Several members of the Board of Health have become particularly apprehensive that this island will soon be over-populated by the Coloured people, and are eager to experiment on some method of birth control, but they know not how to direct their altruistic efforts. . . . I am accordingly to ask if you sometime will be good enough to inquire from the Secretary of State for the Colonies if there has been any successful experience in stemming the multiplication of negro people, improbable though it be.

– Henry Wilkinson, Bermuda, 1933

No one is suggesting that birth control is the immediate solution to a problem which is largely economic, but surely birth control is an aid, a fortification against the deterioration of a social condition in the future. If now, you can plan for your family, to educate, feed and by example to live a moral life by providing a suitable environment, then surely you will be well on the way to bring about this Spiritual awakening, strength of mind and character and such forces.

– John Beckles, Barbados, 1941

Through Birth Control Clinics, the women of Jamaica will secure the necessary knowledge, so easily obtained by those who are able to pay private physicians. Many women will acquire a general knowledge of the care of their bodies . . . which would be a great contribution to family welfare. Why not give a fair chance to every child that is born; and the right to every woman of voluntary parenthood?

– Maymie L. Aiken, Jamaica, 1939

1 Henry Wilkinson to Acting Colonial Secretary, Telegram, August 23, 1933 (Public Health: Birth Control 1934–1961, CS/6.4/E. 178, Bermuda Archives (BA)).
Henry Wilkinson, John Beckles, and Maymie L. Aiken were three Caribbean actors located in quite different positions within the colonial class, race, and gender hierarchy, but they shared a concern over reproduction and a faith in modern birth control technology. Wilkinson, a white Bermudian health reformer who served as the island’s chief medical officer at the time, portrayed birth control as a means to stymie “overpopulation” of an expanding “negro” population. Beckles, a prominent middle-class black Barbadian social worker, envisioned family planning as a tool to help improve economic and social conditions for the island’s most impoverished citizens. Maymie L. Aiken, a working-class activist prominent within the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) and local labor movements, viewed the issue in a somewhat more radical light. For her, birth control had the potential to empower poor women by providing them with control over their reproductive lives.

The arguments of all three actors reflected an intersection of transnational currents with local realities. As noted in the Introduction, efforts to spread access to birth control had spread across the globe in the early twentieth century; the mix of public health, eugenic, neo-Malthusian, social welfare, maternal health, and feminist ideologies driving these campaigns are evident in the quotations above. But the arguments of Wilkinson, Beckles, and Aiken also tapped into and had particular implications for local politics and social life during this critical historical juncture in the English-speaking Caribbean. Indeed, historians of the region have characterized the 1930s and 1940s as a period of profound economic, social, and political disruption that brought simmering tensions to the surface and provided impetus to nationalist movements; for many islands, it marked the beginning of the end of British colonial rule. Scholars have highlighted the power of the black working-class population to challenge the colonial system through organization, strikes, and riots; the reactionary responses of colonial officials and local white elites as they tried to reassert control; and the emergence of middle-class nationalists who attempted to both translate this foment into concrete political gains and manage/suppress the more radical elements within.

4 As discussed in the Introduction, “birth control” in this period referred largely to diaphragms, as well as douches, spermicidal foams and powders, and condoms.

5 For the region as a whole, see Alexander, A History of Organized Labor; Hart, From Occupation to Independence; O. Nigel Bolland, The Politics of Labour in the British Caribbean: The Social Origins of Authoritarianism and Democracy in the Labour Movement (Kingston, Jamaica: Ian Randle Publishers, 2001); Glenford Howe, Race, War and Nationalism: A Social History of West Indians in the First World War
have added an additional dimension to this analysis, illustrating how these political and social struggles were informed by and in turn reinforced discourses that portrayed the majority working-class population as unruly, diseased, immoral, hypersexual, and largely responsible for their own poverty and ill health. As scholars have noted, these discourses were mobilized by both elites and some middle-class nationalists, driving a deeper wedge between those in charge and the wider populations they meant to control and/or represent. But scholars have also pointed to the enthusiasm and expanded public discourse that characterized this period. As Veronica Gregg argues, the 1930s and 1940s were a period “marked by social change, intense intellectual and political debate, and a sharpened focus,” which “made available (temporarily) social and discursive spaces hitherto defined as unspeakable or nonexistent.” On several islands, this included space for explicitly socialist, black nationalist, and feminist platforms.

Debates over birth control provide a unique and illustrative lens through which to view these decades. These debates became a medium through which a particularly broad range of actors expressed their views not only on the shifting political landscape of the region but also on a broader range of issues: the state of the economy, health, morality, family life, population changes, and more. This chapter explores the context and content of these early debates, focusing on the three islands where birth control seemed to be a significant issue: Jamaica, Barbados, and Trinidad.


6 Briggs, “As Fool-Proof as Possible”; Heuring, “Health and the Politics of Improvement.”


command the greatest amount of public attention in these decades. It begins in Bermuda in the 1930s, where efforts by the local government to develop various birth control policies provoked sufficient levels of controversy to attract attention around the Atlantic Ocean. I outline the different arguments made in favor of and against birth control in these years, exploring how these positions both spoke to and challenged existing hierarchies and power relations. I then move on to provide a similar analysis of debates in Jamaica and Barbados in the late 1930s/early 1940s, examining how these campaigns both resembled and differed from the Bermuda case. In doing so, I pay attention to the common currency of certain narratives across borders, the local dynamics that influenced the nature and outcomes of these early campaigns, and the ways certain individuals carved out unique birth control advocacies and alliances that challenged the social and political divisions of their time.

**The Example of Germany: Eugenics and Birth Control in Bermuda**

Attempts to spread birth control in the region began rather infamously in Bermuda, a small island that in the 1930s housed just over 30,000 people on 20.6 square miles of land. Located some 1,500 km northeast of the Caribbean Sea, Bermuda held a unique position within the British Atlantic world. Although the island shared with the rest of the English-speaking Caribbean a history of early British colonization and African slavery, its northerly location made it less suitable for cultivation of high-demand tropical goods that dominated in the Caribbean proper. The island did not develop massive plantations but was instead characterized by smaller-scale farming and commercial and military activity, more akin to a small “settler colony” or a military outpost than the quintessential Caribbean sugar factory. The islands also saw the settlement of a much larger white British-descendent population (forming 42 percent of the population in 1933, as opposed to 7 percent or less in Britain’s other Caribbean colonies) who were given more leeway and independence to act through the local legislature than those in Britain’s “darker,” Crown-controlled colonies in the Caribbean proper (although notably less than in the more fully “white” British settler colonies of Canada and Australia).9

The control of Bermuda’s local white elite over economic and political power was reinforced over time by various laws, policies, and social practices. Gender discrimination and extremely high property qualifications put in place by the Voting Act of 1834, for example, limited the franchise to only 8 percent of the population while allowing some male property owners to vote multiple times in different parishes, ensuring only minimal Afro-Bermudian representation and allowing the government to operate in “naked sectional interest of merchant and land owning elites.”

The government’s economic policies, low wages, and conservative labor practices granted Bermuda the status of “one of the most reactionary colonies in the British Empire.”

The growth of the American tourist industry in Bermuda after World War I also provided justification for a system of explicit racial segregation since, contemporary commentators argued, “wealthy white North Americans would not come to Bermuda if the island was not segregated.”

Black Bermudians were restricted from owning properties or renting in areas reserved for whites; banned from social clubs, hotels, and other areas that whites frequented; and prevented from working in the civil services and the main business district.

As a result, although the growing tourist industry helped Bermuda become one of the wealthiest of Britain’s island colonies, the dividends of this growth were unequally distributed, and opportunities remained limited for much of the population. The economy also took a hit with the onset of the global depression in the 1930s, as travelers stayed home and unemployment rose.

According to Dr. Henry Wilkinson, this situation—and the island’s future in general—was further jeopardized by population growth, which he tracked in his annual reports for the Medical and Health Department from 1927 onward. Wilkinson drew attention in particular to the higher annual births over deaths and corresponding increase in the island’s “Colored” population; according to his analysis, this was a direct result of higher birthrates, which hovered between 25 and 35 per 1,000 during the 1930s, compared to between 18 and 20 per 1,000 for white Bermudians (see Table 1.1). Drawing on neo-Malthusian logic, Wilkinson warned that if these birthrates were not stymied, population growth would soon outstrip employment and endanger the economic, political,
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Birthrate per 1,000 of population</th>
<th>Death rate per 1,000 population</th>
<th>Excess births over deaths</th>
<th>Total population</th>
<th>Density</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Colored</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Colored</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1933</td>
<td>20.29</td>
<td>33.6</td>
<td>8.61</td>
<td>11.63</td>
<td>152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1934</td>
<td>18.52</td>
<td>35.75</td>
<td>8.91</td>
<td>10.92</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1935</td>
<td>16.9</td>
<td>28.32</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9.27</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1936</td>
<td>16.4</td>
<td>29.2</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1937</td>
<td>17.3</td>
<td>26.8</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>11.3</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1938</td>
<td>17.8</td>
<td>28.7</td>
<td>10.2</td>
<td>12.2</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1939</td>
<td>18.7</td>
<td>26.9</td>
<td>8.95</td>
<td>10.2</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td>19.3</td>
<td>24.5</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1941</td>
<td>19.8</td>
<td>25.9</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12.53</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1942</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>27.7</td>
<td>10.23</td>
<td>11.19</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1943</td>
<td>20.4</td>
<td>31.8</td>
<td>9.53</td>
<td>9.02</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1944</td>
<td>20.33</td>
<td>29.2</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1945</td>
<td>19.2</td>
<td>29.47</td>
<td>9.33</td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Compiled by the author using Blue Books (Stacks, BA) and “Public Health: Annual Reports 1934–1941 and 1942–1962,” (CS/6.4, 776/15 and 446/16, BA).*
and social stability of the island. Wilkinson also expressed concern over the rate of illegitimacy (children born out of wedlock), which sat at around 15–20 percent; although these rates were not recorded by skin color during these years, Wilkinson claimed that illegitimacy took place “almost entirely among the coloured.” To address these concerns, Wilkinson argued in 1934 for the opening of voluntary marriage bureaus and clinics “such as Zurich started in 1931, and Basle in 1933” where those “in the humbler walks of life” might receive advice on contraception.

