022; Jain J, Jakimiuk AJ, Bode FR, Ross D, Kaunitz AM 2004). DMPA-SC cannot be taken by anyone who is breastfeeding and less than 6 weeks postpartum nor by people with certain cardiovascular conditions (Askew 2018). Studies have found that their side effects are generally the same, including reductions in sexual drive, irregular bleeding, and amenorrhea (Askew 2018).
possibility is that making research results publicly available would make the drug less likely to be allowed to be marketed and used in many Third World countries.

When discussing Sayana Press, Melinda Gates never mentions that it has not received approval for use in the US. In October 2022, I interviewed someone who works as a program office for the Family Planning sector of the Gates Foundation. She told me that she personally works with Pfizer on the packaging of the product and with ministries of health in Africa to market and distribute the drug in communities. Explaining the shift to Sayana Press, she said, “the idea is that we're introducing [Sayana Press] in places where women may not have easy access to the health system and so they could get the product and self-inject at home, or community health workers can inject for them because it's so easy to use.” The way she describes the foundation’s decision to start using Sayana Press frames the shift as a step in the right direction for women’s health. She did not mention any potential drawbacks of the drug nor that Sayana Press is not FDA approved for use in the US.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I developed my argument that Melinda Gates’ current family planning programs follow a long, violent history of eugenics and population control programs. I show the historic connections that US philanthropic foundations have to eugenics and their role in creating and funding past population control programs. Specifically focusing on the period of ‘crypto-eugenics’ post-WWII, I show how eugenicists began reframing their ideas to situate within a public health framework that would be more acceptable to the public. By basing this chapter in a historical analysis, I’m able to clearly show the progression from the beginning of the eugenics movement, to the creation of the Population Council, to Melinda Gates’s philanthropy today. This historical analysis of eugenics is strongly connected to chapter one’s historical analysis of
US philanthropies and their neocolonialism. While the first chapter traces philanthropies’ imperialism and philanthrocapitalism more broadly in public health, this chapter focuses specifically on family planning programs’ eugenic history which shows examples of the US philanthropic neocolonialism discussed in the first chapter.
CHAPTER 3: Melinda Gates and “Empowerment” Colonialism

In this chapter, I analyze the ways in which Melinda Gates creates her public image and uses it to impose Western ideals on other groups. Drawing on feminist scholars such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Leela Fernandes, I show how Melinda Gates’ language promotes racist stereotypes and capitalist ideals. I describe Melinda Gates’ ideology as empowerment feminism. While Gates’ language of women’s empowerment seems harmless and even a respectable form of feminist discourse at times, her empowerment feminism recreates harmful relationships of power between the “West” and the Third World. While the first chapter focused on the philanthrocapitalism in her work and the second chapter focused on the eugenic character of her programs, this final chapter will analyze the common stereotypes Melinda Gates uses to bolster her public image as well as analyze how these stereotypes push for capitalist development.

Philanthropy Built on Racism and Paternalism

Many insist that Melinda Gates’ work benefits women and girls in the Third World by providing them with more opportunities through improved family planning. However, the specific way that she advocates for the Third World woman feeds racist stereotypes rampant in neoliberal feminist discourse. She often uses racist images popular in Western media that portray Third World woman as submissive and in need of saving from violent and barbaric Third World men. In her book Transnational Feminism in the US (2013), Fernandes argues that “the gendered and racialized representations of uncivilized ‘natives’ provided a critical foundation for the justification of colonial rule” (Fernandes 2013, 43). She details how this discourse became especially prominent in the post 9/11 world and backed many of the US government’s decisions in international political conflicts. Melinda Gates continues this colonial practice of painting non-Western women as submissive and in need of intervention from the Western world.
Her book, *The Moment of Lift* (2019) has a chapter dedicated to the cultural practices of child marriage in the Third World, titled “When a Girl Has No Voice.” Gates decides to speak for a group of women by silencing them under the guise that they are already silent. This chapter title is an example of ideas argued by scholar Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1988). In this article, Spivak repeats the phrase “White men are saving brown women from brown men.” This phrase highlights the colonial and patriarchal domination of white men who believe they are ‘saving’ Indian women from sati, which is the practice of widows sacrificing themselves on their husband’s funeral pyre. Spivak notices that “the protection of woman of (today the ‘third-world woman’) becomes a signifier for the establishment of a good society” (Spivak 1988, 94) which prioritizes the “protector's” desires and consequently silences the women involved. In this chapter, “When a Girl Has No Voice,” Melinda Gates focuses on the horrors of child marriage to justify her interference in several regions. She describes her thought process as follows:

