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NEO-MALTHUSIANISM IN THE EARLY 20TH CENTURY

Introduction

One main concern of human ecology and ecological economics is the balance between human population and natural resources. This is rightly named “the Malthusian question” because Malthus predicted that human populations, if unchecked, would grow exponentially (in geometrical ratio, such as: 1, 2, 4, 8, 16...) while agricultural production would grow only in arithmetic ratio (1, 2, 3, 4...), or even worse, it would be subject to decreasing returns to the labour input (reaching zero marginal productivity).

However, around 1900 there was in Europe and America a successful international social movement that in contrast to Malthus’ pessimism, believed that population growth could be stopped among the poor classes by voluntary decisions. Women were entitled to choose the number of children they wanted to have. This neo-Malthusian movement did not appeal to the State to impose restrictions on population growth. On the contrary, it was based on “bottom up” activism based on women’s freedom, the downward pressure of excessive population on wages, and the threat to the environment and subsistences. An excess of population was foreseen, and this led to anticipatory behaviour.

More recently, in the 1960s and 1970s, there arose a new wave of Neo-Malthusianism, this time top-down, imposed by international organization or by governments (like in China) based on doctrines of overpopulation put forward by Paul Ehrlich (1968) and other authors.

Amartya Sen has explained that in 1798, Malthus quoted Condorcet's discussion in 1795 of the possibility of overpopulation. Condorcet believed in reasoned human action in order to prevent an overpopulation crisis through increases in productivity, through conservation and prevention of waste, and through education (especially female education) which would contribute to reducing the birth rate. Voluntary family planning would be the solution. Malthus, on the contrary, thought that improving the situation of the poor was counter-productive, since it would lead to larger families. So, the neo-Malthusianism of 1900 can be seen a one moment in a prolonged discussion which started in 1795 and continues today.

The origins of neo-Malthusianism

Ever since 1798, when Malthus formulated his essay on population, there arose concerns in his country about avoiding the overpopulation of poor people. The alternative to the Malthusian trap, if there was one, went no further than puritan advice on moral restraint, celibacy, delay in the age of marriage and sexual abstinence. It took some time for Malthus's "remedies" to be transformed. In 1822 Francis Place, a tailor by profession and associate of the utopian socialist Robert Owen, first published in London *Illustrations and Proofs of the Principle of Population*, in which he did not yet describe the details of the contraceptive methods which he would later anonymously disclose in his so-called *Diabolical Hand Bills*. Other personalities followed Place and Owen in the same concern, including Richard Carlisle, who in 1825 wrote his neo-Malthusian work entitled *What is Love?* These and other neo-Malthusian works were broadly disseminated in England during the first third of the 19th century; they had public impact and attracted governmental persecution. Neo-Malthusianism travelled to North America via Robert Owen himself, when he founded his communist-inspired colony, New Harmony. As early as 1835, Robert Owen's son, Robert Dale, published the neo-Malthusian booklet entitled *Moral Physiology* in New York, various editions of which were issued until 1877 in England and the United States. Following this work, Charles Knowlton, a Boston physician, wrote *Fruits of Philosophy*.

Starting in 1854, concern for the condition of the proletariat and high infant mortality rates was spurred by the English doctor, George Drysdale, who published the first edition of his

book *The Elements of Social Sciences* under a pseudonym. The remedies for overcoming the three evils of poverty, prostitution and celibacy, which the author claimed afflicted humanity, were explained in this work. Drysdale's work inspired the creation of the first neo-Malthusian organisation in the world, *The Malthusian League*, founded by his brother, Charles Drysdale with Charles Bradlaugh and Annie Bessant in London in 1877. The spread of contraception gave way to a drawn-out lawsuit involving those who wanted to re-issue the book by the American physician, Charles Knowlton, in England. The court case involved Annie Bessant and Charles Bradlaugh, and was discussed in many countries.

One key factor in the future development of neo-Malthusianism in continental Europe was Paul Robin's exile in England at that time. He was a member of the council of the First International. His contact with the neo-Malthusian English thinkers led him to propose including the population question in the programme for workers' emancipation as early as the 1870s, but his calls had no resonance on the international socialist agenda. Despite this initial lack of understanding, the English league's activities in the United States and England led to the spread of neo-Malthusianism around Europe. This is how, via its own theoretical and practical production, the second independent European neo-Malthusian league was founded in the Netherlands in 1881 under the name *De Nieuw-Malthusiaansche Bond*, the secretary of which was the physician Jan Rutgers, who published the newsletter *Het Gellukkig Huisgezin (The Happy Family)*. From its beginnings, this league had valuable support of a member of parliament, M. S. van Houten. There is no indication that neo-Malthusianism was legally persecuted in Holland like it was at first in England, but there were two public morality (re-population) leagues which attempted to combat the spread of neo-Malthusian theories and practices, called *Rein Levenbeweging*, based in Utrecht, with the newsletter *Levenskracht*; and the *Vereeniging tot Bestrijding van het Nieuw-Malthusianisme*, based in Gravenhage.