Wilkinson’s advocacy of birth control appears to have reflected a mix of reactionary fear of the black population and a modernizing impulse to improve conditions for the island as a whole. Wilkinson’s letters are replete with comments about the “frivolously minded” and “unfit” nature of “the bulk of our population,” whom he described to outsiders as “seldom hard workers and, in general, lax in the sex code.” But Wilkinson also at times defended the island’s working classes to his counterparts in the Bermudian government, arguing that their perceived faults were a reflection of poor economic, social, and health policy and the stubborn resistance of elites to any change in the status quo.

Indeed, Wilkinson served as one of the lone voices within the establishment pressing for the expansion of maternal health, child welfare services, education, and public housing to the black population in the 1930s, and at times openly criticized racial segregation, which he argued prohibited

---

15 See Wilkinson’s annual medical reports from 1934 to 1941 (Public Health: Annual Reports, 1934–1941, CS/6.4/776/15, BA).
17 Ibid., 22.
public health institutions from working for “the common good.” Wilkinson not only hired black nurses to work in the Medical and Health Department but made it his personal cause, repeatedly calling the island’s reliance on white, foreign nurses inefficient and arguing that “young coloured women . . . have the ability to make good nurses as the excellent coloured nurses we have here now demonstrate.” These views pitted him directly against directors of the King Edward Hospital as well as the Bermuda Welfare Society’s district nursing program, both of which hired British nurses and discriminated fairly openly against local Afro-Bermudians.

If Wilkinson’s vision for the island had some progressive edges to it, however, in the early 1930s it was the more reactionary elements of his arguments and the threat of “overpopulation” outlined by his reports that gained a receptive ear among other local elites. In June 1934, for example, a report to the General Board of Health by a committee appointed to consider instruction in contraception and “the advisability of sterilising the unfit” suggested the establishment of racially segregated birth control clinics. In the House of Assembly that same month, discussions surrounding a motion by Mr. W.E.S. Zuill to consider the establishment of birth control clinics (which received sixteen “Ayes” to three “Nays”) focused around how to best target certain populations. Representative S.S. Toddings, Jr., for example, worried that voluntary clinics would decrease “the best classes,” who would use the clinics while “the lower mental[s] who do not care how many children they have” would not “worry their heads,” leading him to suggest compulsory sterilization of the mentally unfit and “habitual criminal” instead. Other members thought they should consider the sterilization of parents of illegitimate children, which (if Wilkinson’s assumptions were correct) would entail

---

22 Wilkinson, “Report of the Medical and Health Department of Bermuda for the Year 1941” (Public Health: Annual Reports, CS/6.4/446/16, BA), 22.


24 This exclusion was enforced by requiring qualifications from foreign schools that discriminated against dark-skinned girls in admission procedures. As pointed out in articles in the Recorder and by labor leader E.F. Gordon, however, even those who did manage to get the sufficient qualifications were still frequently denied local employment with these organizations (see Williams, Care, 95–97).


a considerable proportion of the black population.\textsuperscript{27} Despite the consensus that something had to be done, however, a small grant of £150 to the Medical and Health Department for contraceptives that year led to no practical efforts.\textsuperscript{28}

Birth controllers within government circles continued to press for more aggressive policies. While helping draft a new Public Health Act in May 1935, members of Bermuda’s Board of Health suggested a clause that would free medical practitioners from liability for “administering any drug or using any means to procure miscarriage” (thus potentially legalizing abortion) and another that would provide a bonus of £10 to any person undergoing sterilization.\textsuperscript{29} Although these suggestions provoked alarm in both the House and the island’s press and were ultimately scrapped,\textsuperscript{30} that same month Bermuda’s legislature revisited calls for compulsory sterilization in considering the House’s “Report on Unemployment,” a document that in many ways represents the pinnacle of Caribbean conservative eugenics. Prepared by nine members of a Select Committee of the House, the report argued that the island was facing a serious problem due to the increase of population and recommended the dissemination of birth control at the Board of Health clinics and the legalization of voluntary sterilization. Citing laws in Germany and the United States as a precedent, they also called for the compulsory sterilization of “mental defectives,” women who mothered two illegitimate children, and men who fathered one illegitimate child, as well as the castration of persons found guilty of rape, attempted rape, or “other sexual and/or unnatural offences.”\textsuperscript{31}

The harsh eugenic measures advocated by the report provoked an immediate public outcry. They were opposed first in the House by representative F.C. Misick, who gave a half-hour-long speech suggesting that if

\textsuperscript{27} Such proposals were made by both J.W. Cox (the representative for Devonshire) and Mr. H.T. North of Hamilton Parish. Ibid., 6.
the laws were to pass, sterilizations of “mental defectives” should begin with members of the Committee. A week later, the Ministers of Religion and the Bermuda Citizens Association submitted petitions specifically against the clauses related to birth control and sterilization, which they argued were “inhuman and immoral, and a menace to the moral and social well-being of the Colony.” The report was also discussed extensively in the Royal Gazette and Colonist Daily, the island’s main daily newspaper. Although a handful of letters to the paper (widely considered an organ of the white elite community) praised the Committee’s “scientific” approach to overpopulation and commitment to ensuring “survival of the fittest,” most expressed shock at the extreme proposals and saw the report as an example of the government’s inability to “face the real economic issues and to devise sound, remedial legislation,” turning to “wild schemes” instead. (Indeed, for a report meant to address the unemployment situation, it made only a handful of practical suggestions, spending the majority of its pages bashing the island’s “indolent and inefficient” labor force instead.) Even the editor of the Royal Gazette, who sympathized with the need for a birth control policy, came out against the proposals, arguing that “those who suggested that the Legislature should dabble in eugenics could not have expected such a sweeping series of recommendations” presented “in so drastic, uncouth and incredibly stupid a manner.”

The most outspoken opposition, however, was organized by members of the Afro-Bermudian community, particularly those who contributed to and read the Recorder, a weekly paper that focused on the situation of the

38 “Bulls in the China Shop,” The Royal Gazette and Colonist Daily, October 12, 1936, 2.
black majority and regularly called out race and class inequality on the island. The paper printed a number of letters and opinion pieces against the report, including several by editor David Tucker, who argued that such “ruthless proposals” made “the effort of Hitler to ‘purge’ the German nation seem tame” and would “rock the very foundation of our social system.” The editor also chaired a public protest meeting at Alexandria Hall in early June, where members of the community highlighted the racist undertones of the report. As one Mr. John Tucker argued:

They [the sterilization proposals] will hurt the coloured people more than the white . . . I am going to be frank . . . it will decrease our population if the measure is carried through, and that is one of the motives aimed at . . . it is aimed to decrease our population.

Schoolmistress Miss Adele Tucker also expressed her disgust that “men in power, supposed to represent the community, should represent them in this way,” while one Charles Williams called the recommendations “dirty and crude” and pointed out that the report provided no real solutions for the lack of work on the island. As Recorder columnist “Vigilant” later argued, “if one half of the energy spent in fulminating Birth control plans for the Negro was diverted into channels calculated to afford equal chances of social and economic development of this same group there would be less need for talk of Birth-control.”

The speedy mobilization of Afro-Bermudians against the eugenic proposals – and particularly, their objection on explicitly racial grounds – built on a longer history of black organization seen in the rise of numerous black mutual aid, social welfare, and friendly societies in the early

40 “Editorial: After Us, the Deluge!” The Recorder, May 25, 1935, 2. Educated at Howard University and LSE, Tucker had been a founder of the League of Coloured Peoples in London and was widely known as a prolific writer and debater at home, pressing for working-class rights in the Recorder and later as an elected MP in the 1940s (Butler, Dr. E.F. Gordon – Hero of Bermuda’s Working Class, 33).
41 “Country-Wide Protest against the Unemployment Report,” The Recorder, June 1, 1935, 1.
42 Ibid., 1.
twentieth century. Still, it seems to have taken the island’s white elite by surprise. The editor of the *Royal Gazette* (who was himself opposed to the compulsory proposals under question) expressed his “shock” at the nature of the Alexandria Hall meeting and saw charges of racial discrimination as “unfair” for “there is no word in the recommendations or in their presentation which would indicate . . . that they were aimed at any race or creed.” This statement was immediately challenged by Afro-Bermudian businessman John Bassett in a long letter to the editor in which he mocked “the hypocrisy which is usually displayed whenever the question of racial prejudice is mentioned in connection with any matter that arises in this Colony.” Bassett picked apart the underlying racial implications behind the report, pointing out that even if it did not explicitly refer to race, “the term ‘labourer’ is for all practical purposes synonymous with ‘coloured Bermudian,’” and the condescending and uncompromising attitudes toward laborers expressed within it had a long – and racialized – history behind them. Bassett also pointed out that the poor, criminalized, and illegitimate populations targeted by the proposals were majority black and as a result, the report was “nothing short of race legislation and legal lynching.”

Further protests against the report were received in the following days from the Forty Club and Roman Catholic priest R.H. Durney, as well as – perhaps surprisingly – the Bermuda Woman Suffrage Society (BWSS), formed in 1922 to agitate for women’s right to vote. Although the Society was in favor of birth control for individual use, it objected to the implementation of a state birth control program by an exclusively male House of Assembly “without any effort to ascertain women’s views thereon.” For the Society’s head Gladys Morrell, this opposition also extended into a more general critique of the white male “oligarchy,” which, she argued, refused to take financial responsibility for the labor they had imported to the island.