So when a community denies its women the right to decide whether and when and whom to marry, but instead assigns a girl to a man as part of a financial transaction, taking her from the right to develop her talents and forcing her to spend her life as an unpaid domestic servant…and whenever there is a desire on the part of members of that community to stand up for girls who cannot speak for themselves, I believe it is a fair place to join the fight for women. That is how I explain my support for culture change in communities far from my own. (Gates 2019, 172-173).

Nowhere in this chapter, does she mention underlying systemic issues that can cause child marriage like extreme poverty. Instead, she focuses blame on ‘culture’ and the assumption that girls in the Third World generally do not have a voice.
In a similar vein, she also discusses female genital mutilation (FGM) at length in her book, including an anecdote where her translator told her, “Melinda, some of this I’m not going to translate for you because I don’t think you could take it” (Melinda 2019, 23-24). Again, Gates exotifies different cultural practices in a way that 1) does not address larger issues at hand and 2) generalizes these practices to entire countries and regions to highlight this image of female submissiveness. Additionally, this narrative positions the white woman as the one who needs protection from the cultural practices in the Third World. Overall, these emphases on Third World women and girls’ powerlessness at the hands of practices like child marriage and FGM depict entire regions as ‘backwards’ and in need of help. Illustrating the regions as ‘backwards’ then justifies Melinda Gates’ interventions in different parts of the world.

In 2012, Melinda Gates gave a famous TedTalk called “Let’s put birth control back on the agenda.” Her TedTalk includes many statements that also feed into this submissive image of non-Western women. For example, she says “they can’t even broach the subject of contraception, even inside their own marriage” (Gates 2012). This statement makes it seem as if all non-Western women are married to abusive partners without any form of support. Racialized and/or gendered stereotypes generalize entire regions and erase the differences and nuances among cultures to even further the idea that these areas need Western help. She then uses these images to encourage the audience to invest themselves in ‘fixing’ the problems. Less than five minutes into her speech, she says “I know everyone wants to save these mothers and children” (Gates 2012). In “Under Western Eyes,” Mohanty discusses white feminists’ use of universal truths to advance their agendas. She states that “it is the colonialist and corporate power to define Western science, and the reliance on capitalist values of private property and profit, as the only normative system that results in the exercise of immense power” (Mohanty 2003, 512).
Melinda Gates’ offers broad generalizations about sub-Saharan Africa when she advocates for increased family planning. In her book, she begins with a list of human rights violations she encountered in Africa:

In my travels, I’ve learned about hundreds of millions of women who want to decide for themselves whether and when to have children, but they can’t. They have no access to contraceptives. And there are many other rights and privileges that women and girls are denied: The right to decide whether and when and whom to marry. The right to go to school. Earn an income. Work outside the home. Walk outside the home. Spend their own money. Shape their budget. Start a business. Get a loan. Own property….” (Gates 2019, 3).

This list continues on in a fashion that feminist scholar Fernandes describes as a list of “cultural crimes” that human rights advocates often use in generalizing the Third World. Lists like these highlight differences between the Western world and the non-Western world, systematically implying the modernity and superiority of the West. In Transnational Feminism, Fernandes warns of universalistic language such as this by arguing that “this rights-based framework both imposed a homogeneous global language on complex local/national contexts and ended up intensifying the dominant position of the American state” (Fernandes 2013, 33). Furthermore, Melinda Gates’ list of ‘cultural crimes’ focuses heavily on capitalistic ideals of freedom. She equates owning property and a personal business to markers of independence and strength. This argument, therefore, appeals to supporters of her work in capitalistic societies. In short, Melinda Gates simplifies the situation across the entire continent of Africa while pushing her agenda of increasing family planning in sub-Saharan Africa.
During nearly every interview Melinda Gates does, she brings up her marriage and values and her desire to replicate her experiences with women all over the world. In her book, she says, “when I talk to women in low-income countries, I see very little difference in what we women all want for ourselves and our children” (Gates 2019, 57). This is an example of how she uses her moral superiority to delineate what all women want based on her own values. In a CBS Sunday Morning interview with Melinda and Bill Gates (2017), she even says that “this foundation is our joint values being played out in the world” (CBS). Melinda Gates reinforces colonial power dynamics by describing her experiences as the standard experience all women should strive for.