In 1889 in Stuttgart, Germany, the neo-Malthusian league *Sozial Harmonischer Verein* was created, the secretary of which was the publicist Max Hausmeister. We do not know whether he was also a physician, although sometimes he appears as such. The league's means of spreading information was the newsletter *Die Sozial Harmonie*. In 1911, the German

government – in the phase leading up to World War I – proposed banning the travelling sale of contraceptive products by modifying article 56 of the Industrial Code .

In Sweden, one active propagandist of neo-Malthusianism at the turn of the century was the economist Knut Wicksell who with the anarchist and socialist Hinke Bergegren founded the *Stockholm Sällskapet för humanitär barnalstring* (Stockholm Association for the Humanitarian Reproduction). Bergegren (1861-1936) was jailed in Sweden in 1910 after a public conference entitled “Love without children”. There was a so-called “Hinke Law” against birth-control. Bergegren became in 1917 a member of the Communist Party.

The French neo-Malthusian league was created in 1896. In 1877, Paul Robin had drawn attention to the problems posed by Malthus’s law and had published his work *La Question Sexuelle*. He had not earned the support of anarchist personalities such as Kropotkin whose technological optimism led to see the world’s rising population as a negligible problem. Robin repeated the principles for future generations of “good birth, good education and good social organisation”. Robin’s view broke with Malthus’ moral restraint. In its place, he emphasised the need for voluntarily and consciously reduce fertility rates through sexual education, contraception, and women’s freedom. With this, he proposed taking labour away from capital, weakening militarism, avoiding forced migration and most importantly, allowing working-class women to decide for themselves when to become pregnant. From France, and upon Robin’s impetus, the neo-Malthusian objectives joined those of the workers’ movement, and this was the neo-Malthusianism that took root in southern Europe and some Latin American countries.

In Switzerland, there was a neo-Malthusian group in Geneva that published the journal *La Vie Intime* from 1908 to 1914. Its most visible spokesman was Valentin Grandjean (1872-1944), from a Calvinist family, who became a writer and later a Socialist deputy in the Grand Conseil of Geneva from 1904 to 1913. This group was directly influenced by French neo-Malthusianism.

The union of the European and American neo-Malthusian movements materialised in August 1900 in Paris, when the first International Neo-Malthusian Conference was held, and the *International Federation of Human Regeneration* was created. Attending this meeting were Paul Robin from France, Emma Goldman from the United States, Valentin Grandjean from Switzerland, the Spaniard Ferrer i Guàrdia, Dr Rutgers from Holland, and England's Dr Drysdale. It was agreed that each neo-Malthusian branch with headquarters in each country would be independent, and that committees and groups would be organised as needed, either in cultural centres or labour unions.

Therefore, starting in 1900, neo-Malthusianism was firmly entrenched and organised in western and central Europe, as well as in the United States, where it was spread by Moses Harmann and his daughter, Lily, through the neo-Malthusian newsletter published in Boston, *The Lucifer*. They were joined by the anarchist Emma Goldman, in addition to sundry doctors and midwives. Thus Emma Goldman (1869-1940) was a participant at the first neo-Malthusian conference in Paris in 1900. She published *Mother Earth* between 1906 and 1917. Environmentalists of the 1960s and 1970s revived the title of her journal. She was active as a neo-Malthusian before Margaret Sanger (1879-1966), who is rightly credited as the main force behind the social and legal acceptance of contraception in the United States. Sanger was an International Workers of the World organizer, and therefore familiar with anarchist ideas. She lived and learned about birth control techniques in Europe, she was friendly in 1911 in London with one associate of Ferrer i Guàrdia (who had been executed in Barcelona in 1909 after an uprising against sending troops to Morocco), and after her return in the United States in 1914, she began to publish the journal *The Woman Rebel* which supported socialism, feminism and contraception. She was indicted for violating the Comstock Act of 1873 that forbade contraceptives. Sanger did no longer use the word “neo-Malthusianism”, which (paradoxically) had become politically too radical, and used “birth control” instead, with emphasis on the prevention of abortions, to be substituted later by even less controversial words, “family planning” or “planned parenthood”.

Neomalthusianism in Southern Europe and Latin America

France

Starting in 1896, but especially after 1900, French neo-Malthusianism was devoted to raising women's awareness of their right to voluntarily procreate when they wanted to, and it advised the proletariat not to have large families in order to be more demanding in their fight for emancipation from the slavery of wages. It also fostered co-education between boys and girls and sexual education. As Francis Ronsin points out in his classical work on neo-Malthusianism in France (Ronsin, 1980: 16-22), neo-Malthusian propaganda was partly responsible for the lowering of birth rates among the working class. Neo-Malthusianism in France forged an important presence not only in cities but also in rural areas. The "Womb Strike" (*grève des ventres*) was advocated via the periodicals *Régénération* (1900-1908), *Génération Consciente* (1908-1914), *Le Malthusien* and *Le Néo-malthusien* (1916-1919), along with public conferences, dramas, and prolific artistic production. The sale and dispensing of contraceptives were always accompanied by an explanation of the neo-Malthusian demographic theories. One main point was that there was no inexorable "Malthus' population law". This systematic propaganda on conscious procreation sparked repression by the French state and church because neo-Malthusianism was seen as responsible for the weakness of French demography compared to Germany. The re-population leagues used religious and nationalist arguments, lamenting the decrease in the birth rate. French neo-Malthusianism came to be viewed as a threat to the fatherland. Abroad it was seen as a pernicious example. In France, propagandists were frequently imprisoned.

