

UN-COMMON NATURE. NEO-MALTHUSIAN ENVIRONMENTALISM
BEFORE 1972 UN STOCKHOLM CONFERENCE

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ABSTRACT

This contribution offers an historical conceptual analysis of the population question, as it was articulated by Neo-Malthusian intellectuals G. Hardin and P. Ehrlich before 1972 UN Stockholm Conference. Starting from the conceptualization of nature by T.R. Malthus, the essay then assesses the theoretical and historical continuities and discontinuities that qualify the Twentieth century environmental reappraisal of Malthus' doctrines. In so doing, the essay also proposes a different understanding of the so-called 'Malthusian moment' that contributed to shape the birth of global environmentalism. It is argued that the political core of both Malthus' and environmental Neo-Malthusianism relates to the effort of making nature an *un-common* ground for the people, one that legitimizes social and political hierarchies. The case made by both Ehrlich and Hardin for "coercive" birth control – in polemic with women's claim for reproductive rights – is granted particular attention. Their environmental thinking conveys the idea that all people are passengers of "Spaceship Earth", while they hold different responsibilities to preserve it. Thus, the environmental revival of the Malthusian law of population reshapes the understanding of the "optimum" relation between population and resources, contributing to the formation of the scientific environment that influenced 1972 UN Conference.

Keywords: Ehrlich, Hardin, Neo-Malthusianism, Environmentalism, 1972 UN Stockholm Conference.

"On Earth, we are unmanned by our longing
for a past that never really existed [...]
On the Moon, there is no past.
There is no direction but forward"
(I. Asimov, *The Gods Themselves*, 1972)

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The *Final Report* of the 1972 United Nations Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment opened with a Declaration of the “common principles” that should guide “the peoples of the world in the preservation and enhancement of the human environment” (*Report of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment* 1973: 3). The Fifth proclamation of the document leveraged on the scientific vocabulary of population studies to pose with renovated urgency the problem of governing human reproduction:

The natural growth of population continuously presents problems for the preservation of the environment, and adequate policies and measures should be adopted, as appropriate, to face these problems. Of all things in the world, people are the most precious. It is the people that propel social progress, create social wealth, develop science and technology and, through their hard work, continuously transform the human environment (*Report of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment* 1973: 3).

Two elements of this quotation are worth noticing. First, the trend in population growth was defined as “natural”; second, while population represented a continual problem, “people” were considered “precious” as they were the ultimate basis of any expectable progress. These first lines of the UN Declaration presented a dichotomy between people and the population that provides us with a clear picture of how the “human environment” was treated during the Conference. On the one hand, population was considered on a par with natural phenomena; on the other hand, as opposed to population, “people” was not just a natural but a political factor of human progress. Thus, the contraposition between people and the population suggests that the latter was seen as weighting on the possibilities of progress inherent to the former. As it was discussed in Stockholm, the “natural growth of population” was held responsible for the limits to social wealth that people were suffering for on a global scale. To let the people be free to “propel social progress”, population must first be checked adequately.

This essay aims to present an historical-conceptual reconstruction of the political premises that lay behind the assumption that population follows a natural trend in growth, so it is to be considered one of the main causes of environment’s depletion. In doing so, it will both situate the environmental concerns about “population control” in their historical context, and advance an interpretation of the so-called *Malthusian moment* that deeply shaped discourses on the topic in the 1960s. Recent literature (Robertson 2012; Bashford, Kelly and Fennell 2020) has drawn on that formula – implicitly recalling the renowned work by John Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment* (1979) – to underline the revival of Malthus’ doctrines in environmental thinking. In their interpretation, environmentalism was one of the

many *moments* of Malthus' reappraisal. As it will be argued, while providing groundbreaking perspectives on the birth of environmentalism, these studies did not aim to advance an interpretative hypothesis on the peculiar persistence, crisscrossed by profound historical discontinuities, of Malthus' theories within the new theoretical framework established by the environmental thought (Bonasera 2022a). The works of Paul Ehrlich (1932-) and Garrett Hardin (1915-2003) are here analyzed because they aimed to reframe the political concepts of population and resources from the perspective of natural scientists engaged with the political life of their times. For them, to go back to Malthus meant to revive the political core of a theoretical enterprise which consisted in accounting the "nature" of population responsible for the hierarchies and divisions that constitute human societies. Then, instead of reducing Neo-Malthusian environmentalism to just another *moment* of Malthus' historical reappraisal, this essay analyzes it so to highlight its political core in relation to specific historical and social challenges.