In “Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?,” feminist scholar Lila Abu-Lughod criticizes this common practice among Western feminists and human rights advocates of projecting personal desires onto others. Abu-Lughod poses the following question: “What does freedom mean if we accept the fundamental premise that humans are social beings, always raised in certain social and historical contexts and belonging to particular communities that shape their desires and understandings of the world?” (Abu-Lughod 2013, 786). In Melinda Gates’ case, what can her philanthropy do for women with different cultures and beliefs than her? And how are her notions of health, wellbeing, charity, development shaped by her social and historical contexts, and her particular community?

**Empowerment in White and Western Feminisms**

Melinda Gates uses racialized stereotypes to build her argument that her philanthropy ‘empowers’ Third World women. ‘Empowerment’ is included in the subtitle of her book, “How Empowering Women Changes the World” and appears in the book 63 times (2019). Her TedTalk is also titled “Women Empowerment and Contraception Worldwide” on the Gates Foundation YouTube channel (2012). The word empowerment has a positive connotation that makes the
audience feel like they are doing something for the greater good of society (Brock and Cornwall 2005). This lens of empowerment centers the listener as the main protagonist and “asserts the legitimacy to intervene in the lives of others” (Brock and Cornwall 2005, 1045). Melinda Gates attempts to empower Third World women by giving them birth control without addressing power dynamics. She then convinces others that her work increases women’s empowerment by repeatedly using the word ‘empowerment’ to evoke warm and feel-good emotions in her donors and supporters.

Looking at the history of the word ‘empowerment,’ one finds that Melinda Gates’ use of the word strays far from its origins. In the 1980s, women’s empowerment came into focus as a radical idea that challenged gendered and racialized power relations originating from transnational feminists groups in the Third World (Brock and Cornwall 2005). Activists in the 1980s and 1990s did not believe that empowerment was something that could be handed to someone. In 1993, Srilantha Batliwala defined empowerment in *Women’s Empowerment in South Asia* as a process that breaks down power relations through a framework which “stressed that the ideological and institutional change dimensions were critical to sustaining empowerment and real social transformation” (Batliwala 2007, 560). This definition of empowerment diverges from how Melinda Gates’ uses the word as she usually equates empowerment to having a job or business.

In the 1990s, starting at UN’s International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo in 1994, UN programs began to coopt the radical feminist term ‘empowerment’ to garner support for their development plans (Calvès 2009, 6). The Third World-based transnational feminist group, Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN), was critical of the UN development programs using ‘empowerment.’ DAWN believed that
women’s empowerment could not be achieved by simply integrating women into the economy like these development programs aimed to do. Instead, they argued that women’s empowerment could only occur through radical transformations of economic, political, legal, and social structures that define relationships of power (Calvès 2009). After the UN began using the term ‘empowerment’ at the 1994 Cairo conference, international organizations and feminists all over the world began incorporating the word ‘empowerment’ into their mission statements and goals for the future.

The term ‘empowerment’ then became a buzzword that was rarely defined and used in different ways than the radical meanings that Third World feminists initially conceptualized for the word. Batliwala insists that out “of all the buzzwords that have entered the development lexicon in the past 30 years, empowerment is probably the most widely used and abused” (Batliwala 2007, 557). Cornwall and Brock argued that turning ‘empowerment’ into a loose buzzword allows for international institutions to transform the word into a hegemonic term that can advance their programs (Cornwall and Brock, 2005). The way that Melinda Gates uses ‘empowerment’ reflects international institutions’ cooptation and dismissal of the word’s radical origins. She similarly argues that women’s empowerment can only be achieved if women are able to participate in capitalist economies. By providing birth control, she maintains that this ‘family planning’ will allow women to enter the workforce and therefore be empowered. Nowhere in her definition of empowerment does she acknowledge the radical upheaval of oppressive structures that radical feminist groups such as DAWN and others underscored in their definitions of empowerment.