47 Women would receive the vote on equal grounds as men in 1944. Benbow, *Gladys Morrell and the Women’s Suffrage Movement in Bermuda*, 51–58.
that she was against “shifting the emphasis from unemployment to over-population” because

I think that is getting away from the real issue. No country can call this problem a problem of over-population. It is, and I think we should not cease to emphasise it, an economic problem of unemployment, and we should deal with it as such. Maybe we will have to face the question of unemployment relief. I think that is what the Legislature is afraid of; they are afraid they might have to put their hands in their pockets and pay some persons during unemployment which is unavoidable on their part.50

This argument was echoed by suffragist Margaret E. Misick, who felt that birth control should not be seen as “a panacea for all economic ills” and called for “a wider application of the principles of social justice and a broader conception of a government’s responsibility for the welfare of its people” instead.51

By forwarding the historical and class tensions underlying population control and opposing the government’s proposals, these women made a choice to align themselves with Afro-Bermudian critics rather than the white male elites who controlled the government. This was not an easy or straightforward alliance. Although the BWSS was officially against color discrimination and advocated suffrage “for qualified coloured women just as for qualified white women,” they had previously clashed with the handful of black representatives who continually voted against female suffrage in the legislature; the BWSS read this largely as being a result of fear that “the extension of the franchise [to women] will benefit the other race at their own expense.”52 Similarly, although the Recorder and some labor leaders came out officially in favor of the women’s vote and encouraged their followers to cooperate with suffragists,53 they also recorded their suspicions of the organization, which was heavily dominated by white elite women and associated with the Bermuda Welfare Society and Imperial Order of the Daughters of the Empire

53 See for example, “Suffragettes,” The Recorder, December 8, 1934, 2.
(both of which discriminated against black women). In siding with Afro-Bermudian critics in the birth control debate, the BWSS also put themselves in opposition to the very representatives in the House who held the fate of suffrage in their hands. This awkward political positioning reflected the unique situation of white women in the Caribbean, described by Linden Lewis thus:

Though they enjoy all the privileges conferred upon them by skin colour, they are similarly denied access to the real exercise of power. In this regard, patriarchal power demonstrably supersedes racial affinities... They face the difficult choice of contesting white patriarchal power, and risking the loss of privilege associated with control of the material resources exercised by their men folk, or maintaining the status quo.

Lewis’s conclusion that these social and political divisions essentially “preclude meaningful dialogue and solidarity” between white women and their black counterparts, however, may be too rigid. At least in the instance of the birth control debate, white elite women actively joined Afro-Bermudians in challenging white male elite power on common grounds.

Forced to answer to this broad spectrum of opposition, the Unemployment Committee’s members at first tried to defend the report by arguing that the extreme nature of their proposals was motivated by the extreme threat posed to the island by overpopulation. Hon. G.S. Patton, in attendance at the public protest meeting at Alexandria Hall, also attempted to answer calls of racism by accusing the audience of being “hostile” in bringing up the “racial side,” arguing that “there is not a single law in Bermuda which does not apply to white people as well as coloured,” a claim which provoked outright laughter from the audience. Ultimately, however, the government conceded, and just a few days after the outbreak of protests, the Committee’s proposals for compulsory sterilization and castration were removed.

56 Ibid., 176.
57 This can be seen for example in Sir Stanley Spurling’s defense in the House, at “Unemployment Report is a ‘Rotten Document’,” The Royal Gazette and Colonist Daily, May 21, 1935, 1.
59 Ibid., 5.
The quashing of the Report on Unemployment would not, however, signify the end of controversy over birth control in Bermuda. Only a year and a half later the topic would be back in the news again, this time attracting attention far beyond the island’s shores. Indeed, 1936 would see the mobilization of protests in black communities around the Atlantic sparked by controversial statements made by Bermuda’s Governor Sir Reginald Hildyard. In a rare moment of explicit racial targeting, Hildyard called in October 1936 for birth control specifically for “coloured women” out of fear that “any war or sudden epidemic might prick the bubble of Bermuda’s prosperity ... leaving a rapidly growing negro population and a decreasing white people.” These statements were quickly circulated among Bermudians in the United States by the authors of “The Boston Bean Pot” and “So This Is New York” (two weekly columns in the Recorder), which registered the appalled reaction of expatriates in their communities and called on “our race leaders, business and professional men to stick together with their labouring brother and denounce this vile, barbarous and murderous undertaking.”

Within days, the Harlem-based West Indian Affairs Committee contacted one of New York’s oldest black immigrant mutual-aid groups – the Bermuda Benevolent Association – to formulate a plan to combat the government’s birth control program. The result was a mass meeting of Bermudians, West Indians, and African Americans in New York that November, held to protest birth control for targeting the black population and out of fear that “this particular act is a subterfuge for sterilization.” Speeches by several notable members of Harlem’s Caribbean community (e.g., Jamaican journalist A.M. Wendell Malliet and Trinidadian doctor/organizer Charles A. Petioni) called birth control “more deadly to kill out a race than the poison gas of Mussolini and the machine guns of Germany” and warned that it “would be establishing a precedent ... so that this law could be practiced in other British colonies, where coloured people are in the majority.” They thus

called on black people everywhere to “forget . . . clannishness and to fully realize that this law is a weapon which in the course of time will ensure complete extinction of the coloured Race.”

Black activists around the Atlantic remained on alert for Bermudian eugenic proposals in the following years. Attention was drawn to the threat of eugenics in Bermuda, for example, in a meeting of the West Indian Federation of America, Jamaica Progressive League, and United Aid for Persons of African Descent in New York in 1937, as well as by the International African Services (IAS) Bureau in London. The IAS also joined with the London-based League of Coloured Peoples and Negro Welfare Association in highlighting Bermuda’s eugenic campaign in a memorandum submitted to the Colonial Office in 1938. As the memo stated:

We condemn in no uncertain terms all those who recommend sterilisation of individuals as a cure for the illegitimacy problem in Bermuda and other colonies, for this problem is a reflection on the economic and social conditions of the islands, and will only be eliminated with a change in the present social structure of West Indian society.

Protests would even reach down to British Guiana where, as a telegram between governors in March 1937 reported, “African descendants domiciled in British Guiana protest against vicious legislation to [sterilize] African descendants domiciled in Bermuda.”

The quick mobilization of these actors across distant locales was built on a larger network of black activism established in the previous decades and supported by circuits of migration and the development of an international black press. As scholars have demonstrated, Caribbean migrants traveling around the Atlantic in search of work in the early twentieth century read and shared African American newspapers like the Pittsburgh Courier, while also establishing dozens of their own dailies and weeklies that connected black communities from Harlem to London.

---

64 Ibid., December 5, 1936, s.
66 “Islands’ Plight Aired House Of Commons,” The Recorder, January 22, 1938, 2.
and down to the Caribbean. These “self aware, race conscious” newspapers allowed actors to share information on developments across these locales while also contributing to the construction of a transnational antiracist community. Indeed, several actors writing in the late 1930s explicitly connected Bermudian eugenics to the oppression of nonwhite peoples across the world. As the editor of the Recorder noted:

The coloured population both of Bermuda and the thousands of British subjects in the U.S.A. are naturally alarmed at any proposal that is aimed at any particular section of the community. They know the ruthless measures that were used to exterminate the Red Indian in the U.S.A. and the Aboriginal in Australia, and see a similar motive behind the proposed clinics in the colony.

West Indies correspondent Charles Alexander, in a feature article on Bermuda in the communist Negro Worker newspaper in 1937, similarly described the island’s eugenic proposals as “ANOTHER horrible chapter in the history of British imperialism’s oppression of the Negro people” akin to slave laws in South Africa, the lynching of African Americans in the South, and Crown Colony rule in the West Indies. He warned that “the sterilization of Negroes in Bermuda may easily be extended to Negroes in other lands” and called for mass meetings and cables to the governor of Bermuda and Colonial Office in England.

As historian Irma Watkins-Owens points out, however, although united by the shared legacy of slavery and white racism, African Americans, Caribbean immigrants, and those left at home were also divided to a significant degree by historical, cultural, and social differences and geographical distance that at times complicated their interactions with one another. Indeed, in November 1936, at the height of protests against birth control in New York, Elton E. Beane and G. Gerald Butterfield (editors of the “So This Is New York” column of the Recorder) recorded some hesitation over the West Indian Affairs’ approach. Although they praised their black brothers for “their prompt action and their militant stand,” they also worried about

---


70 Putnam, Radical Moves, 124.


73 Ibid., 10.

74 Watkins-Owens, Blood Relations, 8.
what the attitude of the masses of Bermuda is and until we definitely know that attitude protests, meetings or what not are absolutely ineffective . . . We are here, therefore we do not know what the people in Bermuda are doing, whether they are accepting this law as a blessing or whether they are just not interested, so we say again, that protests are so much energy wasted until we get those facts.75

“The Boston Tea Pot” columnist Leroy H. Johnson also expressed his frustration to the Recorder over the exceedingly negative picture of Bermuda often painted by African Americans in their protests. As Johnson lamented, these actors “know little about anything of international affairs yet they will feebly attempt to comment on sporting features, living conditions, class and caste systems etc. etc.,” leading to a skewed understanding of the local situation and politics.76

The sweeping condemnation of all “birth control” and “population control” by the West Indian Affairs Committee, Charles Alexander, and other international activists did indeed conflict with the more nuanced approach taken locally. A closer study of the Recorder over a longer period beyond these controversial moments reveals that many of its writers were actually in favor of birth control in theory, although they made a careful distinction between different types of birth control practices. While unequivocally condemning compulsory sterilization, writers and activists made a point of stressing that widespread distribution of contraceptives on a voluntary basis could have practical benefits for the economy of the island and/or individual working-class families.77

Recorder editor David Tucker, for example, had been drawing attention to the “population problem” since at least 1933, when he argued that “[i]f our population is increasing in number every year, naturally, by five to six hundred, it takes only a very limited knowledge of arithmetic to show that in a few years our condition will become as bad as what exists in Barbados.”78 This would lead to a lower standard of living for the island in general and the Afro-Bermudian population in particular, prompting the editor to call on his fellow Afro-Bermudians to “limit our families to

---

77 According to Jessie M. Rodrique, a similar position was taken by some African American groups such as the Pittsburgh Courier. Rodrique, “The Black Community and the Birth Control Movement,” 252.
that point that will enable us to adequately provide for them.”

However, Tucker and other Recorder journalists made it clear that birth control services needed to be completely voluntary; apply to “every section of our island community” and not merely “one group”; and be accompanied by education, employment opportunities, and other measures to address wider economic inequalities.