The mathematical law of population first established by Malthus in 1798, and then newly elaborated over time by many social and natural scientists (Pearl 1925; Lotka 1939), inaugurated a theoretical field built on the assumption that trends in human population are subjected to natural laws. If the growth of population is natural and resources are not "illimitable", inequality of social conditions will always exist. As we will see, in rehabilitating this political core of the Malthusian theory, Hardin and Ehrlich refuted their precursor's critique of birth control and made a claim for posing limits to economic growth, as global development was to be considered environmentally unbearable. Still, both Malthus and the Neo-Malthusians polemized against natural rights, grounding their argument in the alleged ruinous effects of their potentially universal enjoyment. Both Malthus and Neo-Malthusian environmentalists affirmed that the people are destined to socially relate to nature in different ways, so they share what is called here an *un-common* nature which results in the justification of social hierarchies. It is on this theoretical terrain that "coercion" was justified as a fundamental tool to preserve the divisions that constitute "Spaceship Earth". It is also on this terrain that, as it will be argued, Neo-Malthusianism connected with the then ascending neoliberal thought by making it visible the pivotal, although hidden role played by institutional intervention in securing social order.

While being of unprecedented historical importance for the way in which it established a worldwide attention on environmental issues (Lorenzini 2018; Borowy 2019), the 1972 UN Conference borne the weight of years of theorizations and mobilizations that had already politicized the environment (Radkau 2014). Between 1964 and 1972, Ehrlich and Har-

din – both natural scientists and prominent figures in population debates – published key works to affirm that to be understandable, the conflictual changes societies were going through had to be addressed “ecologically” and “systematically”. Thus, society had to be considered as an ecosystem. Their theories about nature’s depletion and social inequalities conveyed the idea that humanity was facing a global threat because the Earth could not “carry” a potential infinite number of people. At the time, American society was shaken by multifarious conflictual social movements: from women claiming for their reproductive rights to Afro-Americans animating the Civil Rights Movement, from students starting the Free Speech Movement to late 1960s Anti-War Movement and environmental activism, whose agenda became apparent by 1970, when the first Earth Day was organized on 22 April. At the same time, post-WWII global order was being shaken by the long process of decolonization that went hand in hand with rising expectations of wellbeing nurtured by people in the so-called UDCs (Under-Developed Countries). To understand society “ecologically” meant to measure people’s expectations of social equality, of wellbeing, of ending patriarchal and racist violence, of environmental preservation, and of peace against their alleged unfeasibility. This equaled to find new theoretical tools to naturalize the political and global context they lived in; being it remarkably different from that of their predecessor, this enterprise required an original re-elaboration of Malthus’ concepts.

The first paragraph introduces the political problems and concepts that constituted Malthus’ theory of population and highlights the pillars of the Twentieth-century environmental revival of his ideas. The following part of the essay places Ehrlich’s and Hardin’s major works in their historical context to show how they made a case for birth control in open polemic with the politicization of reproductive rights brought up by the feminist movement. With their critique of the “commons”, of “rights”, and of development policies Ehrlich and Hardin advanced the idea that people’s expectations had to be reassessed to prevent Earth’s collapse. Finally, the last section presents conclusive remarks on the normative, political, and scientific scope of the analyzed application of natural sciences to the social field.

1. FROM THE “FEAST” TO THE “SPACESHIP”

In his entire career, Thomas Robert Malthus (1766-1834) never drew on the language of the environment. Still, with his reconceptualization of nature as limited he inaugurated a theoretical and political field that will then be crossed by influential exponents of environmental thought (Jonsson 2013; Charbonnier 2020). Notably, Malthus made the interplay between

man and nature a fundamental political issue without intending to raise attention on the impending depletion of natural resources. Rather, he leveraged on two postulates – “food is necessary” and “the passion between the sexes is necessary” (Malthus 2008 [1798]: 12) – and on a mathematical correlation derived from them – “population, when unchecked, increases in a geometrical ratio. Subsistence increases only in an arithmetical ratio” (*ibid.*: 13) – to establish the legitimacy of the social inequality much contested in his revolutionary times. As important studies in the history of demography have proven, when Malthus first published his theory of population the actual inhabitants of Great Britain had gone from being six million, to be nine million in less than fifty years (Wrigley and Schofield 1981). Nonetheless, Malthus’ problem was never to assess “overpopulation” *per se*; as he himself stated: “in no state that we have yet known has the power of population been left to exert itself with perfect freedom” (Malthus 2008 [1798]: 15). So, if population had never really outstripped the limits of existing resources, the principle of population was a formal hypothesis built to convey an important political principle: “no possible form of society could prevent the almost constant action of misery upon a great part of mankind” (*ibid.*: 21). On this basis Malthus could build his attack – soon to become a classic argument to criticize any positive regulation or amelioration of poverty – to the Poor Laws and their reformation (Poynter 1969: 43-63). Thus, to assess Malthus’ theories as a mere chapter in the history of demography (Petersen 1979) bears the risk to miss their political scope, which can be appreciated once the author is placed in his historical context and the Malthusian definition of “nature” is taken into due consideration (Winch 2013; Mayhew 2014; O’Flaherty 2016).

