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‘Green’ Malthus? A Bibliographical Itinerary between neo-Malthusianism and Environmentalism

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This contribution presents a bibliographical itinerary on Twentieth century environmental revival of Malthusian doctrines. After introducing both the main conceptual strains inherent to the topic, and their scientific interest the essay takes into consideration the Post-WWII emergence of global environmentalism. A survey of the texts of 1960s and 1970s exponents of Neo-Malthusian environmentalism shows the important role played by this tradition of thought in shaping environmental concerns on both the scientific and the governmental level. The itinerary ends with an analysis of the main authors and strains of enquiry that have assessed the historical and conceptual relevance of Neo-Malthusian environmentalism. It is argued that more researches into Malthus’ legacy over time could grant significant theoretical gains both for the history of political thought, and its entanglments with the history of environmentalism.

keywords: environmentalism; neo-malthusianism; garrett hardin; paul ehrlich

It only takes quick research on Scopus to realize how crucial Thomas Robert Malthus’ thought has been for scholars engaged in the topic of environment. By looking for the words “Malthus AND Environment” in the titles, abstracts and keywords of the contributions collected by the forementioned database from 1960 onward, no less than one hundred and seven documents fit the query[1]. The quantity of subject areas which have a considerable number of publications in the forementioned topic is even more impressing than the mere association of Malthus with the environmental studies. Social Sciences, Economics, Econometrics, and Finance combined account for more than half of

[1] If from the same research one excludes the term “environment”, thus looking only for publications which contain the word “Malthus” either in the title, abstract, or keywords, the results that fit the criteria on Scopus database are 1,242 (consulted on May 11, 2022).

the publications; it is also to be noted that twenty-two of them are in the Environmental Science, fifteen in Medicine, twelve in Agriculture and Biological Sciences, six in Computer Science, five in Mathematics, three in Biochemistry, and so forth. These figures show that Malthus and his analytical model of addressing the relationship between population and resources keep on being of great interest for disciplines rather distant from those in which Malthus himself engaged during his lifetime. In this bibliographical itinerary, I will not limit myself to a quantitative account of the proliferation of scientific references to Malthus in the Environmental studies; rather, I will select some influential publications in the Social and Political Sciences that have addressed the multilayered effect played by Malthusian doctrines on the ecological understanding of the social and political sphere. In doing so, I will highlight the connection between the concepts of 'limit' and 'population', which are the pillars of both Malthus' theoretical contribution, and Twentieth-century's Neo-Malthusian environmentalism.

In order to better evaluate the contemporary persistence of population concerns in environmental thinking, it is crucial to place Malthus' thought in his historical context. In the aftermath of the French Revolution, Malthus aimed to establish a 'natural' limit to population growth so to pose a political barrier to the expectations of the people. In particular, the political core of his theoretical contribution consisted in the attempt to naturalize society and its internal hierarchies: "no possible form of society could prevent the almost constant misery of a great part of mankind" (Malthus 1798, 21). The mathematical formalism of the principle of population, underpinned by a collection of statistical data of which Malthus was among the firsts to make an extensive political use, granted the author the chance to state that inequality is natural because the improvement in agricultural production cannot keep the pace of the growth in human numbers. In the alleged biological and physical truth of the principle of population, Malthus found a solid argument to delegitimize any claim for equality or well-being made by the poor. Since resources are scarce, a large portion of humanity will necessarily be excluded from enjoying them (Winch 1996; Stedman Jones 2004; O'Flaherty 2016). Consequently, a 'sustainable' population, for Malthus, had to be characterized by a diffused sense of morality among the poor, who will eventually become aware of the "limits"

imposed by nature on society, thus containing their numbers by abstaining from sex until they can provide for a family. The limit theorized by Malthus was not meant to preserve the environment from human's destructive action; still, insofar as it focused on the scarcity of resources, the Malthusian doctrine opened the space for multiple theoretical translations, the environmental one being of utmost importance as it reveals the historical persistence, crisscrossed by deep discontinuities, of the political core of Malthus' theory. When Malthus wrote his famous *Essay*, the modern concept of environment was still to be formulated. It is not by chance that Herbert Spencer, a keen reader of Malthus, will then be among the firsts to apply that concept to Social Sciences, so to define the political importance of the reciprocal interplay between man and nature (Spencer 1855). Thus, with his theory of population Malthus posed with unprecedented urgency and theoretical radicalism a set of political questions and issues that will then start to be addressed through the lexicon of environment. Moving from this articulation of the 'Malthus problem', I suggest that the analysis of Neo-Malthusian environmentalism gives the possibility to shed new light on the historical formation of environmental concepts. More specifically, this bibliographical itinerary aims to assess both the way in which the vocabulary of environmentalism has re-semantized Malthus' concepts of nature, population, and limit, and how this historical revival of Malthus' doctrine has been studied so far to suggest new possible approaches to the topic.