The emphasis on empowerment in her philanthropy is evident at the Gates Discovery Center, a public visitor center that showcases the work of the Gates Foundation. Walking into the
Discovery Center, I entered an open room that has a large quote on one wall saying “We are impatient optimists” with a map of the world on the wall opposite of the quote. All around the room surrounding the quote and the map are numerous black and white portraits of people of various ages and ethnicities. In the center of the room, there are several columns that you can walk up to and interact with. One of the first ones is a screen showing a video of an Indian woman named Poonam telling stories of working with other Indian women as a community health worker partnered with the Gates Foundation. After the video ends, text appears saying that “At the Gates Foundation, we work with our partners to ensure that women and girls have decision making power….Because when women are empowered, entire communities are lifted up.” At the column next to this one is another screen with a video of Melinda Gates introducing her work with the foundation. On the backside of the column, there is a biography on Melinda Gates that ties her background to her current work. At the top of this biography, the column is titled in red letters, “Empowering women and girls can lift entire communities.” This column also includes a quote from Melinda Gates which says, “I learned to use my voice as a young woman, and that was very powerful.”
Figure 3: This is a photograph of displays at the Gates Discovery Center in Seattle, WA, taken during my visit on June 30, 2022. The picture on the left shows a screen that says “At the Gates Foundation, we work with our partners to ensure that women and girls have decision making power over their own lives and livelihoods. Because when women are empowered, entire communities are lifted up.” The picture on the right shows a board that gives a brief biography on Melinda Gates. There are a few pictures of her, including a picture of her as a young schoolgirl. At the top of the board is a quote in red letters saying, “Empowering women and girls can lift entire communities.”

Feminist scholars note that neoliberal empowerment discourse, such as these examples from the Gates Discovery Center, often create problematic “solutions” that fail to accomplish anything concrete. In Women’s Empowerment: Feminism, Neoliberalism, and the State, Inna Michaeli argues that advocates of empowerment feminism portray women as a project that others can band around and ‘fix’ in order to improve society at large. This mindset also implies that women are the reason that society is flawed. Michaeli says that through the language of ‘empowering women,’ “women emerge simultaneously as the flawed economic subject who needs fixing (be it via empowerment, business training or just a bit of leaning in) and as the proper gendered subject, expected to properly repay her loan and put her earnings into the
family” (Michaeli 2022, 6). This idea that women need to be ‘improved’ again plays into the racist stereotypes that Third World women are weak and in need of saving from Western feminists, such as Melinda Gates.

Additionally, this empowerment framework plays into larger trends within neoliberalism that turn systemic issues, or in this case, issues specifically caused by longstanding relationships of imperialism, into problems that are expected to be solved by the individual. Catherine Rottenberg, a sociology professor at the University of London, writes in The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism (2018), that neoliberalism is “a dominant political rationality that moves to and from the management of the state to the inner workings of the subject, normatively constructing and interpellating individuals as entrepreneurial actors” (420). In other words, neoliberalism turns responsibility away from larger actors such as institutions, governmental bodies, and large corporations for outcomes of oppression. Melinda Gates’ use of the word ‘empowerment’ reflects this neoliberal trend of focusing on the individual to improve larger structural issues. For example, she often uses iterations of the phrase seen in the first room of the Discovery Center: “When women are empowered, entire communities are lifted up.” By making the basis of her philanthropy women’s empowerment, she assumes that focuses on women’s individual lives will solve broader issues that often stem from long histories of oppression. Michaeli notes that while neoliberal feminists like Melinda Gates are preoccupied “with advancing women in the economy, [other] feminist efforts to transform the economy are far greater in scope and depth” (Michaeli 2022, 10).

In addition to using words like “empowerment” to garner support for her work, she also attributes general advancements in reproductive health to her personal philanthropic work. For example, in 2012 she launched a summit in London called Family Planning 2020 (FP2020). In
an interview with Alice Xiao, she describes this summit as “a global partnership called FP2020 that has brought countries together around a shared goal of reaching an additional 120 million women with the quality family planning tools they want and need by the year 2020” (Xiao 2015). Gates then went on to claim that their summit caused significant progress because 8.4 million women and girls started using contraception in the year after this summit (Xiao 2015). She makes this claim without citing any data or research methods that the Gates Foundation conducted to validate this statistic or to prove that this number had any connection with FP2020. The way she champions her own philanthropic work serves to reify the need for her programs and legitimize her authority in the realm of reproductive health.