Voluntary birth control also received the early support of Dr. Edgar Fitzgerald (E.F.) Gordon, a “colored” doctor born in Trinidad who had moved to Bermuda in 1924 and would become one of the island’s most influential labor activists in the 1940s and 1950s as head of the Bermuda Industrial Union. Although Gordon maintained that the compulsory sterilization and castration proposals of the 1935 Report on Unemployment were “ridiculous and brutal,” he also argued in favor of voluntary sterilization and the dissemination of contraceptives in “a decent and moral manner.” As he explained in articles in the Recorder, this position arose out of his experience as a doctor, in which he had seen the “deepest anguish, the most acute suffering, physical, mental and economic ruin” that befell families who faced unexpected pregnancies. But Gordon also went a step further, arguing that those who called on married couples to practice abstinence as a birth control method were “foolish” as “to abstain for any length of time means to lay the foundation for irritability, weakness, nervousness, or even genuine neuroses” and challenged the Christian emphasis on female purity and chastity. As Gordon argued:

Undoubtedly absolute chastity in women will not be reckoned as high in the future as in the past. The ideal will be increasingly that of temperance rather than the [sic] of complete abstinence ... Furthermore a chastity that depends for its existence on fear alone is hardly a valuable moral asset. We may confidently expect in the future that economic independence, a knowledge of sex hygiene, and the growing respect

82 On Gordon, see Butler, Dr. E.F. Gordon and Alexander, A History of Organized Labor, 100–105.
85 Ibid., 6.
for her own individuality, will keep woman from undesirable and illicit unions at least as thoroughly as she is dealt from them today by purely conventional considerations.  

In doing so, Gordon moved beyond the economic and health concerns that dominated the birth control debate and pointed out the particular impact birth control clinics could have on gender relations, sexuality, and individual women’s lives.

The outcome of these debates – a small birth control clinic opened by the Medical and Health Department in 1937 with a grant from the legislature – reflected something of a compromise between these varying birth control agendas. Although operated by the government and controlled largely by Wilkinson and the conservative Board of Health, the clinic offered user-controlled methods such as diaphragms and spermicidal foams and powders on a voluntary, rather than compulsory, basis and only to patients who actively sought out its services, allowing black activists at home and abroad to rightly celebrate the “defeat” of racist state eugenics in the Caribbean.  

The clinic also positioned the Bermudian government as one of the few in the world at the time to openly endorse birth control and provide services free of charge, a fact that quickly attracted attention to the island. Indeed, within a year, Wilkinson received a letter of inquiry about the clinic from Sir Arthur Farquharson, a wealthy Jamaican sugar planter who ended up funding Jamaica’s own first birth control clinic. Wilkinson’s response demonstrated his awareness of the limits that had been imposed by local opposition. As he wrote to Farquharson in 1938:

In the matter of legislation, it seems to me that you wish the smallest amount possible, merely a grant for birth control purposes … otherwise all sorts of religious, moral, welfare, and inchoate sociological ideas will be thrust forward to befuddle the issue.

As Farquharson and others would soon discover, however, this opposition would arise regardless.

AN IMMEDIATE MEASURE: LABOR POLITICS AND BIRTH CONTROL IN JAMAICA AND BARBADOS

As in Bermuda, birth control campaigns in other areas of the West Indies in the 1930s brought up long-standing racial and class tensions and provoked heated debates among islanders of all backgrounds. However, debates over birth control in this period took place in an even more volatile context in the Caribbean proper. In Barbados and Jamaica, in particular, birth control campaigns directly followed a series of labor riots that rocked the islands in 1937 and 1938, part of a wider outbreak of social unrest across the region. These riots provided a particular urgency to the arguments of both birth control advocates and the opposition, all of whom saw the issue of reproductive control as critical to the direction these islands should take in the aftermath of social disruption. As a result, discussions of women’s reproductive potential became embedded in a more divisive political climate that prevented immediate government action like that in Bermuda. At the same time, however, the widespread social activism that followed the riots facilitated cooperation between more diverse groups of birth control supporters on both islands. Thus while debates in Barbados and Jamaica involved many of the same type of actors and arguments as in Bermuda, they did not line up in precisely the same way or create the same outcomes.

The strikes and riots of the 1930s, although set off by different catalytic moments on each island, had their roots in frustration over the extreme poverty and inequality that characterized the British Caribbean at the turn of the twentieth century. Although black politicians had made some inroads into elected legislatures in Jamaica and Barbados by the 1930s (much more so than in Bermuda), the basic power hierarchy remained intact. Real power remained concentrated in the British-appointed governors and their nominated executive bodies (composed of local white male elites), and the franchise was restricted to a miniscule portion of the population; in Barbados, for example, it was estimated that the electorate consisted of some 3.3 percent of the total population in the 1930s. Access to jobs in the civil service, professions, and retail shops and admittance to elite social clubs also remained largely limited to those

---

with lighter skin, maintained not through explicit segregation as in Bermuda but rather by more subtle practices of racial discrimination including selective hiring, social ostracism, alienation, and omission. Economic opportunities for the working classes also remained limited. In Jamaica, the expansion of peasant smallholdings after emancipation had been capped abruptly by the consolidation of large banana plantations under American multinational corporations like Standard Fruit and United Fruit, which, by the late nineteenth century, had a virtual monopoly on the trade. Unemployment and underemployment were also rampant, and many families lived on “starvation wages,” enhanced only further by the Great Depression and the erection of racist immigration laws around the Atlantic that closed off opportunities abroad and sent many Caribbean migrants home. These conditions heightened discontent with colonial rule and increased the appeal of unions, mutual-aid societies, and charity organizations. Labor leaders like Clement Payne in Barbados and Alexander Bustamante in Jamaica also delivered fiery speeches on race relations, economic inequality, and labor rights in parks and street corners in the 1930s, heightening consciousness and fomenting activism in the face of the injustices of Caribbean life.

The Caribbean, of course, had a long history of both subtle resistance and outright rebellion. But the intensity and regional scale of the riots in the 1930s (which brought major cities like Kingston “to a standstill as mobs surged through its streets halting streetcars, overturning cars and garbage cans, and firing shops” and left a dozen killed and forty-seven injured in Barbados) shocked the general population. As historian Ken Post points out, many officials and members of the conservative elite cast the uprisings as irrational upsurges by excitable “African savages” and advocated repression, but “a minority voice [also] spoke out for amelioration as an alternative way of dealing with worker and peasant protest.” As a result, the labor riots led not only to arrests but also to the creation of a variety of committees and groups aimed at uncovering the social, economic, and political causes of the unrest. The activist atmosphere of the late 1930s also sparked the creation of the region’s first

---

92 On the rise and fall of the peasant economy, see Holt, *The Problem of Freedom.*
94 See Putnam, *Radical Moves.*
broad-based labor unions, leagues, and modern political parties. These included the Bustamante Industrial Trade Union (BITU) and the People’s National Party (PNP) in Jamaica – with cousins Alexander Bustamante and Norman Manley at their helm, respectively – and the Barbados Progressive League (BPL) under Grantley Adams. Composed primarily of members of the local middle-class, brown-skinned intelligentsia/professional communities, the nascent parties worked to transform the energy and demands of working-class protestors into specific reforms (e.g., land redistribution, expansion of the franchise, and removal of racial discrimination in the civil services) aimed at loosening the grip of the white merchant–planter elite over the economy and political system.99

It was in this context that birth control campaigns appeared in Jamaica and Barbados. Almost immediately after the outbreak of labor rebellions on the island, discussions of population and birth control began to dominate major newspapers (encouraged by sympathetic journalists and editors) and crop up in public meetings, lectures, reports, and even literary works.100 For many of these commentators, population growth provided a relatively straightforward explanation for the poverty and discontent underlying the rebellions, and birth control a relatively straightforward solution. As a letter to the editor of the Barbados Advocate in September 1937 argued:

[T]he root of the trouble is the large increase of the population and as a result overpopulation. Since this is the universal opinion the population must be limited, and, surely, there can be no sounder method than the advocacy of Birth Control.101

An almost identical argument was made by Gordon St. C. Scotter in the Daily Gleaner following the outbreak of violence in Jamaica. Scotter argued that “the people of Jamaica grow, but the land itself doesn’t . . . There is only one answer as far as the future is concerned; population itself must be limited; and there is only one way of doing that: Birth Control.”102

100 Such activities were directly encouraged in Jamaica by the Daily Gleaner under the editorship of Herbert George de Lisser. For his support for birth control, see “Editorial,” Daily Gleaner, August 19, 1938, 12. The editor of the Barbados Advocate Louis Gale was against birth control (see “Religion and Economics,” Barbados Advocate, August 10, 1937, 12) but still regularly printed letters and articles with opposing views. Plain Spoken, “Letter to the Editor,” Barbados Advocate, September 9, 1937, 18.
Although many claimed to have witnessed this “overpopulation” in their travels through Barbadian villages and Kingston streets where they saw “so many children,” others pointed to censuses and records of the Registrar General to support their claims. Indeed, statistics at the time suggested that a significant demographic shift had begun in the year 1921, when populations across the region moved from relative stasis to rapid rates of growth. Later demographic analysis speculated that the observed growth was in part influenced by return migration from abroad, as islanders working and living in several circum-Caribbean countries were sent home by discriminatory migration laws erected in the 1920s and 1930s. Between 1930 and 1934, for example, an estimated 30,000 emigrants were repatriated to Jamaica alone. More significantly, however, 1921 marked the beginning of a decline in mortality rates, driven largely by advances in the treatment and control of infectious diseases and the initiation of some limited aspects of public health reform. By 1937, several islands were reporting death rates half the size of their birthrates and population growth rates of some 1.5–2 percent per year, including on islands such as Barbados, which already had one of the highest population densities in the world.

These figures should, of course, be observed with caution. As Karl Ittmann points out, population statistics in the early-twentieth-century British Empire were often “nothing more than educated guesses, made by colonial officials with little or no training in quantitative methods or demography.” In any case, the assertions that these numbers constituted “overpopulation,” that overpopulation was the cause of the region’s problems, and that birth control was the solution were not natural or inevitable. As illustrated by Table 1.2, many islands in the region recorded higher birthrates than Barbados and more densely packed populations than Jamaica and yet did not take up the cause as enthusiastically in these years. Furthermore, birthrates of 35–37 per 1,000 were moderate compared to many other countries around the globe, appeared to have been...