At the apex of the wave of popular radicalism that invested both sides of the Channel in the aftermath of the French Revolution, which also spurred the publication of works such as Thomas Paine’s *The Rights of Man* (1791), Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1791), William Godwin’s *Enquiry on Political Justice* (1793), and Jean-Marie Antoine Nicolas de Caritat, marquis de Condorcet’s *Sketch for An Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind* (1795), Malthus published a polemic pamphlet to counter the idea that either reform or revolution could turn the lot of the people for the better. With the *Declaration of the Rights of Men and of the Citizen* of August 1789, the doctrine of rights – harnessed as a political weapon by the French people – had shown the potential power to turn upside down the historical course of a monarchy as old as the British one. At the same time, in Great Britain the claim for rights – mainly to vote and to subsist – rapidly became the watchword of many radical associations. Occasionally, the popular expectations for better living condition and institutional reform took the shape of open social unrest, as in the case of the

mass mobilization in front of the British Parliament happened on the 29th of October, 1795. In that occasion, no less than twenty thousand people sieged the Parliament at the cry of “Down With George. No King, No Pitt, No War!” and “Bread! Bread! Peace! Peace!”,¹ and a bullet hit the convoy of King George III. The climate of tension that characterized the political life of the Kingdom in the 1790s is well exemplified by the numerous repressive Acts that William Pitt’s government adopted to cope with rising “unsocial” behaviors (Thompson 2013 [1963]; Linebaugh 2006). As Malthus argued in an unpublished paper of 1796 – significantly entitled *The Crisis – “the objections”* of the people “to our Constitution” were like an unbearable “weight” that was putting at risk the stability of social order (Malthus 1837 [1796]: 479). To remove the “weight” of the excessive expectations of wellbeing nourished by women and men, and “save the Constitution” they were endangering with their political protagonism, he recast a longstanding tradition of thought on human progress by making scarcity the necessary outcome of the interaction between man and nature. As the natural law of population implied, if nature is miser and limited some people will always struggle to subsist; thus, their actual possibility of better living conditions did not depend on a radical overthrow of political order. Though “human institutions”, as Malthus argued,

Appear to be the obvious and obtrusive causes of much mischief to mankind, yet in reality they are light and superficial, they are mere feathers that float on the surface, in comparison with those deeper-seated causes of impurity that corrupt the springs and render turbid the whole stream of human life (Malthus 2008 [1798]: 75).

According to the principle of population, the people should turn their attention to the “lesson of scarcity” that nature constantly teaches. So, after having discovered that poverty was the main political issue of his time – as the poor were repeatedly “weighting” on the Constitution with their large numbers – Malthus naturalized that condition by making it the unquestionable effect of a scientific law. This political and theoretical move will then prove of great historical importance, as it marked a long-lasting shift in the conceptualization both of nature and space as limited, and of population as an object of political government (Dean 1991; Bashford 2014). With Malthus, nature not only stopped being the “generous mother” that furnished people with abundant resources to valorize – as the classical liberal paradigm had established since John Locke’s theory of property (Dunn 1969; Winch 1996; Fiori 2003; Di Sciullo 2013) –, but it started naming the normative frame-

¹ The Report of the day is now available at: <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/truth-and-treason-or-a-narrative-of-the-royal-procession-to-the-house-of-peers-october-the-29th-1795> (accessed September 4, 2023).

work of politics (La Vergata 1990). Because politics expressed a potential disorder, Malthus reframed it in terms of natural, thus inescapable unequal order (Pesante 1997; Bonasera 2022b). In polemic with the popular and radical use of the doctrines of natural equality and rights, Malthus conceptualized nature as having rigid laws that left small power to command subsistence to most of the people, and no right at all to pretend what was simply lacking:

A man who is born into a world already possessed, if he cannot get subsistence from his parents on whom he has a just demand, and if the society do not want his labour, has no claim of *right* to the smallest portion of food. [...] At nature's mighty feast there is no vacant cover for him. [...] The affair is principally of power, not of right. (Malthus 1992 [1803]: 249-250).