Melinda Gates promoting empowerment feminism is especially harmful considering her international power and influence. In 2005, Forbes named her the 10th most powerful woman in the world.48 While this list is relatively subjective, it does exhibit her widespread influence in mainstream media. Additionally, the Gates Foundation is the second biggest donor to the WHO, which has immense influence in the world of global health. As one of the main stakeholders in arguably the largest international public health organization, Melinda Gates can significantly impact their ideologies and programs. Given that her views of empowerment align closely with the UN’s cooptation of the word, her influence is unlikely to allow for any changes to the WHO’s women’s empowerment approaches that leftist transnational feminists often criticize.

Not only does Melinda Gates have persuasive say in countless global health programs, she also holds considerable influence over major news outlets to control how her philanthropy is framed. In 2021, MintPress News, a leftist news outlet, posted an article about grants that the

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Gates Foundation has given to a variety of media sources. After adding up all the grants that the foundation gives to news outlets (all of their awarded grants are available on their public website), MintPress News calculated that the Gates Foundation has given around $319 million to news stations including NPR, the Guardian, BBC, CNN, and more. Considering their monetary connections to popular news sources alongside the general lack of news critiquing their philanthropy, it’s hard to ignore the possibility that the Gates’ are surveilling their news coverage. And if the Gates have the power to control news coverage of them and their foundation’s work, than Melinda Gates similarly has the power to control the public presentation of her empowerment feminism.

Whether or not she does control how the news talks about and her philanthropy, her empowerment feminism still inherently creates a positive image of her work. The language she uses makes her supporters feel good about themselves and evokes a sense of saviorism in themselves. For instance, Melinda Gates uses vague, feel-good language in the epilogue of her book that leaves the reader feeling hopeful and helpful in the process for global gender equality. Referencing love, Gates argues in her epilogue that if we can love each other, than we can improve the world and achieve equality: “The goal is for everyone to be loved. Love is what lifts us up” (Gates 2019, 264). This idealistic ending represents larger themes of saviorism that she evokes for the reader throughout her book. The reader of her book feels good knowing that if they continue to support the values that Gates argues in her book, then they can help in her fight for international female empowerment. Overall, the heartening aspect of her empowerment feminism attracts a variety of supporters for work.

49 https://www.mintpressnews.com/documents-show-bill-gates-has-given-319-million-to-media-outlets/278943/
Some skeptics of the Gates Foundation say that their philanthropy is uniquely void of criticism due to their widespread support.\textsuperscript{50} To offer a contrasting example, the Koch brothers are two rich philanthropists that created their own foundation somewhat similarly to the Gates Foundation. But unlike the Gates, the Koch brothers frequently encounter criticism for their philanthropy.\textsuperscript{51} In 2019, \textit{New York Times} writer Bryan Burrough wrote that “probably no individuals in the last decade of politics have attracted as much dismay and fury as the billionaire Koch brothers, Charles and David.”\textsuperscript{52} Since the Koch brothers and their work are so controversial, there are various articles and books investigating their work and condemning their philanthrocapitalism. On the other hand, the extensive support that Melinda Gates receives for her birth control advocacy rarely, if ever, makes space to discuss the potential harms of her work. Outside of Linsey McGoey’s book \textit{No Such Thing as a Free Gift}, a few articles, and some editorials in \textit{The Lancet}, there are not many works that criticize Melinda Gates. The almost universally uncritical support that she receives arguably erases the histories of eugenics and philanthrocapitalism within her work/foundation/legacy that I outline in chapters 1 and 2.

\textbf{Manipulating Power through Philanthropy}

As Amanda Shaw and Kalpana Wilson discuss in “The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the necro-populationism of ‘climate-smart’ agriculture” (2020), philanthropist organizations operate through a ‘forgiveness’ industry that doles out ‘gifts’ which trap the receivers and ensure that they are indebted to them. In other words, those receiving philanthropy are forced to enter an agreement to use the ‘gifts’ from philanthropists in a specific way.