While the ecological crisis has pushed for a revaluation of the trajectories of thought which connect modern to contemporary ideas about the relation between humans and nature (Latour 1991; Charbonnier 2020; Chakrabarty 2021), in its genetic moment environmental thought has been deeply influenced by the Neo-Malthusian assumption that excessive global population was the main cause of nature's depletion. Writing mainly from the US in the period between the 1950s and 1970s, with an echo hearable well beyond the American borders, the Neo-Malthusians were the first to consistently connect environmental concerns with impending global political crises, thus pushing for "ecologically understand society" (Ehrlich 1970, 12). So, the authors presented in this contribution are characterized both by the way in which they leverage on Malthus' theoretical heritage to provide an environmen-

talist understanding of the main political problems of their times, and by their historical reconstruction of the forementioned 'translation' of Malthusian dictates. This environmental 'translation' of Malthus focused mainly on the issue of how to limit population growth in order to make its environmental cost sustainable for future generations, thus accounting the individuals responsible for their present unbearable condition. Notably, by doing so Neo-Malthusians inverted the economic goal of their predecessor: for Malthus, scarcity of resources was key to push for capital accumulation and economic development; during the contrasts opened up by the long process of decolonization, anti-populationist environmentalism was meant to argue against the Western political agenda of pursuing development on a worldwide scale as it was then fueling "rising expectations" of wellbeing among the people. In the first part of this note, I provide a survey of Post-WWII Neo-Malthusian environmentalism; in the second one, I address the question of how, and to which extent, those theories were introjected by governmental discourses in the 1970s. Lastly, in the third paragraph I present the most important strains of contemporary research that aim both at giving historical depth to environmental concepts, and at systematizing Neo-Malthusians' contribution to the first formation of Environmentalism as a scientific and political doctrine of our global present.

1. From the Conservation Movement to a Conservative Philosophy of the Environment

In 1948, the biologist Henry Fairfield Osborn, son of the homonymous prominent paleontologist and eugenicist, published a book entitled *Our Plundered Planet*; a few months later, his conservationist friend, William Vogt, released his *Road to Survival*, another best seller which is key to understand the Post-WWII shift that hit the Conservation movement. In the US, the late Nineteenth-century Conservation movement, led by future President Theodore Roosevelt, had built his social and political success on the idea that nature and its resources were key to the greatness of the Nation, so they must be exploited while protecting their ability to regenerate and flourish. Osborn and Vogt had been

influenced by that movement; still, they contributed to reinvent its vocabulary and scale in light of the tremendous spectacle of destruction – of both nature and human beings – constituted by the drop of the nuclear bombs in 1945 and by the collapse of the international order subsequent to the World War II (Jungk 1958). The global perspective they assumed was pivotal in transforming the environmental concerns expressed by the American Conservation movement in a political and ecological conservative doctrine of capitalist development. Notably, the two authors shared the idea that global poverty and troubled international relations were caused by the pressure of population on fundamental resources to satisfy human basic needs. In fact, as Osborn stated in 1948, for ages man "have been destroying the sources of his life", and that was causing a worldwide shortage of arable land compared with the "unprecedented" growing numbers of people: "another century like this", Osborn was sure, "and civilization will be facing its final crisis". Resources are not "illimitable", thus "the pressure of increasing populations" was the most urgent problem humanity had ever faced (Osborn 1948, 37-41). Notably, with the word "illimitable" Osborn signaled the impossibility for humans to make resources *unlimited*; i.e., to artificially produce as much as it would be necessary for growing numbers. The concept of limit was here applied to humanly produced resources, rather than to natural resources *per se*, thus signaling the social determination of the concept of 'nature'. Similarly, Vogt came to notice that "we must accept change, and adjust our lives to it, if we are to survive" in a planet that was signaling the urgency to find a new "ecological" equilibrium (Vogt 1948, xiii). The US could not build their hegemony on the promise to export industrialization and wellbeing all over the world, because this would have proved ecologically unbearable. This first Malthusian 'revival' leveraged on the alleged imminency of a crisis to disqualify any plan for international expensive growth on the grounds that the Earth is not made to satisfy everybody's needs. In other words, through an ecological account of the disruptive effects of excessive population and capitalist development, Vogt and Osborn wrote a counter-history of Western civilization and its alleged, potential, universality. On the national level, this was meant as a critique of State Keynesianism, whose main objectives were the increase in consumption and economic growth. On the international level, Osborn