104 Bolland, The Politics of Labour in the British Caribbean, 301.
stable for several decades, and were even reportedly declining in some areas (including Jamaica) in the 1930s.\(^\text{107}\) The transformation of

\(^{107}\) In Jamaica, for example, birthrates of around 36–40 per 1,000 in the years 1881–1930 declined to about 33.44 per 1,000 from 1931 to 1935. “Quarterly Digest of Statistics, No. 6 Jan–March, 1949” (Jamaica, B.W.I.: Central Bureau of Statistics, 1949), 11, table 5. According to demographers in the 1950s, birthrates of 35–37 per 1,000 population represented “intermediate level” fertility rates, with rates over forty classified as “high.”
population statistics into a social problem with a birth control solution thus required a series of interpretative steps influenced critically by the wider political and ideological context.

As in Bermuda, for some commentators, the problem was not so much population growth in general but population distribution. Some commentators recognized that birth rates were declining but feared that this was largely among the higher classes who “artificially regulate the coming of their children with due regard to the family’s income and the health of the mother” while the poor continued to “produce children with reckless irresponsibility.” As the editor of the Daily Gleaner, Herbert George de Lisser, reported: “The lower classes hardly practice birth control, the higher classes do . . . And it would be disastrous if the less intelligent, the less energetic, and the less progressive sections of the people were to swarm the limits of their ability, while the others steadily diminished.” Barbados Advocate editor C.L. Chenery similarly pointed to “the growing disproportion between the birth-rate of the classes,” which he saw as problematic since “under existing conditions, the best types do not reproduce themselves as rapidly as the other types and the nations in which this disproportion exists run the risk of losing their moral fibre.”

Drawing on eugenic concepts of hereditary traits, letters to the editor of the Gleaner and the Advocate also warned of the danger to public order created by the overbreeding of “the wrong class” of “the ignorant, the immature, the under-nourished, the criminal, the diseased and the feeble-minded” rather than “the educated, cultured and well-nourished classes.” As in Bermuda, these commentators also saw “illegitimates” (children born out of wedlock) as particularly troublesome, suggesting that the illegitimate boy was destined to fill the ranks of the unemployed and riotous, while the illegitimate female child was “more liable to turn a prostitute than her sister who has


been born in wedlock.”  

This was, in the minds of many, a particularly grave problem on islands like Jamaica and Barbados, where estimates suggested that some 60–70 percent of children were born out of wedlock (compared to 15–20 percent in Bermuda). Commentators put forward a range of suggestions, from voluntary birth control to sterilization. One letter to the editor of the Gleaner, which summed up Jamaica’s problems as “too few bananas, too many babies,” even suggested a law be imposed to limit married men and women to three or four children and single people to none, under a penalty of six months’ hard labor.

Such arguments were not just the musings of press commentators and letter-writers but were also taken up by established organizations like the Jamaica Imperial Association (JIA). Headed by some of the islands’ most prominent merchants, producers, and professionals, the JIA regularly commented on economic policy and had the ear of both local and metropolitan colonial officials. In 1941, the organization wrote a memorandum to the Under-Secretary of State for the Colonies (also published in the Daily Gleaner) arguing that “unless there is also intelligent birth control practised by the working classes and peasantry, all these other aids to improvement will eventually prove a merely temporary alleviation of conditions.” The JIA also claimed in another report that “a high proportion of the loafers and criminals of the community come from the ranks of illegitimate children who were allowed to run wild because their mothers, unaided, could not look after them properly” and advocated the creation of birth control clinics as well as sterilization of the chronically diseased, the mentally deficient, and “those known to be possessed of hereditary criminal tendencies.”

Conservative eugenics

---

114 J.L. Varma, quoted in “Toc H Branch Hears Talk on Sex Education,” Daily Gleaner, April 28, 1938, 10.
115 Roberts, The Population of Jamaica, 288. The causes of this trend have long been a central point of debate in Caribbean sociology; see Christine Barrow, Family in the Caribbean: Themes and Perspectives (Kingston, Jamaica: Ian Randle Publishers, 1996) for an excellent overview.
118 “Memorandum Sent to Under-Secretary of State for Colonies by Jamaica Imperial Association,” Daily Gleaner, September 29, 1941, 6 [6]. See also the JIA, “Report for the Year 1939,” 1940 (May Farquharson Papers, SSC), 35.
120 “Recommendations of the J.I.A. to the Economic Committee,” Daily Gleaner, October 17, 1944, 4 [4].
also received an audience in the Barbados legislature in September 1937, when one Dr. J.W. Hawkins (who had previously spoken out in support of an explicitly eugenic approach to public health) went on a long diatribe about the dangers of reproduction of physically and mentally “unfit” classes, and argued that the government “should have power, as in Germany, through its magistrates and judges to prevent those terribly unfit and absolutely lawless citizens from propagating children.”

As can be seen above, Jamaicans and Barbadians were often more careful than Bermudian elites to phrase their fears in terms of “class” rather than “race.” As Patrick Bryan argues in the case of Jamaica, this reflected a long tradition of attempting to diffuse race tensions on the island through an unofficial moratorium on discussing race, which, in reality, rarely succeeded in masking racist ideologies. Indeed, commentators frequently spoke of “national” or “cultural” characteristics in ways that adopted the deterministic and essentialist nature of biological racism without explicitly referring to skin color. Commentators, for example, continuously repeated the trope of the “Jamaican father” or “Jamaican labourer” who was “a most unreliable person where his offspring is concerned” and “far more highly-sexed and far less inhibited than his English equivalent.” In Barbados, observers related stories of “the Barbadian man” whose primary preoccupation was the “sowing of wild oats.” Such stories drew on long-held stereotypes of black male sexual pathology, which, as scholars have noted, “has historically been

121 In a report in 1926, for example, Hawkins claimed the law of “survival of the fittest” was responsible for the high infant mortality rate, which could not be prevented except by “prevention of the most unfit from having children if this is practicable.” “The Report of the Public Health Commission 1925–1926,” Advocate Co., Ltd., 1927 (Pam C56, BNA), iii–iv.


124 As George M. Fredrickson argues in his analysis of the history of racism, “culture can be reified and essentialized to the point where it becomes the functional equivalent of race” and can “do the work of biological racism quite effectively.” See Fredrickson, *Racism: A Short History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 6–7. See also Briggs (*Reproducing Empire*, 165) for similar observations in the case of Puerto Rico.


126 Esther Chapman, “The Truth About Jamaica,” June 7, 1938 (Institute of Jamaica, West India Reference Library, NLJ).

constructed, particularly by whites, to be unquenchable and uncontrollable.”

Interestingly, although some working-class women were also accused of reckless breeding, they were more often portrayed as relatively innocent victims of male predation. Commentators spoke of the “ignorant Jamaican mother” who was like “the old woman who lived in a shoe who had so many children because she didn’t know what to do.”

According to the Barbados Advocate, these women were “amazingly prolific not because they are thoughtless or lascivious” but because they were unable to protect themselves against male advances and ignorant of birth control methods.

As Jill Briggs aptly points out, birth control “offered a convenient excuse” to those who sought to resist demands for real reforms to the social and economic system in the aftermath of the rebellions by blaming working-class sexual practices instead. Indeed, several conservative commentators dramatically claimed that the only alternative to birth control was “strife and epidemic disease,” and thus dismissed all efforts at social and economic reform as “mere sound and fury.”

But if such positions often seemed to dominate elite-run newspapers during these years, they did not represent the full gamut of birth control advocacy in either Jamaica or Barbados. In fact, some of the movement’s most vocal supporters were among the middle-class professionals and reformist elites who had taken critical stances on government policy and the socio-economic structure following the labor rebellions. These actors sometimes used the same language as conservative elites – speaking of the “danger” of working-class fertility and the threat of “overpopulation” – but were often more careful to contextualize these terms, use them to critique policy, and link their advocacy within more liberal or even socialist political and economic projects. Lawyer and head of the Barbados

128 Lewis, “The Contestation of Race in Barbadian Society,” 176. See also Howe, Race, War and Nationalism, 66.
129 One commentator in Barbados, for example, pointed out that “Quite a number of women of the lower class as can be seen from the reports, played an active part in the recent riots. This class of woman with low morals and negligent manner of working is a subject for Social reform” (Efficiency, “Letter to the Editor,” Barbados Advocate, September 10, 1937, 13).
131 “Editorial: Birth Control,” Barbados Advocate, October 1, 1926, 5.
132 Briggs, “As Fool-proof as Possible,” 175.
Progressive League (BPL) Grantley Adams, for example, discussed overpopulation in a memorandum to the Colonial Office as part of a larger critique of social and economic inequality, rather than to divert attention away from it. As Adams recognized, the extreme population density in certain parishes was a result of the island’s history of slavery, racial discrimination, the “exorbitant” rates charged for land, and the “violent opposition of the landed aristocracy to the suggestion of dismembering estates.”

Along with the rest of the BPL, Adams (a self-declared “socialist” at this stage of his career) advocated a number of reforms to address the islands’ problems, including nationalization of the sugar industry, land reform, and expansion of the political franchise. However, Adams and fellow BPL member Dr. Hugh Gordon Cummins also argued that wider distribution of contraceptives – along with emigration – could serve as a complement to (rather than a replacement for) these reforms, helping to relieve at least some of the pressure of population growth on the island.

A similar case was put forward by barrister Norman Washington Manley, founder of Jamaica Welfare Limited (an organization focused on improving the lot of small peasants and farmers through cooperative agriculture) and head of the newly created People’s National Party (PNP). Indeed, it was precisely in defense of land reform (rather than as a substitute for it) that Manley came out in favor of birth control; as he argued, relieving population pressure through birth control would make a scheme to increase peasant ownership of land more feasible.

Manley at times vaguely referenced demographic arguments to support his position; at a speech at the Ward Theatre on 1939, for example, he claimed that “American economists” predicted that each person needed two and a half acres of land to lead a comfortable life, a prospect that would be

136 Although Adams was later criticized as one of the most conservative of the West Indies’ nationalist politicians, this testimony before the commission caught him at one of the most radical stages of his career (Alexander, A History of Organized Labour, 250–256).
137 See WIRC, “Seventh Session Held at Bridgetown, Barbados. Witnesses: The Barbados Progressive League,” January 24, 1939 (CO 950/919, NAUK), 69–72. Adams claimed that himself and one other member of the league were in favor; although he did not identify Cummins, the latter had previously stated his support for birth control on maternal and infant health grounds. See “Disturbances Commission,” Barbados Advocate, September 6, 1937, 6–7.
138 On the JWL, see Patrick Bryan, Philanthropy and Social Welfare in Jamaica, 55.
impossible if Jamaica’s population continued to grow rapidly (especially considering his estimation that “75%” of the land on the island was unproductive). But in the very same speech, Manley also argued for birth control on more liberal grounds, claiming it was a matter of “liberty and freedom of conscience,” for (as the journalist covering the story summarized), he “believed that the poor were entitled to possess the same knowledge as those who were better off.” Manley even made the matter personal, mentioning that he had two sons and did “not intend to have any more,” thus suggesting that he himself used birth control.