Besides transforming the pretense of natural, universal rights in an “affair of power” – thus denying the political legitimacy of the formers – Malthus accorded to the image of the “feast” with limited covers the task to make intelligible the social differences that nature universally prescribes, and society must always confirm. A successful formula used by William Cronon (Cronon 1995) can be recalled here to visualize the political core of this theoretical shift. In his introductory essay to *Uncommon Ground*, Cronon explained that “what each of us finds here is not One Universal Nature but the many different natures that our cultures and histories have taught us to look for and find” (*ibid.*: 57). For the author, nature is an “uncommon ground” because it is both a unique life-system, and a cultural construction. As it distributes different shares of social power to sit at its table, it is here argued that for Malthus nature is an *un-common* ground that legitimizes divisions and hierarchies, rather than presuming a shared – that is, equal – condition among women and men. In repeating Cronon’s wording, the aim here is to stress the political and social dimension – rather than the cultural one – of Malthus’ concept of nature. “From the inevitable laws of our nature, some human beings must suffer from want. These are the unhappy persons” that “in the great lottery of life, have drawn a blank” (Malthus 2008 [1798]: 85). For Malthus, people are destined to socially access to nature in hierarchical ways. The one they share, is an *un-common* nature which is theoretically built so to contrast the popular claims for natural and universal rights.

When confronted with the task to ground the cause of environmental depletion in the excessive growth of population, Ehrlich and Hardin found in Malthus both a privileged ‘interlocutor’, and an object of multiple, even controversial historical reappraisals.² As Paul and Anne Ehrlich wrote in

² Over time, many strains of thought have made population their main theoretical and political focus, often openly referring to Malthus. Birth control movements that leveraged on

1970: “Spaceship Earth is now filled to capacity or beyond and is running out of food” (Ehrlich and Ehrlich 1970: 3). The hypothesis here advanced is that the authors revived the concept of nature as an *un-common* ground notwithstanding the perception of sharing a “global community” conveyed by the metaphor of the “Spaceship” (Höhler 2016: 83). So, the *Malthusian moment* of their political doctrine consists in the reappraisal of the idea that natural limits produce undisputable social inequalities, and adequate measures must be taken according to people’s social position. To understand Neo-Malthusian thinking properly one cannot avoid facing the historical persistence of the problem to naturalize a contested social order. With the words used by Hardin in 1964:

Every year Malthus is proven wrong and is buried – only to spring back to life again before the year is out. If he is so wrong, why can’t we forget him? If he is right, how does he happen to be so fertile a subject of criticism? (Hardin 1964: 1).

Ehrlich’s and Hardin’s attempt to answer these questions cannot be overlapped altogether; still, their works are here read in parallel as they both argued for adopting governmental solutions to check the “natural growth” of population, which was the only cause of both excessive global pollution, and rising social unrest. Leveraging on an amount of data and scientific disciplines that could not be known by their predecessor, they argued that the argument started by Malthus was the most impelling ever as it could help reframe the political issues of their time (Mayhew 2016).

The political problem that Ehrlich and Hardin aimed to address had been synthetized in 1953 by the then exponent of the US Democratic Party Adlai Stevenson; in an article written for the Journal “Look” – one which Paul and Anne Ehrlich will quote in 1970 – Stevenson had affirmed that

we live in an era of revolution – the revolution of rising expectations. In Asia, the masses now count for something. Tomorrow, they will count for more. And, for better or for worse, the future belongs to those who understand the hopes and fears of masses in ferment. The new nations want independence [...] the people

Malthus’ theory, refuting its “moral code”, started in England in the 1830s (HIMES 1936); Herbert Spencer and Charles Darwin, founders of evolutionism through selection, both started their enquiries from Malthus’ law of population (CLAEYS 2000); at the end of the Nineteenth century, ‘Malthusian Leagues’ were founded all over Europe and North America, influencing both State policies and scientific eugenicist and racial theories of birth selection (LEDBETTER 1976; SOLOWAY 1978; CASSATA 2015). At the same time, Malthus’ theories have always been an object of fierce contestations and unexpected appropriations. While highlighting the historical continuities that constitute Neo-Malthusianism, the risk to treat ‘Neo-Malthusianism’ as a conceptual tradition devoid of internal ruptures and tensions must be avoided.

want respect, and something to eat every day. And they want something better for their children (Stevenson 1953: 46).