and Vogt argued that development being irreversible, the only space left for political action was to prevent other countries to get to the same level of resources' exploitation reached by Western civilization. Instead of configuring itself as a part of a nationalist agenda to preserve local natural landscapes, with Vogt and Osborn environmentalism assumed a global theoretical scale (Nebbia 2013) to advance a specific political doctrine of the international division of wellbeing. In Vogt's terms, the "Malthusian trap" could then be clearly appreciated as an "ecological trap"; as a consequence, everyone had to engage in the "heavy task" of "regain ecological freedom for our civilization", first and foremost by understanding that "unless population control is included, other means to save the world are certain to fail" (Vogt 1948, 284, 264). The specification of freedom as necessarily 'ecological' is telling of the way in which environmentalism twisted a fundamental political concept. Being ecological, then, became the precondition to justify a differentiated access to freedom on a global scale.

Key to the momentum gained by Neo-Malthusians 'prophecies' of an impending crisis was the application of the concepts and the methods elaborated within the ecological science to social and political relations. Carrying capacity, ecological systemic interconnections, degradation, and limits to growth were all categories used to interpret and justify the shortages, inequalities and conflicts that characterized both international relations in general, and human societies in particular. Just like an ecosystem – in which every fact is the always-changing outcome of many interconnected chains of cause and effect – every society was seen as a stratified unity that could only be studied by proceeding from practical experience to plausible principles that account for extremely complex interdependencies. Leveraging the specific relation between nature and society that informed Malthus' political thought, Osborn and Vogt were able to formulate a theory to grasp the overall complexity of the world crisis, reducing it to one simple cause: western prosperity was to be evaluated in relation to its overall costs, and its level of depletion of limited resources was leading to a future of doom which could not be repaid, unless other countries were prevented from getting to the same level of wellbeing. Ecology, in this context, became the science which claimed to grasp the totality of the connections that man had been establishing for centuries with its social and natural

environment. As elaborated by the first wave of Neo-Malthusian environmentalism, ecology was key to renovate the tools of a critique of global development that was meant to conceal a justification of the constitutive inequalities of the world market (Connelly 2008).
Twenty years after the first alarms raised by Osborn and Vogt, anti-populationist environmentalism found new grounds in the works of Garrett Hardin and Paul Ehrlich. In the highly unstable global scenario exacerbated by the long process of decolonization and the emergence of so-called 'developing' countries during the Cold War, the resources question – coupled with that of integrating new national economies in the world market – gained an unprecedented attention. In the hands of American Neo-Malthusians such as Hardin and Ehrlich, the issue of reorganizing international economic relations, while also responding to the birth of new radical mass movements against the war and ecological devastations between the 1960s and 1970s, became part of a wider political strategy to reinvent the conditions of social order (Nixon 2012; Ricciardi 2017). Framed in a Neo-Malthusian way, the goal of ecological equilibrium was to become a persistent argument in favor of assuring political stability and security, both national and international[2].
In the age of "rising expectations" (Ehrlich, 1970, 3) of wellbeing on a world scale, determined by the growing interconnections between the so-called underdeveloped countries (UDCs) and developed countries (DCs) made possible by new technologies, Malthusian arguments on the natural limits to population growth were revived to vehicle the idea that the Earth is like a "Spaceship", and numbers must be checked to prevent it from sinking. The metaphor of the Earth as a ship (or as a "lifeboat", as Hardin suggested in 1974) will prove successful in subsequent strains of ecological thinking, and it is to be contextualized in the race to the space that in those same years was becoming one of the main field of struggles of the Cold War (Höhler 2015). As a matter of fact, between 1967 and 1972 no less than six full-disk pictures of the Earth were taken and released, raising outstanding interest all over the world. They made it possible to effectively see the world as physically

[2] Hardin 1968; Ehrlich 1968; Myers 1993; Renner 1996.