The neo-Malthusians of one hundred years ago agreed with Malthus that poor people had too many children, but they did not believe in chastity and late marriages. They promoted more vigorous "preventive checks" than Malthus had foreseen, exhorting the poor populations of Europe and America to use contraceptives, and to separate love making from child bearing and even from marriage. The movement was careful to insist that they were not Malthusians but *neo*-Malthusians, devoted to "sexual freedom and parental prudence" (Paul Robin in 1896, cf. Ronsin, 1980:70).

Francis Ronsin
**La grève
des ventres**

*Propagande néo-malthusienne
et baisse de la natalité en France
19^e-20^e siècles*

Aubier | *collection
historique*



Spain

Neo-Malthusianism was spread in Spain from Catalonia through the working-class press in Barcelona, including *El Boletín de la Escuela Moderna* (*Newsletter of the Modern School*) and *La Huelga General* (*General Strike*), which had been financed since 1901 by Ferrer i Guàrdia, one of the founders of the international neo-Malthusian league one year earlier, and Mateo Morral, the correspondent in Germany for the international neo-Malthusian league publication headquartered in Paris, the magazine *Régénération*. This paved the way for the creation of neo-Malthusian branches for both sexes or exclusively for men or women throughout the entire peninsula, except in the centre.

In 1904, the Spanish branch of the *Human Regeneration League* was formed in Barcelona, and its secretary was the anarchist and first president of Barcelona's *Ateneo Enciclopédico Popular*, Luis Bulffi. This federated league, homonymous with the international one headquartered in Paris, was devoted to studying the population problem and preaching freedom of choice in motherhood, claiming that unlimited reproductive growth was not possible because the natural environment was limited. One means to spread neo-Malthusianism in Spain from 1904 to 1914 was the magazine *Salud y Fuerza, Procreación consciente y limitada* (*Health and Strength: Conscious, Limited Procreation*), with debates on the advisability of restricting fertility in light of colonial militarism, overseas migration and the condition of sexual slavery in which proletarian women found themselves,

Portugal

Just as in Spain, the idea of restricting the working class birth rate in Portugal arrived in around 1900 in the working-class media and some medical sectors. From 1902, neo-Malthusianism began to be propagated by a physician who sympathised with anarchism, Ângelo Vaz. Starting in 1905, the working class press from Oporto included neo-Malthusian

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ideas by translating publications by the Spaniard Luis Bulffi persecuted in Spain. The first Portuguese translation of the booklet *Huelga de Ventres: Medios prácticos para evitar las familias numerosas* (*Womb Strike: Practical Means for Avoiding Large Families*) was published with the title *Greve de Ventres*. From Oporto, neo-Malthusianism – united with the International Neo-Malthusian Federation – radiated out to Lisbon and Setubal, and then spread to the rest of Portugal. Unlike in Spain, in Portugal there were no exclusively neo-Malthusian periodicals. *Paz e Liberdade* (*Peace and Freedom*) was eloquently subtitled as an anti-militaristic, anti-patriotic, revolutionary labour unionist, and neo-Malthusian magazine.

Similar journals were *O Agitador (The Agitator)* from Lisbon, *Germinal* from Setubal, and others, through which information was provided and contraceptive products were sold.

The reduction in the Portuguese birth rate was estimated at 18% in the five-year period from 1920 to 1924. The decrease began to be noticed in 1911. Neo-Malthusianist doctrines were a contributing factor (Livi-Bacci, 1972). The classical neo-Malthusian pattern of lower fertility in poorer than in rich sectors of society, could be found in rural southern Portugal with decreasing fertility rates in an area without industrialisation and urbanisation. Meanwhile, in Lisbon, since the 1930s the birth rate decreased to levels as in countries such as Belgium, Denmark and Finland. In Portugal, dispensing contraceptives was further penalised in 1929 after a protracted patriotic campaign by Catholic bishops and physicians (Freire and Lousada, 1982: 1367-1395).

