The White Slavery Controversy, Women’s Bodies, and the Making of Public Space in the United States

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Abstract

After John D. Rockefeller, Jr. was appointed to serve on the New York White Slavery Grand Jury, he began a long commitment to the cause of prostitution and sex trafficking. This research report outlines initial conclusions based on a review of records in the Rockefeller Archive Center for the ten years after Rockefeller’s service on the grand jury. The research report summarizes findings from the archives, previews arguments deriving from the archival documents, and suggests additional future directions for research.

Report

Two years after George Kibbe Turner inflamed passions with his Chicago white slavery exposé, he set his sights on New York, specifically Tammany Hall. Writing in *McClure’s Magazine*, he claimed, “In the past ten years New York has become the leader of the world in this class of enterprise... under the protection of the Tammany Hall political organization.”¹ Turner described in great detail an organized national and international trade in primary poor and immigrant young women that was intimately integrated into the Tammany political machine. Indeed, Turner claimed that the Tammany Hall building “has come to be the leading headquarters for disreputable dances” where young women were procured for prostitution.² He concluded, “Shall New York City continue to be the recruiting-ground for the collection for market of young women by politically organized procurers? The only practical way to stop it will be by the defeat of Tammany Hall.”³

It is, perhaps, unsurprising that Tammany Hall quickly responded to Turner’s accusations, especially considering the possibility that the *McClure’s* article impacted the 1909 elections in the city.⁴ On January 3, 1910, New York Judge O’Sullivan, who was likely a “Tammany man,” called a small group of citizens to serve on a special grand Jury to investigate accusations of white slavery in New York City, and John D. Rockefeller, Jr., the son of one of the nation’s wealthiest
and most influential men, was called to serve as jury foreman. In order to challenge aristocratic power in the city, Tammany Hall commonly used a strategy of making particularly ineffectual aristocrats figureheads in investigations similar to the white slavery investigation. Based on initial newspaper reporting, Tammany Hall appeared to have their man in Rockefeller, who attempted to be excused from the grand jury on account of his youth, inexperience, health, and business interests. After being reminded by the judge of his “patriotic duty,” Rockefeller “stammered” an acceptance of the appointment.

Despite its auspicious beginning, the White Slavery Grand Jury conducted a sweeping investigation that lasted for six months, even though it was initially expected to only last for one month, and Rockefeller told his biographer that he “never worked harder in [his] life.” The investigation began a decades-long commitment to the issue, where Rockefeller ultimately gave about $5.4 million to the cause, and fundamentally altered the national response to prostitution and white slavery.

**John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Investigation and Reform**

By 1910, John D. Rockefeller, Sr., Standard Oil baron, had stepped away from most of his business interests, and John D. Rockefeller, Jr. was expected to take his place. However, during his grand jury service, the news leaked that the younger Rockefeller had stepped down from most of his business roles in order to concentrate on managing the family’s philanthropies. While Rockefeller, Sr. may have been motivated to develop the family philanthropies through “his religious conviction and the old-fashioned concept of stewardship,” Rockefeller, Jr. brought a commitment to the Progressive Era impetus that scientific thinking and the assumption that strong management and organization could solve social problems. He brought these methods to the White Slavery Grand Jury, systematically seeking testimony from political officials, representatives from local organization doing work on the issue, academic experts, and investigators.
Rockefeller also wrote letters to nearly every person who had published on the topic of white slavery asking for “actual facts” and the “sources of information from which they were obtained,” often quoting something specific from the publication and asking targeted follow-up questions. While Rockefeller received many responses, the president of the New York Evening Journal replied, “You will, of course, find it very difficult—perhaps impossible – to get ACTUAL PROOF.” Nevertheless, after about six months, the grand jury concluded its investigation and found what it believed was actual proof.