These words contained key elements of historical prognosis (Koselleck 2004 [1979]) that twenty years later could be leveraged on to argue for urgent political solutions. Firstly, Stevenson had stressed how the problem of Russian communism was made more urgent by the existence of rising “masses” of people who had “rising expectations” of independence and subsistence and who nurtured a rising desire of wellbeing. This incremental and future-oriented character of human expectations was considered so politically dangerous to require a strict scientific explanation of why it was destined to be frustrated. In this sense, the ‘natural’ truth contained in the law of population provided a solid argument to counter the idea that the future may reserve possibilities beyond what can be deduced from the present. As Anne and Paul Ehrlich stated,

The ‘have-nots’ of the world are in an unprecedented position today: they are aware of what the ‘haves’ enjoy. Magazines, movies, transistor radios, and even television have brought them pictures of our way of life. [...] Naturally, they want to share our affluence. They have what Adlai Stevenson called ‘rising expectations’. But, a few simple calculations show that they also have plummeting prospects (Ehrlich and Ehrlich 1970: 3).

Biology, ecology, agronomy, statistics, demography, human geography, and computer science were all contributing to provide society with a scientific knowledge of the limits those expectations were doomed to encounter. According to Hardin, the environmental reappraisal of the Malthusian law of population had to be part of a broad scientific effort to synthesize many disciplinary approaches to the gigantic problem to navigate amid “a maelstrom”, i.e., “to exorcise the devils of disorder” recognizing that once “in the middle of some sort of a revolution”, past knowledge is of only partial use (Hardin 1969: v). Being a trained biologist, Hardin went on comparing social changes to physiological or pathological processes that science must be able to grasp. For him, “conflict” was caused by “heterogeneity” and “diversity” and their polemic force was the symptom of a detachment between individuals needs and social demands that science was having trouble to diagnose. If collective, anti-systemic initiatives exacerbated the gap between social normative codes and people’s expectations of wellbeing, then science had the daunting task to mend the fabric of society by making it visible what could be accomplished, and what was out of reach. The image of the Earth as a “Spaceship” launched into open space conveyed the idea that the Planet is limited, and that even if all the people are part of its community, their actual heterogeneous conditions cannot be over-

come, but must adjust to the fact that “space is no escape” (Hardin 2009 [1968]: 244). In the same years in which many social thinkers were coming to terms with the need to rethink the foundations of political authority to cope with its material and symbolic contestation (Cento 2023), environmental concerns combined with Malthusian legitimization of nature-based social inequalities attempted to grant society a justification of both its systemic character, and its much needed “ecological” transformation.

2. AN “UNSUSTAINABLE” AMOUNT OF RIGHTS

Most of us are poorer than we realize. Hidden costs are accruing all the time; and because we tend to ignore them, we tend to overstate our incomes [...] Thomas Hobbes said that in the state of nature the life of man was nasty, brutish and short. In the state of modern civilization it has become nasty, brutish and long (Samuelson 1969).

Implicit in the treatment of economic development – so it went one of the pillars of the Neo-Malthusian argument – was the idea that all the people in the world would have one day enjoyed the American standard of living. With this polemic target in mind, Paul Samuelson – prominent economist and population theorist – reminded the old Hobbesian maxim about the melancholic human life in the state of nature. Improvements in healthcare and living standards had made civilized life long enough to revive the problem to safely afford and comfortably enjoy the products of human industry. Notably, to apply the conditions of the Hobbesian state of nature to the description of modern civilization Samuelson broadened the spectrum of the “costs” implicit in the act of purchasing goods. For Hobbes, nature was not avid of resources *per se*, but their natural enjoyment was made unsafe by the lack of laws regulating possession (Macpherson 1962). Following an idea first established by Malthus, for Samuelson the limitedness of non-renewable resources was an unavoidable “hidden cost” that weighted on market economy. Longer expectations of life meant more people consuming increasing amounts of limited resources, a perverse dynamic that was making people’s life “nasty” and “brutish” under the banner of economic growth. On this terrain, both Malthus and the Neo-Malthusians made demographic trends a key variable of social wealth, international peace, and Earth’s health.