Italy

In Italy, neo-Malthusianism began to be disseminated among the poor people at around the turn of the century. It emerged as a political response to the high infant mortality rate, forced migration and deplorable working conditions. Contraceptives were advertised and dispensed from the working class newspaper with the highest circulation in the country, *¡Avanti!*, accompanied by refutations of religious prejudices. After much propaganda in the workers' press, in 1910 the neo-Malthusians sponsored a national conference in Florence on whether the lower classes had the right to voluntarily restrict their procreation. This event marked a point of no return. More than one hundred men and women from all corners of Italy and with the most diverse ideologies took part: conservatives, revolutionaries, monarchists, anarchists, republicans, socialists and labour unionists, along with professors of medicine, teachers, scholars of sexuality, middle and elementary school teachers, Protestant pastors and Catholic priests, in addition to participation by many Italian organisations and newspapers. The conference did not reach a unanimous decision on the advisability of spreading neo-Malthusian practices among the proletariat. However, the sociologist Roberto Michels and anarchists including Secondo Giorni and the physician Luigi Berta, decided that spreading the theory and practice of neo-Malthusianism should have a high priority. The

leading book on neo-Malthusianism in Italy was published in 1911 by Secondo Giorni entitled *L'arte di non far figli (The Art of Not Making Children)*, which was illustrated with engravings that showed the application of contraceptives as taught by physicians such as Jules Barian. Many articles in the anarchist press by the neo-Malthusian doctor, Luigi Berta, provided practical information on how to voluntarily limit births, along with the reasoning behind it, especially the resistance to growing militarism. In 1911, Italy proceeded to invade Tripoli while Spain had an expansionist policy in Morocco. Neo-malthusian reasoning served to reinforce those who opposed conscription into the military service. This is one of the reasons why neo-Malthusian publications and their publicists, Giorni, Belloni and Berta in Italy, and Bulffi in Spain, were to suffer imprisonment and fines.

During this time, neo-Malthusianism was truly international. To this effect, the *Universal League of Human Regeneration* created the *International Neo-Malthusian Bureau of Correspondence and Defence* at the neo-Malthusian conference at The Hague in 1910. It was presided over by Charles Drysdale of London; Dr. J. Rutgers of Holland was named secretary, and the Frenchman Gabriel Giroud (Paul Robin's son-in-law) was named treasurer. The legal and political support provided by the International Neo-Malthusian League was decisive when challenging the persecution of neo-Malthusianism in Spain, Italy and even the United States.

Once the initial trials mentioned above were over, in 1913 neo-Malthusian leagues were created in Turin and Milan. In Florence, the anarchists founded a neo-Malthusian institute that facilitated contraceptives among workers at cost price, given the difficulties of finding them on the open market. In 1913, the specifically neo-Malthusian magazine, *L'Educazione Sessuale (Sexual Education)*, was created by Luigi Berta, Secondo Giorni, Alfredo Polledro and M. Berardelli.

Neo-Malthusianism in Italy as an organized movement persisted until 1922, even during the wartime period from 1914 to 1918. Progressive schools and public universities included sexual education and neo-Malthusian theories in their curricula. All of this took place despite the fact that after outbreak of World War I, the international neo-Malthusian league

was dismembered. With the war, the pioneers of neo-Malthusianism disappeared in Italy. Luigi Berta departed to the Austrian front as a pacifist volunteer in charge of an ambulance and was killed in September 1916. Secondo Giorni, Luigi Fabbri and others went into exile upon the advent of Fascism.

Uruguay and Argentina

Low birth rates characterised Uruguay already at the beginning of the 20th century, accompanied by the neo-Malthusian theories spread by Iberian emigrants and refugees. In Uruguay as elsewhere, neo-Malthusianism was condemned by governments that viewed the country's low birth rate as the nation's bankruptcy: the spectre of France was ever-present. The Spanish neo-Malthusian league's representatives in Montevideo and the rural regions promoted public propaganda on the neo-Malthusian theories and means, and to this end, in 1907 an anarchist committee was formed called the *Comité Neo-Malthusiano del Río de la Plata*. In Argentina, the spread of conscious procreation among the working class emerged from the arguments on living conditions and the restrictive Residence Law dating from 1902. Foreigners in Argentina were seen as the detritus that Europe expelled from its own soil. The immigrants had to put up with the accusation that they were responsible for all the country's social ills. Given the abusive working conditions existing in Argentina, the main objective the Iberian neo-Malthusians propagated in Argentina was to prevent migration. Neo-Malthusian practices gained following in the anarchist working-class centres. Women with knowledge about obstetrics such as Lola Sánchez, and the poet and painter of Cuban descent, Félix Nieves, along with the working class press, initially spread neo-Malthusianism in Argentina. This is how in 1908 in Buenos Aires, a group in favour of conscious procreation called *Pro-Salud y Fuerza* was created in association with the *International Federation of Human Regeneration*. The objectives of the group were analogous to those of the Montevideo committee and consisted of: "Spreading and disseminating scientific ideas in order to practise voluntary procreation and, using the means within its scope, contributing to social emancipation and human regeneration".

By 1911, there were already four editions of Luis Bulffi's booklet published by the working class newspaper with the highest circulation in Argentina, *La Protesta*, and neo-Malthusian propaganda had reached the country's second largest city, Rosario de Santa Fe through the neo-Malthusian library, *Libertad y Amor (Freedom and Love)*.