circumscribed, thus giving conservative environmentalism visual legitimation.
In 1968, Hardin published his renowned article "The Tragedy of the Commons", in which a classic Malthusian argument was used to discredit the welfare state based on its alleged unsustainable environmental cost. Hardin, a trained ecologist, will then devote his entire career to connect political conservatism with environmental theory. More precisely, in order to establish the need for conservative politics, he thought it necessary to ground political conservatism on ecological assumptions. In his 1968 article, starting from the fact that "population, as Malthus said, naturally tends to grow 'geometrically'", Hardin addressed the environmental issue as a "No technical solution problem", insofar as "space is no escape" (Hardin 1968, 244). Then, in "Living on a Lifeboat" the concept of limit was applied to describe the actual availability of resources to make a case against "those who would, from a commendable love of distributive justice, institute a ruinous system of the commons" (Hardin 1974, 567). Instead, Hardin thought that to understand society 'ecologically' meant to consider the damage caused by favoring the increase of global population through the allowance of social benefits. When you live on a 'lifeboat' – as Hardin explained while questioning both the economic and social policies adopted by US government, and the popular movements demanding more social equality and the end of environmental devastations – you must take direct care of the numbers you can afford, otherwise you risk a shipwreck. It is to be noted that in his famous article Hardin controversially circumscribed the issue by establishing a strict alternative between common and private property, that is between redistributive politics and the market logic. This distinction suggests that in welfarist policies Hardin saw the risk to legitimize the ongoing popular contestations of the market in the name of social justice and equality. That the author was first and foremost concerned with letting no space to any criticism of the market-driven policies is also signaled by the role played by his environmental theories in the neoliberal school of thought: in fact, the Hardinian 'tragedy' was to become a common reference to promote private property and the rule of market competition as the only rational tools to manage scarce resources (Locher 2013; Baritono 2019), even though neoliberals articulated this concept within a theoretical para-

digm that refuted the benefits of planning (especially family planning) argued by Neo-Malthusians (Cuppini and Ferrari 2020).
Part of the historical relevance of Neo-Malthusian environmentalism lies in the way it reconfigured, through the concepts of limit and population, the relationship between politics and space; this shift is key to the assessment of globalization in its genetic moment (Galli 2001), and I suggest Neo-Malthusian environmentalism was involved in that historical process and contributed to determine it. Moreover, the reconceptualization of the political space determined by the ecological translation of the principle of population rehabilitated the Malthusian idea – first formulated as a critique to Bentham's utilitarian maxims – that the material affluence produced by civilization cannot be universally enjoyed (Rudan 2013). In the words of Ehrlich: "'the greatest good for the greatest number' is an impossible maximization. The greater the total number of people, the fewer there will be who can 'live like kings'" (Ehrlich 1970, 207). In this environmental refutation of political universalism resonates Vogt's previous warning about the need to reconsider modern freedom in light of its ecological cost. Finally, in *Living Within Limits: Ecology, Economics, and Population Taboos*, Hardin openly declared his intention to restate conservative political theory grounding it on the newly discovered "scientific conservation laws" that regulate life on earth and force people to be "contented" with living "within limits" (Hardin 1993, 6). The reference to Malthus, largely quoted through all Hardin's works, gave the American ecologist the possibility to establish the idea that whenever humanity encounters nature's limits, the inequality of conditions is unavoidable and specific measures must be taken in order to counter the tendency of population to outstrip resources, and deteriorate the Earth. All in all, "living within limits" was for Hardin a general political maxim that had to be continuously reinstated in light of a fundamental concept which he found implicit in Malthusian works: the concept of "carrying capacity" of the Earth, which commands to keep population in its "sustainable size" because "the quantity of life, and the quality of it are inversely related" (Hardin 1993, 213; Miller and Nowak 1993; Mead 1993). The point here is not to evaluate the correctness of Hardin's reading of Malthus; what is relevant is to highlight the persistence of the Malthusian strategy of naturalizing inequality to legitimize the hierarchical organiza-

tion of society, along with the discontinuity introduced by Twentieth century Neo-Malthusianism through the application of systemic, ecological knowledge to the conceptual couple limit-population.
Neo-Malthusian environmentalism shows how ecology, in its first scientifical application to human societies, was driven by an effort to naturalize both population (whose trend is reduced to its mere demographic/mathematical dimension), and its environment, which was considered a universal physical limit that dictates to humanity the boundaries and timing of proper action.