For decades, the watchword of development had served the goal to regulate the progressive decay of large Empires, and then to legitimize the persistence of economic subjugation of former colonies to the more ‘advanced’ and ‘civilized’ countries (Rist 2002; Lorenzini 2019). Nonetheless,

at the end of the 1960s – a decade which had witnessed the foundation of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), whose aim was to furnish guidance to improve member states' economic performances – the principle of global development was widely put on the stand, and the environmental argument proved to be effective in showing the limits of development policies (Macekura 2015; Schmelzer 2016). Increasing troubles in securing global order and capital accumulation through international aids and welfare policies brought Western economies to a theoretical and material shift towards neoliberalism (Arrighi 1994; Connolly 2009). After having served as a fundamental international tool to check the advance of communism by “modernizing” the so-called Third World, at the end of the 1960s critics of quantitative development as a rational measure of economic success and social stability multiplied on the side of both economists, diplomats, and intellectuals (Jolly, Emmerij and Weiss 2009), and social movements or trade unions. Even the Final Declaration of Stockholm Conference mirrored the ongoing shift by coupling the word “development” with a variety of adjectives – “social”, “environmental”, “rural” – that qualified the only kinds of development deemed globally affordable. In this historical passage of changing capitalistic relations, the Neo-Malthusian discourse on scarce resources presented itself also as a theory of international relations between the “North” and the “South” (Robertson 2014; Garavini 2009). As noticed by Selcer 1972 UN Conference was the culmination of prolonged theoretical and political efforts – to which Neo-Malthusian intellectuals largely contributed – to entangle environmental concerns with the goal of equilibrium in demographic and economic trends (Selcer 2018). For Hardin and Ehrlich, to argue in favor of equilibrium meant to openly criticize the ideal of global development, i.e., to state that “development” must always reproduce “underdevelopment”. While the relation between the “North” and the “South” within the human environment happened to be a hard problem to solve in Stockholm (Sörlin and Paglia 2022), “coercive” birth-control was the main solution Neo-Malthusians envisaged to reach the goal of equilibrium, especially in poor countries. As the watchword of “birth control” was being politicized collectively by women claiming for the right to choose on their own bodies, Neo-Malthusians made global poverty, “under-development”, and environmental damages the effect of large numbers. Namely, the effect of *un-common*, unescapable nature.

In 1965, US President Lyndon B. Johnson addressed the nation arguing that “five dollars invested in population control is worth one hundred dollars invested in economic growth”. Then, large-scale national and international schemes were promoted to encourage the technological limiting of births by means of contraceptive pills and surgical sterilizations

(Murphy 2012). The alterability of human reproductive trends became a planetary political issue. In 1968, male exponents of the Black Unity Party in Peekskill, N.Y., urged black women not to take the pill as it was part of the “system’s method of exterminating Black people here and abroad [...] when we produce children, we are aiding the REVOLUTION in the form of NATION building”. With these words, they recognized that behind the plans to “alleviate poverty” national organizations were pursuing the racist target to “put rigid birth-control measures into every black home” to “cure American internal troubles” (*Birth Control Pills and Black Children*).³ This letter opened a field of tension and confrontation within the party, as the “black sisters” did not hesitate to respond advocating the right to choose on their own bodies (Baritono 2018). As stated by Patricia Robinson,

In a capitalist society, all power to rule is imagined in male symbols and, in fact, all power in a capitalist society is in male hands [...] Women have become the largest oppressed group in a dominant, male, aggressive, capitalistic culture [...] Already the poor black woman demands the right to have birth control, like middle class black and white women. [...] She allies herself with the have-nots in the wider world and their revolutionary struggles (Robinson 1968).

Robinson chose to focus on the capitalistic and patriarchal dominion that divided society to show that even the desired “black Nation” would be criss-crossed by social and sexual differences, as not all black women shared the same position in society, even less so did black men and women. Signaling a plausible political connection with the struggles of the “have-nots in the wider world”, the author highlighted both the partial position occupied by “black poor women” in society, and their possibility to advance a structural critique of capitalism and patriarchy against both white racist schemes to impose birth control on black women worldwide, and black men’s attempt to pursue “Nation building” at the expense of women’s right to choose. In those years, “birth control” became both a polemic claim for women collectively affirming their right not to be “exploited as sex objects, breeders”⁴ (Redstocking 1969; Echols 1989), and the object of international policies – urged by organizations such as the *Zero Population Growth*, founded by Paul Ehrlich in 1968 – that, as Gayatri Spivak noted, “in complicity with patriarchy put the blame for the exhaustion of the world’s resources between the legs of the poorest women of the South” (Spivak 1999: 416; Rudan 2020: 172).

Given that “population, as Malthus said, naturally tends to grow ‘geometrically’”, Hardin argued that it is a “moral” duty to work against that

³ ROBINSON (1968).