The authorities of the day became concerned when the number of immigrants began to decrease on the eve of World War I. New generations of proponents of neo-Malthusianism emerged independently in Argentina. The development of neo-Malthusianism was tied to the secular nature of the society. Thus, much later, when in 1940 marriage rates increased and nevertheless birth rates decreased in the federal capital, the responsibility for this was attributed to neo-Malthusianism by *Acción Católica Argentina*, which at the same time attempted to once again uproot it in the name of Catholic morals in order to overcome the "suicide of the white race" and the bankruptcy of the nation. Nevertheless, it has been demonstrated that wherever neo-Malthusian practices are introduced, a return to past demographic models does not happen easily.

Cuba

Some of the first neo-Malthusian groups in Latin America can be found in Cuba. Since the turn of the century, the neo-Malthusian publications from Barcelona had been broadly distributed on the island. In 1907, the *Sección neo-Malthusiana de Cuba*, part of the *International Federation of Human Regeneration*, was founded in Havana. Since they were scattered all over the island, the Iberian immigrants led to the presence of neo-Malthusianism in small cities, too, such as Cienfuegos and Manzanillo. Through the widespread practice of readings in the tobacco factories, many neo-Malthusian works which ideologically went beyond mere birth control, were shared. With its publication, *Pro-Vida (Pro-Life)*, Cuban neo-Malthusianism made significant contributions to the debates at that time. From this publication, a significant grass-roots vegetarian and naturalist movement developed which attempted to raise the Cuban population's awareness against fictitious needs and for social justice. Theosophers, spiritualists, Masons, socialists and anarchists all took part in this movement.

Ecological discourses of Neo-Malthusianism

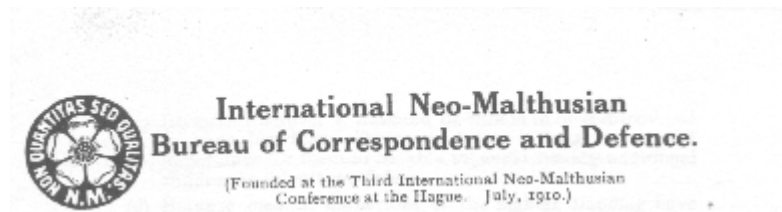
The neo-Malthusians of 1900 often discussed the carrying capacity of the Earth, as many other authors did at the time (Martinez-Alier, 1987, chapters on Pfaundler and Ballod-Atlanticus, and Cohen, 1995), framing the question as “how large a world population could be fed”. Thus, Paul Robin’s son-in-law, Gabriel Giroud, wrote a pessimistic book on *Population et Subsistances* published in Paris in 1904. The answers were not conclusive. Today the question must be asked in a different way: how large a human population can be fed and live sustainably at an acceptable standard of living, provided that at least 50 or 60 per cent of biomass production is not preempted for human use?

The balance between population and natural resources was one of the concerns of the neo-Malthusians. They were aware as the world population reached two billion people in 1914 that the depletion of resources such as coal, iron and fertile agricultural land was a problem that would take some time to emerge, but one that future generations would be forced to face. Others had faith in the technological progress which would come about in the future, providing a solution to “the disorderly growth of the human species” (UASE, 1913: 20-26). Most neo-Malthusians acknowledged that they did not know the limits of the Earth’s potential to produce, and they recognised advances made in the field of chemistry for fertilizers and hoped for advances to be made for obtaining food. A general opinion was that the growing population on the planet could produce enough for its well-being, were it not for capitalism. However, if population growth continued, limiting birth rates would end up being necessary regardless of which social system prevailed.

The availability of energy was for some a concern at the time. Some foresaw a world population that would reach a maximum of five billion inhabitants by the end of the 20th century (Antich, 1931:28). The means of transport and machinery known at that time could not meet the needs of a world population of that size. There were disagreements between neo-Malthusian anarchists such as Sébastien Faure and anti-Malthusian anarchists such as Kropotkin who believed that food supply could increase enormously through greenhouse

agriculture, as shown in the islands of Guernsey and Jersey - he was criticized by Popper-Lynkeus (1912), himself a proto-ecological economist and a neo-Malthusian social reformer, because Kropotkin had forgotten to calculate the energy requirement for heating the greenhouses.

Such neo-Malthusianism re-opened a discussion on natural resources and the population. What is more, neo-Malthusians were antagonistic toward the submission of other lands and cultures in order to secure resources (Giorni, 1922). However, at the same time they were described as being anti-socialist because they wanted merely to reduce the size of the proletarian families. Some of their critics believed that the greater the number of poor people, the sooner revolution would take place – to which the neo-Malthusians responded that revolution based on misery would be an utter failure.



Neo-Malthusianism in India?