2. 'Limits to Growth': A Scientific and Governmental Paradigm

The 1960s' growing attention for the population issue is best represented by the unprecedented discourse delivered by US President Lyndon Johnson in 1965, in which he said that "less than $5 invested in population control is worth $100 invested in economic growth". Western concerns for world-scale inequalities and the threat of political unrest they embodied led both to a popularization of the idea that over-population was the ultimate enemy of human wellbeing, and to institutional attempts to formalize the pillars of anti-populationist political agendas. In this sense, 1972 was to become a turning point in the history of environmentalism in general, and of the success of Neo-Malthusian arguments in particular. Sponsored by the Club of Rome, a group of scientists from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology led by Dennis and Donella Meadows published in that year a report significantly entitled *The Limits to Growth.* The scholars leveraged on the alleged indisputability of natural limits to individual consumptions to call for restrictive positive measures before societies had to encounter those 'limits' without regulations. In a Western context dominated by the fear of Communism and of the concentration of masses of people in African and Asian capital cities, the report summarized in a few points the character of the natural crisis humanity was facing: there are physical boundaries to economic growth; there is a concrete risk to meet boundaries with catastrophic consequences; an equilibrium must be found between the needs of growth and the reality of environmental depletion; whatever

action the governments take, no matter how well coordinated, it will take many decades to set up an equilibrium. So, applying mathematical models to the computation of key variables such as population, food production, and pollution the authors foresaw a dismal future for mankind, unless governments decided to quickly invert the trend and to promote "a period of great transition – the transition from growth to global equilibrium" (Meadows et al. 1972, 24). This Report will prove highly influential both in scientific, and governmental circles in the decades to come, becoming one of the main points of reference for anti-populationist and conservative environmentalism (Basosi 2015).
It is not by chance that that same year the United Nations called for the first ever Conference on the Human Environment, to be held in Stockholm. Unsurprisingly, the most arduous problem to address happened to be that of global population growth. "The natural growth of population", so it recited one of the firsts proclaims of the Final Report of the meeting, "continuously presents problems for the preservation of the environment, and adequate policies and measures should be adopted, as appropriate, to face these problems" (*Report* 1972, 3). It goes without saying that nobody at the Conference could advance the same harsh proposals to contain population Ehrlich and Hardin were advocating in those same years; still, the influence of their propaganda (brought up by influential institutions such the Zero Population Growth Organization) is to be traced in the eloquent appeal made by the UN to "apply demographic policies" especially in those regions of the world where "the rate of population growth or excessive population concentrations are likely to have adverse effects on the environment" (*ibid*., 5). At the peak of world-wide diffusion of Neo-Malthusian arguments, the alleged impact of population on the environment became a topic of discussion both in scientific circles, and global policymaking. In this sense, the governmental translation of Neo-Malthusian concerns about population growth must be addressed as a "Cold War History" (Lorenzini 2019), i.e., put in the context of the wider global debates on the way in which the DCs could govern the "rising expectations" of the people in the UDCs. Thus, the quest for managing the hierarchies produced by world development, while neutralizing the polemic and political presence of its malcontents, leveraged also on patriarchal assumptions that ground the male-dominated dimension of the global

scenario. As Gayatri Spivak noted, "complicity with patriarchy puts 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).

3. Finding a Place for Neo-Malthusianism in the History of Political Thought

Thomas Robertson's work, *The Malthusian Moment* (2012), is key to appreciate the historical entanglements between Neo-Malthusianism and the development of Environmentalism as a political doctrine. In fact, this book was the first attempt to study Neo-Malthusian environmentalism as a specific historical phenomenon deeply connected with international US Cold War politics. In doing so, Robertson recognized the existence of a Malthusian theoretical core that contributed to shape environmental thinking in a specific historical period, and he attempted to bridge this chapter of American intellectual history with the birth of the environmental movement. While leveraging on a formula widely used in historical studies since John Pocock's *The Machiavellian Moment* (1975), Robertson did not draw on the theoretical hypothesis there advanced. In fact, Robertson found in the 1960s a specific *moment* in which Malthusian concerns about population clearly emerged as a key content of conservative philosophy, then connected with environmentalism as a political doctrine in charge of "slowing a headlong rush for economic growth" (Robertson 2012, xv). This did not imply, for Robertson, the possibility to trace in the Malthusian attempt to naturalize society a problem that could be both historicized and observed in its long-lasting political effects. Rather, the author considered the presence of Malthus in the writings of the forementioned authors almost incidental, as they were only looking for the best theoretical equipment to criticize capitalist development (Bashford 2013). As the author argued, "between Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) and the first Earth Day in 1970" so many publications warned about population growth that in order to appreciate the "shift from the early twentieth-century 'conservation' movement to the post-World War II 'environmental' movement" (Robertson 2012, xiv), it is necessary to assess Neo-Mal-