In June 1910, Rockefeller asked for the grand jury to be dismissed and requested to read a presentment to the court, outlining the investigation background, findings, and grand jury recommendations. Justice O’Sullivan ultimately declined Rockefeller’s request, and, instead, summarized the findings, “You report that no organized traffic in women exists in this city,” and New York is “the cleanest great city in the world.” The grand jury report, however, was more nuanced, and after disappointing correspondence with the mayor, Rockefeller and James Reynolds, the Assistant District Attorney with whom Rockefeller had worked during the investigation, conspired to publish the grand jury report and distribute the report to newspapers. The significant differences between the grand jury report and the judge’s report accounts for some of the divergences in newspaper reporting.

Perhaps one of the strongest recommendations in the report was the need for a thorough investigation of white slavery and prostitution in New York, and, thus, Rockefeller began acting on that recommendation after discovering that the mayor’s office and court had largely dismissed the investigation. There is evidence that Rockefeller wanted to begin private investigations right away after being appointed to the grand jury, but there were limitations to the admissibility of evidence. After his service, Rockefeller began funding investigations with the explicit request that he not be publicly connected to the investigations. An early investigation conducted by a Dr. Sandford was facilitated by Reynolds and involved the opening of a false disreputable house, although Rockefeller later denied being associated with the investigation and explicitly directed later investigators to avoid any illegal or immoral activity in the course of their investigations. By December 1910, Rockefeller was convinced that the mayor was
unlikely to appoint a commission to study the problem and concluded that a public commission would be of limited utility.\textsuperscript{19} Instead, Rockefeller began what would ultimately become the Bureau of Social Hygiene, an organization that worked largely in secret for nearly two years.\textsuperscript{20}

In January 1911, Rockefeller hired Clifford Roe, the lead investigator of the celebrated Chicago effort to eradicate white slavery.\textsuperscript{21} The subsequent report that Roe produced on April 1912 reads like a sensational novel with investigators engaging in elaborate plots, detectives who shifted between different characters, and even a state's witness killed by a bombing before trial.\textsuperscript{22} Although dramatic, Roe's investigation resulted in few indictments, and Rockefeller did not continue to employ Roe after one year.\textsuperscript{23} Rockefeller's experience with Clifford Roe appears to have functioned as a break from the Chicago white slavery campaigns. While Roe's sentimental language chronicled the infiltration in and movement across spaces, what came to be the New York approach to white slavery utilized scientific language to investigate the body as a site of danger and reform.

This rhetorical shift is evident through three primary approaches to the problem of white slavery in New York, each initiated and supported by Rockefeller. First, Rockefeller, through the Bureau of Social Hygiene, funded and published “scientific” reports on prostitution in New York and Europe.\textsuperscript{24} The initial investigators, George Kneeland, Abraham Flexner, and Raymond Fosdick, became long-term allies in Rockefeller's efforts. Also, there is evidence that Rockefeller not only funded the investigations, but he provided specific direction to the investigations and edits to the subsequent publications.\textsuperscript{25} These investigations functioned as the “truth” about prostitution and white slavery, and they were intended to provide a scientific grounding for reform efforts.

Second, Rockefeller funded clinical research beginning with the Bedford Hills Laboratory of Social Hygiene.\textsuperscript{26} Bedford Hills was a reform institution for young women sentenced by New York courts. The lab functioned as a mechanism to study and treat women in order to enable their reform, and the explicit purpose of the funding was to provide a model of criminal justice reform that could be applicable outside of Bedford Hills. In her proposal to Rockefeller, Katharine B. Davis argued,
“definite knowledge must precede concerted action to make it worthwhile or its results lasting.” Indeed, Rockefeller explained:

Miss Davis told us that while the girls in her intuition are committed there for various crimes, practically all of these crimes were committed as a result of or in connection with their being prostitutes. In other words, her experience would go to prove that the one crime of woman is prostitution. All the other crimes are simply incidental thereto.

The Bureau later funded a municipal health clinic that would serve public health needs by reporting and managing venereal disease, while studying those who come through their doors in order to find the most effective solutions to the problem.