Anandhi S's work on early birth control debates in Tamil Nadu (Anandhi S., 1998), traces a contrast between those who saw women as merely “reproductive bodies” and those who saw women as “sexual bodies” with a right to freedom. Forgetting the feminist component in Neo-Malthusianism, Anandhi S. considers “Neo-Malthusianism” a patriarchal and right-wing word, as do Mohan Rao (Rao, 1994) and some historians (Ramusack, 1989). Anandhi S. claims with persuasive evidence that the Neo-Malthusians of Madras in 1890-1930 were almost all upper class, upper caste men, worried about the excessive reproduction of the

lower orders. They said that excessive fertility was a cause of poverty, thus “blaming the victims”. Also, the Neo-Malthusians had eugenic preoccupations. The connections to the world Neo-Malthusian movement are unclear. For instance, Murugesu Mudaliar (who apparently lived in London) was the Madras member of the international Neo-Malthusian movement since 1880 but we remain in the dark concerning his political views. Annie Besant was living in Madras at the turn of the century, and she was internationally known by her public defence in London in 1877 of Neo-Malthusianism. However, she appears not to have been a central figure on the debates on birth control in India.

So, top-down, male Neo-Malthusians saw women as “reproductive bodies”. In this they coincided with the currents *opposed* to Neo-Malthusianism, which also saw women as pure “reproductive bodies”. Anandhi S. traces here a distinction between two currents, the Hindu Nationalists and the Gandhians. The Hindu Nationalists opposed birth control for two reasons. First, they wanted more citizens for a future independent India. Second, they opposed birth control because the control of women’s sexuality required by the endogamic caste system negated women’s freedom to control their own reproduction. Contraception allowed more sexual freedom, and this was dangerous to the caste system.

The Gandhians, from the 1920s onwards, and Gandhi himself in his private and public life as explained in his *Autobiography*, were concerned about the increase of population. Earlier in his life Gandhi had defended the right of Neo-Malthusians who preached contraception to express their views in the Vegetarian Society of London of which he was secretary while studying law. He himself, however, believed in celibacy (*brahmacharya*). After having four children, he imposed celibacy on himself and his wife. Anandhi S. argues with reason that Gandhian doctrine is consistent with the view of women as pure “reproductive bodies”. Women’s sexual desires were neglected, made invisible, sacrificed. Gandhi, when interviewed by Margaret Sanger in 1932, still opposed “artificial” birth control.

From early Neo-Malthusian debates and from the nationalist and socialist ferment, there arose in Tamil Nadu in the 1920s and 1930s a more radical perspective proposed by E. V. Ramaswamy Periyar, who was explicitly anti-caste and against the Brahminical control of

women's sexuality. Periyar broke away from the Indian National Congress and formed the Self-Respect Movement in 1926. He developed a political philosophy against caste and religion, in favour of freedom for women. His politics was framed by a search for free and equal citizenship for different social groups (Anandhi S., 1998, p. 159). So, he fought against race, caste and gender inequalities, and he preached birth control. The international Neo-Malthusian movement studied in the present article aimed to diminish poverty and to conserve natural resources, and to promote women's freedom. Periyar focused also on women's freedom, explicitly arguing against Hindu religious notions of purity of blood and consequent control over women's sexuality.

It might be possible to trace the influence of the early Neo-Malthusian debates and the Self-Respect Movement on today's lower birth rates in south India as a whole. Thus, when attempting to explain the low birth rate in Tamil Nadu, Zachariah and Rajan (1997, pp.27-28) notice that education levels for women are low (compared to Kerala), and poverty is high, so perhaps political will and the social reform movements initiated by Periyar have played a role in the demographic transition.

Among feminists today, the very idea of neo-Malthusianism appears abhorrent. In India there has been a high reliance on female sterilization, although Indira Gandhi also promoted mass male sterilization (with politically counterproductive effects). Research shows that a declining fertility rate because of female sterilization is linked in India (with the well known exception of Kerala and other states) to greater female infanticide (because of the preference for male children). Moreover, sterilized women are subject to greater physical abuse by insecure husbands. Women who will not have children get perhaps less food at home than otherwise (Krishnaraj et al., 1998). Such consequences of birth control arise because of gender-biased cultural values and not because of birth control itself. However, there is no denying that such state-imposed population policies are not at all inspired by the feminist movement, and that their consequences are terrible from a feminist perspective, and from a general humanist perspective. On the contrary, it is well understood among scholars in India that "engendering population policy involves moving beyond family planning to focus on changes in social structure that would allow women to make marital and fertility choices free

of social or economic constraints” (Desai, 1998: 49). Notice here, as Periyar had said, that lack of freedom in “marital choices” goes together with lack of freedom in “fertility choices”. Notice also that India has a population density as high as the most densely populated European countries (Caldwell, 1998). How large will India’s ecological footprint become, as its large population hopefully achieves a higher standard of life?