The birth control advocacy of Dr. Jai Lal Varma, a colleague of Manley in the JWL, also mixed a variety of positions. An Indian-born doctor who had moved to Jamaica in the 1930s, Varma was known as an anticolonial intellectual through his work with the East Indian Progressive League. In a series of articles penned for the middle-class publication Public Opinion, Varma mobilized practically every argument for birth control available at the time, from a discussion of eugenic theories of “degeneration” to considerations of the impact of a labor surplus on declining wages to discussions of the value of birth control in improving maternal health, preventing abortions, and reducing high infant mortality rates. Others, like Dr. W.E. McCulloch (a white, Jamaican-born doctor also associated with the JWL and a lead advocate for public health reform), strongly opposed eugenic sterilization on ethical grounds, as well as distinguishing between long-term structural goals and short-term poverty alleviation.

141 Ibid., 21.
142 Ibid., 21.
146 McCulloch provoked the particular ire of the Colonial Office for his heated letters on the topic of public health reform and was described by officials as a “poisonous little tick” who demonstrated a “surprising ignorance (real or assumed) of proper procedure.” See Edward Denham to Beckett, Letter, January 25, 1938, H. Beckett to Sir Edward Denham, Letter, December 14, 1937 (CO 137/821/17, NAUK).
In letters to the *Gleaner* and a pro-birth control pamphlet entitled “Parenthood by Choice and Not by Chance,” McCulloch argued that he had “always been convinced that the real, permanent solution of our overproduction of population lies in the improvement of social conditions,” but also posited that voluntary clinics could serve as “an immediate measure”\(^{148}\) for mothers suffering the physical consequences of frequent childbearing and who “have to deny themselves the poorest quality of food, of clothes and of house so as to feed and clothe these little ones.”\(^{149}\)

Birth control also gained support on maternal and child welfare grounds from prominent social workers like Barbadian John Beckles. Beckles claimed that he had witnessed firsthand the hardship faced by families in Barbados, one of the poorest British Caribbean colonies at the time.\(^{150}\) In a passionate letter to the *Advocate*, he described conditions in “the slums” of Barbados, in which families of six or more children lived in small houses of 10 × 12 feet and survived on the meager wages of their fathers. Like McCulloch, Beckles maintained that “no one is suggesting that birth control is the immediate solution to a problem which is largely economic” but argued that it was “an aid, a fortification against the deterioration of a social condition in the future.”\(^ {151}\) This concern over working-class survival was also combined with a more explicit focus on working-class women in a strain of maternalist birth control advocacy put forward by a growing group of activist middle-class black women in Jamaica, including Amy Bailey, a social worker, teacher, activist, and founder of the black nationalist feminist “Women’s Liberal Club.”\(^ {152}\)

Through her social work activities, Bailey, too, had seen the physical and financial burden placed on working-class women trying to support large families. Bailey also challenged the emphasis on self-control put forward by Christian charity workers at the time. As she recalled pointing out to one such group, even if a couple were only to “come together once


\(^{150}\) Chamberlain, *Empire and Nation-Building in the Caribbean*, 54–57.


a year they could still have a child once a year. The answer is not self control the answer is knowledge.” Bailey was also particularly concerned with teenage pregnancy, which, she argued, was a result of a lack of sufficient education about sex in youth and created barriers to educational and vocational advance for young women.

The concerns of Beckles and Bailey over working-class survival were built on a longer tradition of family reform advocacy apparent in black middle-class and lower-middle-class social movements around the Atlantic Ocean from the early twentieth century onward. African Americans, Caribbean migrants, and organizations within the Caribbean frequently portrayed “better” childrearing, along with education and community building, as essential to “Negro uplift” in the face of economic crisis and state racism in the Anglo-American world. Scholars have drawn attention to the ways that the emphasis on illegitimacy and indictments of family instability within these discussions at times dovetailed with elite stereotypes surrounding black sexuality. As Lara Putnam points out, however, black “uplifters” differed from conservative elites in that they “accompanyd their criticism of parental failings among ‘our people’ with a fierce denunciation of US and British institutionalized racism.” They also attempted to add some nuance to the conversation by recognizing the broader social and economic context shaping family practices. Indeed, at the same time as Bailey lambasted fathers who abandoned their children, she also tried to defend working-class men by pointing out that many were unable to find work or earned too little to support a family; she also argued in her work more broadly that the presumed “immorality” of the working classes was the result of economic structures, rather than an innate racial characteristic. Bailey waffled somewhat on the issue of overpopulation, at times mobilizing neo-Malthusian language and at other times arguing that the unemployment problem was a function of capitalist interests rather than overpopulation. One senses in

159 As May Farquharson recorded in 1939: “By the way, at a meeting of the Women’s Liberal Club to which I went the other night, the Baileys again said that ‘Jamaica is not
Bailey’s advocacy the complexity of critiquing gender relations while not reinforcing stereotypes of black men, as well as balancing a critique of elite power and structural conditions with the promotion of practical remedies and creation of strategic alliances to improve working-class lives in the present.

A similar complexity characterized discussions of birth control by several female members of the UNIA, an international pan-Africanist organization started by Jamaican Marcus Garvey in Harlem in 1917. Garvey preached a message of black pride and called for the creation of an African homeland for the black diaspora; a mix of sailors, laborers, and activists set up local chapters across North America, the Caribbean, and Africa in the 1920s to spread his vision more widely. Although the organization went into decline in the 1930s (with Garvey’s retreat from public life and death in 1940), local chapters were kept alive by activists like birth control advocate Maymie Leonie Turpeau De Mena Aiken (known variously as Maymie L. Aiken, Mrs. P.A. Aiken, and “Madame De Mena”). Aiken related that she had become convinced of the need for birth control while living in the United States, where she had been a close colleague of Garvey; her faith in the cause had been only further reinforced by her work as a social worker after moving to Jamaica and joining the local Kingston chapter of the UNIA in the late 1930s. She related stories of “unwanted” infants in slum areas dying from neglect and disease and claimed: “if statistics of the number of maternal deaths were available, one would be surprised to find that a great number of them were caused by criminal abortion, overpopulated,’ and that the trouble is that the capitalists wont provide work for the people!” Letter to Mrs. How Martyn, April 24, 1939 (4/108/115, MFC, NAJ). 4. Henrice Altink, however, notes that Bailey also expressed concern around the issue of overpopulation in other contexts (Altink, Destined for a Life of Service, 16).


In a telling illustration of the flexibility of racial identity, Robert Hill notes that Aiken was variously listed as white, Spanish American, Negro, African/Black, West Indian, and colored in various passenger lists over the years. On Aiken, see Robert A. Hill, ed., The Marcus Garvey and Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers, Volume VI, September 1924–December 1927 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), fn 1, 117–118.

undertaken in a vain attempt to end an unwanted pregnancy.”

As a result, Aiken saw birth control as important to improving the economic, moral, and educational status of the black community in general and of Jamaican women in particular. She was, in fact, the only commentator at this time to refer to family planning as a woman’s “right” in her statement: “Why not give a fair chance to every child that is born; and the right to every woman of voluntary parenthood?” Fellow social worker and UNIA member Alma LaBadie also argued before a meeting of the organization in 1942 that the goal should not be to produce “a million negroes” but rather “quality negroes” for the race struggle, and that having only as many children as could be supported was critical to this cause. Like Aiken, she combined this black nationalist message with feminist criticism of men who “hatch children and leave them to grow up . . . with no real father,” which she argued demonstrated the “lack of self-respect for our women.” As scholars of women in the UNIA have noted, these women put forward a type of “community feminism,” which combined “a race-uplift activism asserting women’s political equality while demanding fulfillment of traditional male roles” and, one might add, respect for women’s rights to bodily autonomy.

Aiken, Bailey, and LaBadie found a perhaps unlikely ally in May Farquharson, daughter of Sir Arthur Farquharson, who became one of Jamaica’s most well-known birth control advocates. Like Henry Wilkinson in Bermuda, Farquharson occupied a contradictory position as a social reformist white elite. In private letters, Farquharson was often frankly disparaging of the general population (even going as far as to describe the “average” Jamaican as “unambitious and indolent”) and


164 Maymie L.T. Aiken, “Letter to the Editor: Birth Control,” September 8, 1939, 10 [10]. The next time the description of family planning as a “right” would appear seems to be in 1952; see Mrs. E.N. Shaw, “Letter to the Editor: Increasing Birth rate,” Daily Gleaner, March 25, 1952, 6 [6].


166 Ibid., 5.


168 [Fort George] to How-Martyn, June 17, 1940 (4/108/1315, MFC, NAJ), 3. (May Farquharson sometimes did not sign her letters, although her address of “Fort
clearly ascribed to the belief (widespread at the time) that white elite women like herself were uniquely qualified to inform on matters of maternity and morality.\textsuperscript{169} But Farquharson was also harshly critical of her elite contemporaries, particularly members of the Roman Catholic upper classes (whom she at one point described as “narrow minded beasts . . . no more”)\textsuperscript{170} and other white elite women, whom she felt preferred to “yap round Committee tables” and engage in “war work” as “an easy excuse for laziness and indifference and avoiding real, worth while jobs.”\textsuperscript{171} Indeed, Farquharson actively sought to distinguish herself from the classic white elite “charity lady” based on her self-proclaimed “spinster” status and feminist views,\textsuperscript{172} her efforts to push for more substantial reforms (such as a state Old Age Pension Scheme for the laboring classes), her support for Manley and the socialist cause,\textsuperscript{173} and her willingness to work with black social workers at a time when they were excluded from most white elite charity organizations. In particular, Farquharson worked closely with Amy Bailey, and the two developed an enduring friendship seen by many as a symbol of the possibility of cross-racial women’s mobilization.\textsuperscript{174}

Indeed, Farquharson’s first opportunity to discuss birth control publicly came at the “First Jamaican Women’s Conference,” organized by Bailey and her colleagues at the Women’s Liberal Club and held in Kingston from February 20–21, 1939. Attended by some fifty women, the conference included discussions and speeches by a range of socially and politically active women, including secretary of the Board of Supervision

\textsuperscript{169} On popular faith in white elite women and the concept of “maternal imperialism,” see de Barros, Reproducing the British Caribbean, 12.