⁴ REDSTOCKINGS (1969).

natural tendency to reach “an optimum population” and limit the occasions for conflict and social unrest (Hardin 2009 [1968]: 245). To accomplish the target of a relative equilibrium between population and resources, Hardin and Ehrlich claimed for the necessity to recur to any technological tool available to check population growth among those people who could not afford their subsistence. In his famous work *The Tragedy of the Commons*, Hardin started the argument by questioning the Smithian assumption that individual interests tend to meet the public ones. Specifically, Hardin was sure that “natural” limits had to be translated into social ones by putting an end to welfare policies, as it would happen in succeeding decades (Cooper 2017):

If each human family were dependent only on its own resources; if the children of improvident parents starved to death; if, thus, overbreeding brought its own ‘punishment’ to the germ line – then there would be no public interest in controlling the breeding of families [...] To couple the concept of freedom to breed with the belief that everyone born has an equal right to the commons is to lock the world into a tragic course of action (Hardin 2009 [1968]: 249).

Resembling the words used by Malthus in 1803 (Malthus 1992 [1803]: 261), Hardin aimed to reverse the “unbearable” process of granting rights, allowances, and demanding to families the responsibility of the reproductive choices therein made by women and men. He then argued for the introduction of “some sort of coercion” which would not be “perfect”, just “preferable” to the alternative of the “commons”, namely to the alternative of letting the reproductive field open to individual actions unaware of their social costs (Hardin 2009 [1968]: 251). The only principle that mattered was that “injustice is preferable to total ruin” (*ibid.*: 252). By treating birth control as part of the issues connected to the management of the commons, Hardin assessed sex as just another form of market relations. The environmental *tragedy* connected to a misuse of the commons did not only depend on the possible abolition of private property; for Hardin, the word “commons” encompassed all the fields where detrimental consequences for society could follow from individual actions. Here lied his reversal of Adam Smith’s doctrine of the “invisible hand”, which grounded the “natural” coincidence of personal and public interests exactly in the unexpected consequences of individual actions (Locher 2020). In these years birth control was part of a variety of schemes of legislation around the world, some of them being openly coercive and authoritarian, other not (Bourbonnais 2018). What needs to be underlined is the pivotal – although mostly hidden – role Hardin consistently assigned to coercion also within democratic societies through all his intellectual career. As no “invisible hand” could stabilize the market, some sort of coercion was necessary in economic and social relations.

One year after having introduced the metaphor of “Spaceship Earth”, Ehrlich and his colleague Richard Harriman published a “manual” to survive the ecological crisis:

The change from an essentially laissez-faire attitude toward population growth to recognition of the need for national manipulation by society of population size is the critical first step toward control. It is our contention that the long-term survival of our civilization, and perhaps even of our species, depends on everyone moving from the status of passenger to that of crewman (Ehrlich and Harriman 1971: 19).

For the authors, to become “crewmen” equaled to understand that on “Spaceship Earth” people have different duties. As the present was inhabited by incomparable social conditions (Robertson 2012: 178), the concept of “optimum population” was not to be defined universally. Its content had to be measured against the practical needs of specific societies. Acknowledging the loud feminist critique of anti-abortion policies, Ehrlich and Harriman stated that “women must have control over what they may or may not do with their bodies” (Ehrlich and Harriman 1971: 25). Still, their proposal leveraged on existing economic inequalities to transform breeding from a “right”, to a “luxury”, so that only people “with money” would one day afford the cost of “overbreeding” (*ibid.*: 33). Then, when confronted with the problem to advance a set of possible solutions to check population growth in the so-called UDCs, they underlined that poor countries rich in natural resources could not exercise their “legal right to withhold resources” as the “military and economic power” of Western countries backed the international trade system that exploited those resources for capital valorization. As natural resources were unequally divided by market relations that could not be disputed, population control was the only given choice to UDCs people. “Coercion” was needed especially in those cases in which development was structurally impossible. As “voluntary exercise of restraint in relation to the commons have proven notoriously ineffective [...] one should not be instantly repelled by the term coercion” (*ibid.*: 114). So, after having recognized women’s right to interrupt pregnancy, the authors reinstated patriarchal dominion over women’s bodies as an indispensable part of a global order that had to both affirm and leverage on class and color lines.