Among environmentalists in India, one current definition of neo-Malthusianism is that it is a doctrine that sees “sheer excess in human numbers” as “the primary (or) sole burden on scarce resources” (D’Souza, 2003). It is true that neo-Malthusians emphasize population density, although they also take into account per capita consumption and the technologies employed. If one uses “ecological footprint” analysis (Patricia Hynes, in Silliman and King, 1999:196-9, also D’ Souza, 2003: 25), an index that translates food energy, other biomass, and fossil fuels, into spatial requirements, we see that the average Indian has an ecological footprint of nearly 0.5 ha. With a population density of 3 persons per ha, India’s ecological footprint is already larger than her territory. It is increasing fast because of population growth coupled with rapid economic growth. When appeal is made to “ecological footprint” analysis in order to emphasize wealth as the main threat to the environment, one cannot evade the importance of both consumption per capita and population density. If India went up to a European per capita ecological footprint of about 3 ha, then of course India’s footprint would grow six fold even if her population would increase no further. The importance of population density would be even better shown by HANPP, “Human appropriation of net primary production” (Haberl, Erb and Krausmann 2007).

Conclusions

While Malthus thought that improving the situation of the poor was utterly useless because it would lead to the exponential growth of their population, the neo-Malthusians of 1900 thought that Malthus was wrong. They believed that poor people could and should control births not by chastity and late marriages or by pestilence and wars, as in the Malthusian scenarios, but by contraception. This was a successful movement. They argued that, despite scientific progress, it was legitimate for the defenders of conscious procreation to set forth

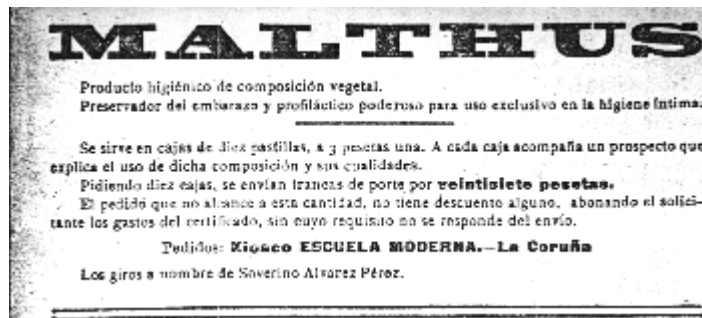
the issue of excessive population relative to resources. However, there are writers on the environment in Europe, in America and also in India, who ignore the neo-Malthusianism of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Between Malthus' *Essay on the Principle of Population* of 1798, and Paul Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb* of 1968, there were proposals and movements concerned with population and natural resources which cannot be left aside.

European fertility came down *not* because of state policies, but *against* state policies. Democratic governments in Europe forbade neo-Malthusian activism as late as the 1920s, and Fascist governments even later. Between 1865 and 1945, the Prussian, and later the German state wanted more soldiers to fight the French, and vice-versa. The French state, which had done so much for the depopulation of France in 1914-1918, patriotically forbade the neo-Malthusian movement in 1920 (Ronsin, 1980:83-84). In European history, the words "state population policy" meant attempts to increase population by increasing the birth rate. In America, it meant increasing the immigration of populations of suitable origins. Recent interventions in China and elsewhere have changed the meaning of "state population policies". The science of demography was sponsored in France by populationist governments, producing fervent anti-Malthusian scholars such as Alfred Sauvy still after 1945. Demographers have usually been silent on ecology ("this is not my department"), and it fell on a biologist such as Ehrlich to rise stridently again in 1968 the population-environment question given the silence (in the best of cases) not only of demographers but also of many economists. As was the case in the early 20th century, the alarm raised by Ehrlich and others influenced behaviours, this time beyond Europe and the United States.

Thus, it is a common place to say that Julian Simon was an anti-Malthusian economist of the late 20th century who saw in a growing population a stimulus to economic growth, while his opponent, Paul Ehrlich, is a noted "neo-Malthusian". Currently, in some circles any concern for the imbalance between natural resources and human demography is still suspected of being backed by contemporary neo-imperialism (Rao, 1994), while neo-Malthusians emphasize that increased agricultural production has been achieved at the cost of excessive energy inputs, loss of biodiversity and increased pollution, being unsustainable. Moreover, Malthus' concern with human subsistence should be supplemented by concern for the

reduced space left to other species because of human population growth and because of the use of agro-fuels.

As we have seen, around 1900, social radicals, including radical feminists, were in favour of limiting population growth, with three main arguments: women's freedom, the downward pressure of excessive population on wages, and the threat to the environment and human subsistence. Loss of wilderness was less emphasized than food scarcity, and in this they were truly Malthusian. Two other arguments were added in the European and American context of one hundred years ago: anti-militarism, and resistance to migration overseas.



Source: *Solidaridad Obrera*. Barcelona, n. 484, 1917.

True, top-down neo-Malthusian policies inspired and legitimized by the image of the “population bomb” have caused in recent years many forced sterilizations and large-scale female infanticide in some countries, and they threaten small surviving ethnic groups. However, as we have seen, one hundred years ago in Europe and America, *the* original neo-Malthusian movement opposed Malthus’ view that poverty was due to overpopulation rather than social inequality, and simultaneously fought successfully for limiting births by exercising women’s reproductive rights (to use today’s language), appealing sometimes also to ecological arguments of pressure of population on resources. There was an awareness that population growth might have negative effects, its consequences were anticipated.