\textsuperscript{172} As May wrote to a birth control manufacturing contact in 1940, “By the way you address me as ‘Mrs.’ but I am or was, until I took up B.C. a highly respectable spinster!!” [Fort George] to Mrs. Kennedy, Letter, May 3, 1940 (4/108/945, MFC, NAJ).

\textsuperscript{173} As she wrote in trying to convince Manley not to run for a position in the federal government: “In the long run surely it will be better for the whole Federation and for this corner of the world, that we in Jamaica (half the Federation) should develop strong, sensible, balanced Socialist lines, which we will do, under you.” May Farquharson to Hon. Norman Manley, Letter, November 24, 1957 (4/60/12B/18, Manley Papers, NAJ), 1.

\textsuperscript{174} See, for example, “Amy Bailey Great Family Planning Pioneer,” JFPA News 1.1 December 1970 (J233, NLJ), 6. Their relationship is also documented in the movie Miss Amy and Miss May (Sistren Research, 1990).
Edith Clarke, teacher Mary Morris Knibb (embroiled at the time in an election campaign for the local city council), visiting British feminist Edith How-Martyn, and Maymie Aiken, who reportedly announced that “[m]en have had 100 years to run this country & have all but failed. Women must stand beside them now.”\textsuperscript{175} Farquharson spoke on the subject of illegitimacy and birthrates, claiming that the Jamaican population had been increasing more rapidly than any other country in the world. As the \textit{Gleaner} summarized, she felt that “many people, who were not entitled to produce offsprings, produced them,” reflecting conservative eugenic and neo-Malthusian fears prevalent among her conservative peers. But Farquharson also situated her concern within the rising tide of social reform and optimism for a nationalist future. The essential problem, she argued, was that “when the population was overrun they could not educate people properly, they could not overlook and care them properly,” and “[i]f the babies keep on coming at the rate they are coming at this very moment, we will have to give up all idea of these things we want to see in Jamaica.” Farquharson also recalled stories of young women dying in childbirth, thus tapping into the maternal health narrative of Bailey and Aiken.\textsuperscript{176}

The Women’s Conference was recognized as an unprecedented moment in Caribbean cross-racial feminist activism.\textsuperscript{177} The participation of a broad range of women on equal grounds served as a vivid example of the inclusive approach taken by black activist Jamaican women in this period who, as Henrice Altink argues, both “made race visible on the one hand” and “tried to make it irrelevant.”\textsuperscript{178} The diverse group of participants passed a series of historic resolutions at the end of the conference, including a demand that the government “do whatever is possible to encourage Birth Control propaganda and to bring within the reach of the poorest those privileges which are now obtainable only by the more favoured.”\textsuperscript{179} Early birth control campaigns in Barbados and Jamaica thus appealed to an even broader and more diverse range of actors than in Bermuda. The unique postrebellion political climate also seems to have opened up even more opportunities for joint advocacy across racial lines. Yet birth control

\textsuperscript{175} The latter quote was recorded in May Farquharson’s exercise book from the conference. “Exercise Book: Women’s Conference,” 2 (4/108/589, MFC, NAJ). Edith How-Martyn’s involvement is discussed further in Chapter 2.

\textsuperscript{176} “Women Deal with Big Problems,” \textit{Daily Gleaner}, February 28, 1939, 10 [38].

\textsuperscript{177} Vassell, “Voluntary Women’s Associations in Jamaica,” 34.

\textsuperscript{178} Altink, \textit{Destined for a Life of Service}, 187.

advocates on these islands would face equally if not more fervent opposition than in Bermuda.

THE DEATH-KNELL OF RACE DESTRUCTION: OPPOSITION TO BIRTH CONTROL IN BARBADOS AND JAMAICA

As in many other areas of the world, opposition to birth control in Barbados and Jamaica was in part religious. In fact, religious leaders in Barbados and Jamaica argued that widespread distribution of birth control would be especially threatening in their societies, due to the high illegitimacy rates on the island, which provided vivid evidence that most people were having sex and reproducing outside the confines of Christian marriage. Under these conditions, if birth control was distributed widely to the population, it almost certainly would not be confined to use within wedlock. The movement was thus opposed not only by Catholic priests but equally strongly by Anglican leaders, who well into the late 1950s rejected the tacit approval granted by the Lambeth Conference of Bishops in England in 1930.180 As Anglican Bishop Sara argued in 1938, since “the root trouble in Jamaica is lack of responsibility on the part of the citizen – promiscuity and illegitimacy,” birth control was particularly dangerous, for it would “destroy even the little sense of responsibility that still exists.”181

Religious leaders were not entirely unanimous in this position. Reverend E.B. Baker of Jamaica, for example, wrote a number of articles in the mid-1940s defending birth control against Catholic opposition and arguing that it was necessary and moral in light of the socio-economic context of the region.182 Reverend F. Cowell Lloyd of the Baptist Church in Jamaica stressed the value of birth control to both the “eugenic” future of the island and responsible parenthood, in an article in the Gleaner in


181 WIRC, “Seventh Session held in Jamaica, 10th November 1938,” November 10, 1938 (CO 95c98, NAUK), 17.

which he admitted that “while it is probably impossible to rule out irregular sex intercourse it should be far from impossible to prevent unsuitable parentage.” 183 Even some prominent Catholics, such as U. Theo McKay, came out in favor of birth control in spite of the doctrine of their churches. 184 But many of the most prominent Caribbean religious leaders were unconvinced. Roman Catholic Father Joseph Krim accused those who “declared all self-control and chastity impossible” of promoting a general “MORAL DEFEATISM” that would lead to “mortal anarchy.” 185 A. Wesley Knott of the Jamaican Baptist Union similarly maintained: “That our people cannot be called ‘nice’ is a bitter pill to swallow, but I am convinced that they are not beyond the point of redemption.” 186

This clerical response to the birth control campaign in Jamaica also included an attack on the “new morality” that, according to Rev. E.L. Maxwell of the Church of England, had been gradually replacing Christianity since the Great War. 187 Although this challenge included a critique of doctors who were described as promoting birth control to acquire more money from patients, 188 women took most of the heat. As Krim pronounced in the Gleaner:

The entire Birth Prevention movement is a part of the scheme for emancipating womanhood – from what? First from a husband, now from children. No wonder the movement, originating in minds that had lost hold of Christianity, ends in broken homes, and the loss of God himself! 189

Father Walter J. Ballou likewise painted a grim picture of “the willfully barren wife,” who was a “social failure, a shirker, a slacker, a betrayer of home and of country.” 190 These comments point to the discomfort with not only working class but all women’s sexuality and independence that

underlay many religious critiques, as had been aptly noted by E.F. Gordon in Bermuda.

Several religious leaders also accompanied moral condemnation with a critique of class inequality and government policies, challenging the logic of overpopulation arguments and rooting the islands’ poverty in unequal distribution of land, poor housing, low wages, and lack of native industries.\footnote{Rev. Walter J. Ballou, “So Called Birth Control – A Social Menace,” Catholic Opinion, reprinted in Daily Gleaner, January 24, 1939, 24. See also J.T. Dillon, “Letter to the Editor: Population Problem,” Daily Gleaner, January 10, 1949, 8 [8].} As in Bermuda, however, a more fervent class critique came from labor and black activist organizations. These groups – like their counterparts at Alexandria Hall in Bermuda in 1936 – argued that the focus on working-class fertility was a distraction from the larger economic structures to blame for Caribbean poverty and inequality. F.A. Hoyos and K.L. Sealy in Barbados, for example, claimed at a YMCA debate that birth control was an “artificial remedy” for a deep-rooted problem.\footnote{“Discussion of Birth Control,” Barbados Advocate, November 11, 1940, 6.} Jamaican labor leaders St. William Grant and J.A.G. Edwards similarly argued that birth control was little more than a “false cure-all”\footnote{“Unionist Against Birth Control Move,” Daily Gleaner, January 28, 1939, 18.} used to “keep the bulk of the people in ignorance of the true cause of the conditions affecting them, with the hope of further achieving their selfish ends.”\footnote{J.A.G. Edwards, “Letter,” Daily Gleaner, April 11, 1938, 25.} These actors also responded to elite birth control advocates’ measured silence on race by explicitly highlighting it. According to the editor of New Negro Voice, a weekly paper published by the Kingston division of the UNIA, birth control was little more than “a sinister movement to decrease the Negro populations of the world.”\footnote{“U.N.I.A. Activities,” New Negro Voice, January 17, 1942, 5.} The tone of this opposition may have been directly influenced by the controversies surrounding Bermuda in black nationalist presses; indeed, local actors appear to have been well aware of the controversies surrounding birth control in Bermuda, seen as “an instance of the ‘whites’ acting against the ‘coloureds.’ ”\footnote{Noted in W. Tyler to May Farquharson, Letter, October 21, 1941 (4/10/8/1360, MFC, NAJ), 1.}

As in Bermuda, opposition to birth control played a critical role in stymieing potentially coercive state sterilization programs in Barbados and Jamaica. Dr. Hawkins’s long eugenic rant in the Barbados legislature in 1937, for example, was quickly denounced by other members of the
House, and Smith ultimately withdrew his original motion before the end of the debate.\textsuperscript{197} A 1941 report of a Special Committee to the St. Catherine Parochial Board in Jamaica recommending “Birth Control & Sterilization of the unfit” also caused a local outcry and was quickly removed.\textsuperscript{198} In Barbados and Jamaica, however, the power of opposition appears to have gone a step further, preventing even the opening of a voluntary government clinic along the lines of Bermuda. For example, although the 1937 Disturbances Commission in Barbados (which investigated the labor riots on the island) argued that “the root cause of many, if not all, of the economic ills in the island is overpopulation,”\textsuperscript{199} it declined to advocate even voluntary birth control out of fear of the “controversy and religious passion” it would excite, calling on the British government to assist in an emigration scheme instead.\textsuperscript{200} A bill presented to the Jamaican Legislative Council in 1942 by the member for Manchester that would have created voluntary (a fact stressed by its promoter) government clinics across the island to provide birth control services and general education was also quickly defeated.\textsuperscript{201} The latter proposal had been directly targeted by the New Negro Voice, which called on the “Negro Voters of Jamaica” to “warn your Legislators to leave this murderous legislation alone, at the peril of their defeat at the polls in the coming election.”\textsuperscript{202} Unlike many of the black activists in Bermuda, UNIA and labor leaders in Jamaica did not seem to make the distinction between “compulsory” and “voluntary” programs, instead collapsing all into the realm of an often vaguely defined concept of “birth control.” This stance left little room for support of antiracist birth control advocacy. Some male UNIA leaders even went as far as attacking the motives and commitment of black