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{50} https://www.vox.com/2015/6/10/8760199/gates-foundation-criticism
\textsuperscript{51} https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/08/30/covert-operations
\textsuperscript{52} https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/15/books/review/kochland-christopher-leonard.html
\end{quote}
regardless of how the actual community wishes to use them. There is a difference between redistribution of resources where those receiving the resources have complete control over how they use the resources and acts of charity that manage how the resources are used exactly. Bill and Melinda Gates demonstrate an air of superiority when ‘helping’ those in Third World countries and make sure to control every aspect of how their money is used in these areas. Their work is similar to how Carnegie described his philanthropy as helping communities better than they could help themselves. They see their work as only beneficial to those who receive their ‘help’ and therefore assume a position of dominance over other countries which they can wield to their benefit.

_No Such Thing As a Free Gift: The Gates Foundation and the Price of Philanthropy_ by Linsey McGoey appears to be the main piece of scholarly work that deconstructs some of the issues with the Gates Foundation. The title for McGoey’s book references a concept similar to Shaw and Wilson’s discussion of the ‘forgiveness industry.’ McGoey mentions that the title of her book is inspired by French anthropologist Marcel Mauss' essay *The Gift* (1925). The main idea of his essay was that gifts or presents can act as a form of power in relationships between people. Invoking this idea, McGoey’s main argument throughout the book is that the Gates’ philanthropy creates relationships of power between them and those who receive their philanthropy.

To give a specific example of this, I will discuss a quote from my interview in October 2022 with an anonymous program officer in the Family Planning sector of the Gates Foundation. In our interview, I asked her how the Gates Foundation navigates their partnerships with local communities and larger international NGOs and if their goals ever conflict. She responded by explaining a recent instance with differing views on the distribution of the DMPA-
SC drug between the Gates Foundation and their partner, United States Agency for International Development (USAID). She told me that the Gates Foundation wanted to encourage the distribution of DMPA-SC for all of the international communities that they partner with. USAID, however, thought it would be best if they encouraged birth control more generally and supported each group in whichever method of birth control that the desired for themselves. She told me,

“In our minds, a successful DMPA-SC program is one that's focused on self-injection. But USAID, they don't necessarily feel comfortable making, like us, a stance like that. And from their perspective, they let their country missions tell them how things should be and they would leave it up to each country mission to determine how they want to use the product and they may not be prioritized for self-injection.”

In this quote, she demonstrates that the Gates Foundation strongly pushes for their programs to solely provide DMPA-SC for birth control. Considering that the Gates Foundation has monetary ties with Pfizer, the pharmaceutical company that manufactures DMPA-SC, this universal push for DMPA-SC is noteworthy. Does Melinda Gates have a financial incentive for encouraging the DMPA-SC’s distribution and use? Wouldn’t letting each community decide for themselves which contraceptives they prefer better align with her empowerment ideology? Regardless, advocating for their program partners to use a specific form of contraceptive exemplifies how the Gates Foundation controls the ways that their money is used. Restricting how their grantees use their money creates a power dynamic between the foundation and the recipients of their philanthropy as Shaw and Kalpana define in a ‘forgiveness industry.’

**Conclusion**

To summarize, in this chapter I detail the issues which arise from the ways that Melinda Gates’ continues to brand her philanthropy to the public. I also introduce concrete harms and
issues that result from her problematic empowerment feminism. Currently, there is not much scholarship that analyzes Melinda Gates’ work specifically. With this chapter, I aim to bridge this gap by applying pre-existing transnational feminist scholarship to Melinda Gates’ current work in family planning. I hope this chapter brings attention to the fact that there generally needs to be more critical works of Melinda Gates’ family planning programs and the Gates Foundation at large.
CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I conducted a close analysis on Melinda Gates’ work on family planning to expose the harms and issues of her work. I connected her present-day work with the past imperialism of longstanding philanthropic programs including ones from the Rockefeller and Carnegie foundations. Outlining the history of eugenics, I also showed how her work continues the eugenic legacies of population control programs from the 1950s. And lastly, I analyzed the language that she uses to describe her work as specific examples of the broader issues and limitations of Western empowerment feminism.