While Chicago appeared to work toward shutting down and eliminating prostitution, a strategy commonly described as abolition, Rockefeller situated his work within a pragmatic middle ground between regulation and abolition. Rockefeller described his perspective in his proposal for a mayor’s commission. He explained, “Let us draw an imaginary line. On one side of this line let us place,” men and women who are irredeemable. According to Rockefeller the irredeemable consisted of “probably less than 25%” of those involved in prostitution. Following this logic, a scientific study of prostitution can reveal the most effective methods of reform and prevention. For Rockefeller an appropriate response should not be “sensational or sentimental or hysterical,” but instead operate with “deep scientific as well as humane interest in a great world problem.”

Finally, Rockefeller worked behind the scenes to fundamentally alter the national landscape of philanthropic organizations dealing with issues of white slavery and prostitution. By 1910 there was a dizzying array of organizations working on the general problem of prostitution, morality, white slavery, and venereal disease. Rockefeller worked behind the scenes to consolidate, direct, and “modernize” the movement, which ultimately led to the creation of the American Social Hygiene Association in 1913 and a shift in national reform efforts to New York City, away from Chicago.
Conclusion

This research report has traced some of the preliminary findings of my investigation of records at the Rockefeller Archive Center. In what follows I outline some of the next steps in this research, as well as some larger implications. In particular, I will preview future analysis deriving from this research, as well as additional possible directions for research.

Research on the rhetoric of science has illustrated the rhetoricity of seemingly neutral science. With this framework, I engage in a careful rhetorical analysis of primary source documents including the Grand Jury report, Kneeland’s book, and Bedford Hills documents. I ultimately argue that the New York branch of the movement engaged in explicit definitional work to move the definition of “white slavery” from entrapment to “redeemability.” In doing so, reformers shifted the ground of reform from spaces of entrapment to the site of the body, which may or may not be capable of redemption. The rhetoric of science functioned as a compass to negotiate the site of the body and determine possibilities for redeemably. Rhetorical analysis can help uncover the ways in which the rhetoric operated, as well as the constructed lines between those who were and were not capable of reform.

Records of John D. Rockefeller, Jr.’s grand jury service can also be a resource for researchers interested in early federal responses to sex trafficking. Rockefeller appears to have been meticulous in the collection of information, and, as a result, the archives contain difficult to find government reports, interviews, and evidence of enforcement priorities.

Researchers interested in organizational history, will find valuable correspondence in piecing together the history of purity and vigilance organizations. Official records of these organizations do not reveal the apparent behind-the-scenes work of the organizational restructuring and refocusing. Rockefeller was engaging in correspondence with major reformers across the country, and these letters reveal interpersonal conflict, differences in strategy and focus, as well as possibilities that
never came to fruition. Throughout this time period, Rockefeller appeared to occasionally influence direction, once predicking future funding on staffing decisions, and even while encouraging the merger of related organizations, he insisted on the autonomy of the Bureau of Social Hygiene.

I conclude with a research possibility that has left me somewhat baffled. After his grand jury service, Rockefeller mailed the novel House of Bondage to huge numbers of associates, asking each for their opinion. While criticizing other writing on white slavery as sentimental, Rockefeller called House of Bondage a new Uncle Tom’s Cabin. At least on the surface, House of Bondage does not appear appreciably different than the so-called sentimental writing on the topic. The responses to Rockefeller’s request for information are also fascinating. Those responses reveal divergence in various aspects of the white slavery issues, including divergence from those who served on the grand jury with Rockefeller. Rockefeller also had the responses summarized and categorized. While I am puzzled by Rockefeller’s initial assessment of the book and his decision to widely disseminate the novel, I am equally unclear about the purpose of categorizing responses.
2 Turner, 58.
3 Turner, 62.
6 Harr and Johnson, The Rockefeller Century, 110.
7 “John D. Rockefeller, Jr., Is Foreman of Grand Jury to Probe ‘White Slave’ Trade,” January 3, 1910, Office of the Messrs. Rockefeller, Rockefeller Boards, Record Group 2, Series O, Box 8, Folder 56, Rockefeller Archive Center.
8 Harr and Johnson, The Rockefeller Century, 110.
9 Harr and Johnson, 114.
10 Fosdick, John D. Rockefeller, Jr. A Portrait, 140.
12 John D. Rockefeller Jr., “Grand Jury Statement to Judge O’Sullivan,” May 11, 1910, Rockefeller Archive Center. There is some evidence that Rockefeller generally supported the cause, making relatively small donations to organizations like the Committee of Fourteen in New York. However, Grand Jury investigation appears to have been the catalyst to the sustained and significant commitment that followed. Frederick Whitin, “Letter to John D. Rockefeller, Jr.,” November 18, 1907, Office of the Messrs. Rockefeller, Rockefeller Boards, Record Group 2, Series O, Box 6, Folder 40, Rockefeller Archive Center; John P. Peters, “Letter to John D. Rockefeller, Jr.,” February 26, 1909, Rockefeller Archive Center.
15 “Judge O’Sullivan Discharge Statement to Grand Jury,” June 1910, 3–4, Office of the Messrs. Rockefeller, Rockefeller Boards, Record Group 2, Series O, Box 8, Folder 57, Rockefeller Archive Center.
17 Starr L. Murphy, “Letter to John D. Rockefeller, Jr.,” January 25, 1910, Office of the Messrs. Rockefeller, Rockefeller Boards, Record Group 2, Series O, Box 8, Folder