\textsuperscript{199} “Report of the Commission appointed to enquire into The Disturbances which took place in Barbados on the 27th July 1937 and subsequent days,” December 1937 (C12, BNA), 4.
\textsuperscript{200} Ibid., 25. \textsuperscript{201} “Legislators Ban Birth Control,” \textit{Daily Gleaner}, July 8, 1942, 6 [6].
Jamaican women who supported birth control. According to the editor of *New Negro Voice*, “[t]hese ladies of brains, 99½ per cent of whom never had a child, and know not of a mother’s love, fail to realize that they are ringing the death knell of race-destruction.” J.A.G. Edwards specifically called out Maymie L. Aiken in a letter to the editor of the *Gleaner*. As Edwards wrote:

I am indeed greatly disappointed in seeing Mrs. P.A. Aiken, popularly known in the U.N.I.A. as Madam de Mena, championing Birth Control . . . Whilst I always hold Madam in high esteem, and still regard her as a lover of the race, . . . How in the name of goodness can any far-sighted Negro Leader agree to the practice of Birth Control within the race to-day as it stands, when the only power the Negro can boast of to-day is his power in numbers, even though, maybe 60% of them are half-starved . . . I wish Madame will again reflect, because I genuinely feel that she means well, but she is too anxious to get relief for the suffering people.

These critiques tapped into the pro-natalist gender ideology that dominated Garveyite philosophy, which called on “the Negro woman” to play her part by producing and mothering the next generation of soldiers in the racial struggle. As St. William Grant stated simply after LaBadie’s speech to the UNIA in 1942: “Mr. Garvey was no advocate of birth control, and if he were alive he would not support it.”

Rather than backing down, black women within the UNIA seized on these challenges to state their case more forcefully. Responding to Edwards’s letter to the *Gleaner* a few weeks later, Aiken defended her support for birth control by pointing to the threat to women’s health of too-frequent childbearing and the undue suffering experienced by children whose parents were unable to maintain them. She also expressed her surprise to see Edwards attacking birth control “from a racial standpoint,” when “Birth Control is not practised by any particular race group,

---

but is a representative institution started to benefit humanity in general.” 207 As such, she argued, “any race leader, whether white or black, red or yellow, who loves humanity would be interested in the thing that would assist in the prevention of his offspring.” 208 Aiken even went as far as to conclude her letter by deliberately calling out the gender tensions underlying the position of her peers, suggesting that “nearly every woman who is a mother will agree that the subject of Birth Control is of very little interest to the selfish man.” 209 Her colleague Alma LaBadie also seems to have been energized rather than discouraged by the negative reaction to her speech before the UNIA. In fact, she wrote to fellow advocate May Farquharson immediately after the meeting, relating her plans to give similar talks across the island to black lodges – “especially women’s lodges” – to ensure that they were all made “Birth Control conscious.” 210

Aiken and LaBadie’s refusal to capitulate to the dominant position of the UNIA on the matter of birth control built on a longer history of resistance on the part of its female members to the organization’s gender proscriptions. As Honor Ford-Smith points out, black women who embraced certain aspects of Garveyite philosophy also seized on opportunities to address “the contradictions between UNIA rhetoric and their own experience” 211 and draw attention to women’s issues and feminist concerns in UNIA debates, press, and international circles. In the process, they “transformed the space they occupied within and outside the UNIA, exploiting the contradiction between their participation and the subordinate experience of women with their lack of formal power in the movement and the wider society.” 212 As a result, Ford-Smith argues, the UNIA’s quintessentially patriarchal discourse and gendered hierarchical structure did not, in practice, relegate women to passive acceptance of their role as “race mothers” and nurses. 213

Nationalist political figures who had come out enthusiastically in favor of birth control at first (like Grantley Adams and Norman Manley), however, retreated more quickly from public promotion on the cause. Indeed, almost immediately after Manley spoke out in favor of birth control in 1939, the PNP published a note in the paper clarifying that

208 Ibid., 10.
209 Ibid., 10.
212 Ibid., 30.
213 Ibid., 20.
“Birth Control Forms No Plank of the Party.” Manley would also stop making statements in support of birth control in the following years, undoubtedly influenced in part by the political challenge forwarded by the Jamaica Labor Party (JLP), organized in 1943 by Manley’s cousin, Alexander Bustamante. Bustamante cast his party as a guardian of the working classes, protecting them from the “Brown Man Rule” of the PNP, and quickly seized on the birth control issue. In 1943, for example, the JLP claimed that birth control “would mean the destruction of the race,” and by 1944 Bustamante was outright accusing the PNP of preaching “race hatred [and] birth control.” The electoral victory of Bustamante’s JLP in 1944 (in the first election to include universal suffrage) only further sped this retreat. When directly questioned on the matter in subsequent years, Manley argued that it was not a “political issue,” claiming instead that it was an individual’s prerogative to have a large or small family and that “the problem of birth control will adjust itself as soon as people are properly educated into the meaning of responsibility.” He did, however, continue to lend moral support and advice to birth control advocates in private. As he reassured May Farquharson:

I do not at all despair of the possibility of a development in the Birth Control Movement, at least to the point where the Health Service of the island would be at liberty to engage in quiet work . . . This is one of the things that will inevitably come one day.

Grantley Adams also seems to have put the struggle for birth control on the backburner in the 1940s, focusing instead on trade union rights and adult suffrage and not reviving his position as a birth control advocate until the mid-1950s.

In the absence of government support along the lines of the Bermuda clinic, birth control advocacy on these islands rested instead on the

---

217 “Mr. Bustamante Replies to Various Critics of His Party and Himself,” *Daily Gleaner*, October 25, 1944, 8.
220 On Adams’ work during the 1940s, see Beckles, *A History of Barbados*, 246–253. On his birth control advocacy in the mid-1950s, see Chapter 4.
enthusiasm (and finances) of private actors, at least for the time being. As we will see in the next chapter, this happened quickly in Jamaica, where advocates organized into the Jamaica Birth Control League in March 1939 and opened the island’s first clinic that August. Attempts to spark a similar group were also initiated by John Beckles in Barbados in 1941. In a letter to the Advocate entitled “An Appeal to the Educated Coloured Women of Barbados,” Beckles called on his “Coloured sisters” to engage yourself actively in a campaign purporting to bring about the Limitation of Offspring by the prevention of conception. I myself feel that the time is opportune for your evolution from the shy and self-conscious woman of the nineteenth century and take your place in line with those of the other West Indian islands, by speaking out boldly the woman’s point of view on matters affecting them so nearly.

Beckles’s call was not immediately met, however, perhaps because of the much smaller scale of women’s activism and civil society organization in Barbados (as compared to Jamaica, especially) at the time. As we will see, Barbados would have to wait until 1954 before it would see the creation of its own family planning association.

CONCLUSION

In many ways, the early birth control debates of the 1930s and 1940s reflected and enhanced the race and class tensions of this period of Caribbean history. A number of conservative white elites advocated a harsh form of eugenic control as a substitute for wider economic and social reforms in the face of unemployment and labor unrest. Labor and pan-Africanist leaders mounted a campaign against such impositions, opposing birth control at home and abroad on class and race grounds. Black and brown middle-class nationalists straddled the line, critiquing elite power, while also at times replicating much of their discourses surrounding the working classes. These narratives took on highly similar tones across the islands, speaking to the circulation of thought through local and transnational presses as well as the similarities in political and social struggles of these

years. And yet, actors from all sides on all three islands at times challenged these narrow discourses. Some whites envisioned their advocacy as part of the nationalist project of the middle classes and allied with them in public debates, reports, and conferences. Some religious leaders and white women moved beyond their own priorities to delve into a critique of the economic structures and policies on their islands. Some labor and black nationalist activists found ways to reconcile birth control with the ideologies of their organizations and even incorporated explicit discussions of women’s rights and sexuality. In the process, they developed a form of advocacy that transcended the debates of their time.

These diverse participants at times drew on the same language, echoing local tropes stressing the problems of “illegitimacy” or invoking transnationally circulating neo-Malthusian and eugenicist ideologies. But when Alma LaBadie referred to the need to improve the “quality” of the race before a meeting of the UNIA in 1942, she had something quite different in mind than those who drafted Bermuda’s 1935 Report on Unemployment. Similarly, Grantley Adams’s understanding of overpopulation in 1939 was more sophisticated than the term itself might imply. Meanwhile, numerous actors eschewed these terms altogether, rooting their birth control advocacy in practical experiences they had as social workers, doctors, and teachers, arguing for birth control as an immediate measure aimed at helping families (and working-class women, in particular) cope with their economic and social realities rather than the solution to poverty and inequality, and even positing birth control as an essential “right” (like Maymie Aiken) or a precursor to a more liberal approach to sexuality (like Dr. E.F. Gordon). Opposition to these movements was also not as simple as it might appear on the surface. Some of those who spoke against state birth control programs, like David Tucker in Bermuda, made clear that they understood the intrinsic value of family planning but could only support voluntary versions, accompanied by other social and economic reforms. For others, the opposition to birth control was shaped by political partisanship and/or attempts to reign in women’s independence. The debates over birth control of the 1930s and 1940s were thus about many things: race and class tensions, yes, but also about gender, sexuality, and competing understandings of how best to empower working-class actors on the path to decolonization. As demonstrated in the next chapter, efforts to transform birth control debates into practical measures to increase access to contraception involved an equally complex mix of actors and agendas.