The tension between “right” and “coercion” that constituted the political framework of both Hardin’s and Ehrlich’s thought is peculiar to their Neo-Malthusian position; at the same time, it established an unexpected connection with the then ascending neoliberal school of thought. While stating that society is the outcome of a “spontaneous order” theoretically incompatible with coercion (Hayek 2012 [1973]; Ventresca 2019), Hayek’s support for both Augusto Pinochet’s regime in Chile in 1973, and

then Jorge Videla's dictatorship in Argentina in 1976 (Farrant, McPhail and Berger 2012; Ricciardi 2020), proved the practical consistency of authoritarianism with the neoliberal goal of preserving social and political order. Furthermore, the Hardinian "tragedy" was to become a key reference for neoliberal promotion of privatization as the best tool to manage "scarce" resources (Locher 2013). In the hands of Ehrlich and Hardin, the environment became a normative principle to reaffirm – in times in which politics took the shape of social movements and collective initiatives aimed to radically change the social system – an unbridgeable political distance between the individuals and the objects of their expectations. In this perspective, the *Malthusian moment* of their political discourse made the hidden pillars of social order visible and reverberating in the neoliberal program notwithstanding specific differences in economic doctrines.

3. THE GRAVITATIONAL FIELD

1972 Stockholm Conference catalyzed popular attention and scientific investigations in the many issues related to the environment, boosting the conception that man both depends on the functioning of the Planetary system, and is in charge to take care of it. Climate science started enjoying much more attention and funding, as two things were getting clearer and clearer: first, that climate change was a key factor in the up-scaling effects of environmental catastrophes; second, that increasing scientific understanding of environmental phenomena was needed to guide international governance toward proper actions (Warde, Robin and Sörlin 2018). Many publications raised attention on the trends in population growth, and Hardin's and Ehrlich's works contributed to shape the scientific climate that brought hundreds of nations to meet in Stockholm. There, how to check population growth happened to be one of the most divisive subjects of discussion, especially as the so-called UDCs were not eager to renounce to development policies. In fact, during the Conference "the priority of developing countries was development. Until the gap between the poor and the rich countries was substantially narrowed, little progress could be made in improving the human environment" (Report 1973: 46). This agenda openly contrasted with that of delegates who thought it fruitless to discuss "development and environment" unless "the rate of population increase was reduced" (*Report of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment* 1973: 47). Under the influence of Neo-Malthusianism, the relation between population and resources became a global issue of governance that came to be durably associated with that of economic development, as proven by both the famous *Limits to Growth* report published by the Club of Rome

in late 1972 (Schmelzer 2017), and the focus on *Population Issues and Development* chosen for the Third World Population Conference happened in Bucharest on August 1974. Notably, this Neo-Malthusian stress on the environmental relation between population and resources will also be influential in shaping other strains of ecological thought, as it is the case of degrowth theories (Latouche 2006) which openly trace their origin to the 1972 Meadows Report while put responsibility to invert the ecological crisis on human consumptions rather than on biological reproduction.

Hardin and Ehrlich leveraged on multiple scientific and political traditions of thought to establish population's "natural" impact on the environment. In this sense, the title chosen by the Ehrlichs for their major work, *Population, Resources, Environment*, is telling of the political goal of their intellectual enterprise. Despite the appearance, the three terms do not share the same theoretical level; rather, the relation they build between population and resources happens within a given environment that strictly determines the conditions of their political interplay. In this sense, one must acknowledge the role played by the application of the ecological understanding of nature as a system to social exchanges. As Paul and Anne Ehrlich wrote, the concept of ecosystem *per se* – first formulated by botanist Arthur Tansley in 1935 – emphasizes "the functional relationships among organisms and between organisms and their physical environment" (Ehrlich and Ehrlich 1970: 157). Thus, the concept provides a systemic understanding of a given *habitat*, which is the always changing outcome of the many relations that constitute it; notably, within natural sciences the definition does not contemplate a preeminence of a given system over the single organisms that constitute it. On the contrary, when applied to human society the concept of ecosystem gained a clear normative content. Namely, it started assigning to human 'organisms' specific duties and functions to accomplish in order to preserve a given, limited 'social-system'. Thus, the environmental discourse on the "hidden costs" of human expectations can be interpreted as a discourse on the hidden conditions of social and political order. The environment – as framed in the peculiar way here assessed – did not present itself as a system open to structural modifications following changing intercourses. Rather, it was a gravitational field aimed to engulf every contestation of social, hierarchical relation of power. Following Malthus seminal indications, Neo-Malthusians conceptualized the environment as the set of conditions that determines the political unfeasibility of individual and collective claims to question and challenge a racist, patriarchal, and capitalistic 'ecosystem'. Against its practical contestation, they revived the political core of the *Malthusian moment* leveraging on a new scientific understanding of how individuals and governments should bend to the possibilities accorded by the "limits" of the Earth. In doing so, they made nature

a gravitational field that attracts claims of system-change in its vortex of given, *un-common* and always already contested conditions.

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