While I have separated my case study of Melinda Gates’ family planning programs into 3 distinct sections, each chapter connects to each other. For example, the histories of philanthrocapitalism in the US and eugenic population control programs are strongly intertwined because a majority of these programs were founded and funded by US philanthropists and foundations. Additionally, a lot of philanthropies used these population control programs alongside other international public health programs to spread their imperialistic influence and control in different areas of the world. Finally, even though the last chapter focuses on the language that Melinda Gates’ uses when discussing her work, ideas behind her empowerment feminism permeate throughout the entire thesis. Her Western feminism uses racist generalizations and stereotypes that are at the root of her philanthrocapitalist and eugenicist work.

My main inspiration for writing this thesis materialized during a Duke Global Health class that I took my junior year on reproductive health. We started the class by watching Melinda Gates’ TedTalk on contraception at the beginning of the semester. Her TedTalk framed the discussions in our class for the rest of the semester as they orbited around neoliberal, Western
ideals of empowerment that focused solely on the individual as opposed to criticizing systemic issues. We never even discussed how histories of Western colonialism and oppression contributed to different health outcomes and health systems in certain parts of the world. Also, the class used the same generalizing, racist stereotypes that Melinda Gates frequently uses. The professor continuously lectured us on the “health issues of Africa” and implied that all of Africa experiences the same global health issues and is a general site of underdeveloped health systems. These lectures also relied on the pervasive stereotype that Third World women are submissive and their husbands are abusive. These notions often lead Duke students (and professors) to believe that they have the responsibility to travel to these places and ‘fix’ these ‘problems.’

During our last class of the semester, we did an interactive wrap-up activity to briefly summarize everything we had learned. On one side of the classroom’s whiteboard, everyone went up and wrote 3 global reproductive health issues that we thought were the most important to be addressed. Then on the other side of the board, everyone went up and wrote three different ‘solutions’ for these issues that we had learned about in our class. Firstly, this activity is inherently saviorist and implies that these complicated issues can have simple solutions. Second, the class responses illuminated how Melinda Gates’ empowerment feminism greatly contributed to the pedagogy of the class. My classmates wrote down a variety of issues including interpersonal/partner violence, Human papillomavirus (HPV), female genital mutilation (FGM), HIV/AIDS, barriers to healthcare, stigma, and more. For the solutions to these issues, the overwhelming answer that my classmates wrote on the board was “education.” They believed that if all women were educated on sexual and reproductive health, then issues like STD transmission, stigma, healthcare accessibility, etc. would improve. This perspective puts the burden of responsibility on women and girls to fix structural issues. Melinda Gates’ influence
can be seen here as her empowerment feminism offers similar “solutions” that fail to question relationships of power that cause these health issues. After this class ended, I felt frustrated with our discussions on empowerment and wanted to open up a more formal conversation critiquing Duke Global Health. I decided to write this thesis on Melinda Gates in the hope that other Duke students will question her work as well as the fundamentals of Duke Global Health Institute’s teachings.

I know that my thesis could be received negatively by a variety of audiences. How could I criticize Melinda Gates, a renowned women’s rights activist and advocate of birth control use? Does that mean I am not a feminist? Don’t I believe in women’s rights? Am I not pro-choice? Isn’t Melinda Gates right for using her wealth and platform to bring attention to these issues of contraceptive use? What about all the women that she gives birth control to? Is that not a good thing?

While writing this thesis, I presented my research to a small group of Duke underclassmen. I remember that at the end of my presentation, someone asked me if I believed that Melinda Gates shouldn’t give birth control to women who needed it. I want to make clear that my argument is not about whether women deserve birth control or not. That notion in and of itself is inherently problematic and does not represent what I am trying to discuss in this thesis. Instead, I am trying to show the real, concrete harms that Melinda Gates’ philanthropy causes and demonstrate that her empowerment feminism conceals the problematic nature of her work.

My thesis is not just about whether women have birth control or not. It’s about global relationships of power and how philanthropists continue imperialism. It’s about desires to undermine the power of billionaires who have immense global influence. It’s about the problematic ways that people in the US view groups of peoples in the Third World. It’s about the
necessity of understanding how histories of colonialism and imperialism shape neo-imperialism today. The work of my thesis is inspired by transnational feminists who have been theorizing about these topics for years before me. I wrote this thesis to apply pre-existing feminist arguments to Melinda Gates, a figure that I rarely saw criticized. I hope that my thesis inspires more conversations about Melinda Gates and philanthropists like her, and that those conversations spark a shift in the public’s image of her.
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