20 The organization was initially called the Committee of Three and included [names]. In [date], when Katherine Davis joined the committee, they voted to rename themselves the Bureau of Social Hygiene.


24 [comprehensive list of publications]

Fosdick ultimately became Rockefeller’s authorized biographer. Rockefeller continued to employ Kneeland after the completion of his book, and in 1914 the police were calling Kneeland a “wizard.” Rockefeller continued to quietly support Kneeland even as the investigator was being treated for the advanced stages of syphilis in 1918. Raymond B. Fosdick, “Letter to John D. Rockefeller, Jr., Seal Harbor, Maine,” September 10, 1914, Office of the Messrs. Rockefeller, Rockefeller Boards, Record Group 2, Series O, Box 8, Folder 62, Rockefeller Archive Center; John A. Fordyce, “Letter to John D. Rockefeller, Jr., New York,” May 27, 1918, Office of the Messrs. Rockefeller, Rockefeller Boards, Record Group 2, Series O, Box 8, Folder 62, Rockefeller Archive Center.

26 Rockefeller agreed to fund the Lab for up to $200,000. John D. Rockefeller, Jr., “To the Bureau of Social Hygiene,” April 3, 1912, Office of the Messrs. Rockefeller, Rockefeller Boards, Record Group 2, Series O, Box 6, Folder 35, Rockefeller Archive Center; Starr L. Murphy, “Minutes of a Meeting of The Bureau of Social Hygiene,” April 3, 1912, Bureau of Social Hygiene Records, Series 1, Box 2, Folder 23, Rockefeller Archive Center.


There was one report that the Bedford Hills research continued outside of the institution on women who had not consented. “Rockefeller Board Tricks Working Girls into ‘Morality’ Test,” New York Call, March 26, 1916, Rockefeller Foundation Records, Record Group 1.1 Projects, Series 200, Box 15, Folder 157, Rockefeller Archive Center.

30 John D. Rockefeller, Jr., “[Commission Recommendation],” 1910, 1, Rockefeller Archive Center.


Prior to the creation of the American Social Hygiene Association (ASHA), Rockefeller supported a merger of the National Vigilance Committee and the American Purity Alliance to form the American Vigilance Association (AVA) through funding and publicity. The AVA and American Federation for Sex Hygiene were the primary organizations in the merger that created the ASHA. Documents that illustrate Rockefeller’s behind the scenes work include: John D. Rockefeller, Jr., “Letter to James B. Reynolds, New York,” July 11, 1913, Office of the Messrs. Rockefeller, Rockefeller Boards, Record Group 2, Series O, Box 6, Folder 30, Rockefeller Archive Center; John D. Rockefeller, Jr., “Letter to Clifford Roe,” January 26, 1912, Office of the Messrs. Rockefeller, Rockefeller Boards, Record