In Table 1 the main characteristics of the different varieties of Malthusianism and neo-Malthusianism in the last two hundred years are summarized.

Table 1 - Varieties of Malthusianism

MALTHUSIANISM	Human populations would grow exponentially unless checked by war and pestilence, or by the unlikely restraint of chastity and late marriages. Food would grow less than proportionately to the growth of the labour input, because of decreasing returns. Hence, subsistence crises.
NEO-MALTHUSIANISM OF 1900	Human populations could regulate their own growth through contraception. Women’s freedom was required for this, and it was desirable for its own sake. Poverty was explained by social inequality. “Conscious procreation” was required in order to prevent low wages, and pressure on natural resources. This was a successful bottom-up movement in Europe and America against States (which wanted more soldiers) and against the Catholic Church. It also appeared in South India (Periyar).
NEO-MALTHUSIANISM AFTER 1970	A top-down doctrine and practice sponsored by international organizations and some governments. Population growth is seen as one main cause of poverty and environmental degradation. Therefore States must introduce contraceptive methods, even sometimes without the populations’ (particularly women’s) prior consent.
ANTI-MALTHUSIANISM	The view that assumes that human population growth is no major threat to the natural environment, and that it is even conducive to economic growth.

Of course, environmental problems are not only population problems. From the beginning of Political Ecology (Blaikie and Brookfield, 1987) a strong distinction has been traced between population pressure on resources and production pressure on resources. Moreover, new illnesses are spreading, old illnesses coming back, and populations might decline in some African countries. All this is known, but it does not explain why the feminist movement, which supports women’s right to safe birth control and abortion (still illegal in so many

countries) as part of comprehensive health care, can forget its own historical role in the demographic transitions.

One problem in the study of neo-Malthusianism is its relations with the eugenics movement around 1910. It should be clear that neo-Malthusianism raised the proletariat's awareness about the risk of transmitting hereditary illnesses, including alcoholism, and sexual diseases that wreaked such devastation amongst the population at the time. However, southern European neo-Malthusianism rejected ties with eugenics, as expressed by the neo-Malthusian from Aragon, José Chueca, in 1914: (...) *Although they claim to pursue the same end, the regeneration of the human species, eugenics and neo-Malthusianism have no relationship whatsoever; the former is essentially bourgeois and based on false science, while the latter goes against the bourgeoisie and ranks among the things that truly belong in the realm of science; the former vainly attempts to regenerate humanity by attempting to brutally prevent certain people from reproducing, while the latter aspires to convince people to procreate consciously by affording them the means to prevent fertilisation aiding them in achieving this, since neo-Malthusianism does not wish to impose itself on anyone by violent means, nor does it wish to deny the right to love to the most lowly, the most degenerate of men (...)* (Chueca, 1914: 321-2).

Thus, one hundred years ago Malthus's pessimistic prognosis was transformed into the idea of conscious, voluntary procreation. Poor people, and especially poor women, were deemed capable of "conscious procreation". This was a feminist and proto-environmental movement. Instead, today's neo-Malthusianism of the rich considers the larger reproductive rate among the world's poor as a threat to their own environment through migration. In Hardin's case this developed into a so-called "lifeboat ethics" (Hardin 1974). Hence, the need for top-down population policies. Instead, the neo-Malthusianism of 1900 was not a doctrine imposing population policies from above. It was the opposite. In France and elsewhere, it challenged the political and religious authorities of the time through the idea of a "womb strike", and also through anti-militarism and anti-capitalism. It defended "rational feminism" (as Alexandra David put it).

Only strong-willed radicals dared preach contraception in late 19th century and early 20th century. One main figure of neo-Malthusianism in Brazil was the feminist and anarchist Maria Lacerda de Moura who wrote several books in the 1920s and 1930s, one of them entitled “Love one another, and do not multiply”. Active feminists in French neo-Malthusianism had been Marie Huot (who first used the words *la grève des ventres*) and Madaleine Pelletier, who since 1900 proposed not only contraceptives but also the legalization of abortion. She was persecuted and later confined to a psychiatric asylum, where she died in 1939. (Gordon, 1976, Ronsin, 1980, Morton, 1992, Masjuan, 2000). Among the contraceptive methods recommended by the neo-Malthusian movement in Europe and America, some were geared to women, but condoms were popular. Vasectomies were endorsed in French anarchist circles in the early 1930s - the state’s response was a court-case (Ronsin, 1980:202).

Similarly to what today is happening with climate change, where anticipation leads to action (possibly too little and too late), human demography became in Europe and America socially self-modifying, more so than it had been in other societies (except for small “primitive” groups which closely controlled reproduction). This is a good example of the reflexivity of human action in response to forecasts, predictions, or bad scenarios.

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