thusian environmentalism. Thus, with this historical overview the author aimed to provide the reader with a comprehensive account of the contradictions that lie at the basis of the formation of environmental thinking affecting its impact on Post-war American policymaking. In fact, the political importance of Neo-Malthusianism is made clear by the unexpected polemic appropriation of its anti-populationist core; despite its conservative birth, Neo-Malthusianism had an historical role in shaping the political claims for abortion by women and the feminist movements (Murphy 2012), as well as the anti-war and environmental mass movements that called for a radically different organization of societies. For almost twenty years Neo-Malthusian environmentalists such as Osborn, Vogt, Hardin, and Ehrlich were successful in building a scientific paradigm to legitimize American international interventionism and champion coercive birth control policies, both in the US and overseas. As environmentalists, they saw natural limits as a factor which people should start caring about, first and foremost those who were experiencing extreme poverty due to excessive numbers. Consequentially, they were among the firsts to support "licensing childbirth, implementing 'stop at two' laws, placing sterilents in the public water supplies, and cutting off food aid to famine threatened nations" (Robertson 2012, 11). On the one hand, Robertson's work presented the merit to be among the firsts to focus on the historical-political relevance of Neo-Malthusianism. On the other hand, it is to be noted that his reconstruction of the *Malthusian moment* accounted for the American population concerns between the Sixties and the Seventies, but did not address the specific theoretical scope and political goal of their reappraisal of Malthus' thought.

Already in 1973, Sergio Novi argued that the "great discovery" of Twentieth century environmentalism was that the unbridled development of industry alters the balance of the environment, challenges the limits of nature and risks leading mankind down an unsustainable path. In so doing, environmental thinking "always refers back to the ancient warning of Malthus" (Novi 1973, 73), even though the birth of global environmentalism was fueled by such variegated contributions on the environment, ecological science, legislation, and radical activism on both sides of the Atlantic that it cannot be understood only in Neo-Malthusian terms (Borstelmann 2012; Radkau 2014). While reco-

gnizing the presence of Malthusian ideas within the formation of environmentalist political thought, Novi's study missed to account for the originality of Neo-Malthusianism and the discontinuity represented by its global appraisal of the possible unbalances of the world market.
Grappling with the attempt to find a place for Malthus in the history of political thought, in 1982 David Wells stated that the *Essay on the Principle of Population* had been the first book to ever proceed from an "ecological viewpoint" (Wells 1982, 3), insofar as it reasoned on the ecological question of the "limits and checks" that "restrict the growth of population" (*ibid*., 4). Notably, in his quest for grounding the authority of Malthus' political theory, Wells recognized that the paradigm invented by *The Limits to Growth*'s authors had led to a significant twist in ecological thinking, one whose theoretical assumptions could be in fact brought back to the Malthusian idea that progress should be measured against the physical, biological limits that a finite nature imposes on man. In this perspective, to establish how Malthus could have become such a solid reference for ecologists one ought to look at the modern connection between man, society, and nature he established with his work.
The political assumption that growth – of both population, and resources – must always confront limits became a key element of the eco-socialist critique of excessive productivism, intended as an ideological pillar shared by both the US, and the USSR. The works of Mauricio Schoijet and Giorgos Kallis are explanatory of this theoretical framework, while those of Ted Benton account for the stratified debate around 'limits' to capitalist production that crisscrossed some late Twentieth-century's Marxist traditions of thought (Benton 1989). With the article "Limits to Growth and the Rise of Catastrophism", Schoijet aimed at affirming that it is possible "to be a catastrophist without being a Malthusian in the original sense" (Schoijet 1999, 516). This publication is relevant insofar as it is indicative of an anti-capitalist environmentalism which intends to tackle the problem first opened by Malthus, subtracting its conservative content from the concepts of limit and sustainability. Thus, the role of technology becomes prominent in Schoijet's attempt to define the nature of limits, to evaluate the feasibility of challenging them with increasing human knowledge, and to establish the sustainability of technological progress. Specifically, the

article gave voice to the critique of the idea that, thanks to technology, humanity could escape the "Malthusian trap" once and for all. On the contrary, the author proposed a shifting conceptualization of 'limit' relating it to the transformative power of the idea that if a universal crisis is about to come, radical and urgent transformations are needed.

In his recent book called *Limits: Why Malthus was Wrong and why Environmentalist Should Care*, Kallis made the effort to turn upside down the classical reading of Malthusian theory of scarcity, so to articulate an innovative understanding of the concept of limit which could be adopted by eco-socialist politics. Specifically, Kallis argued that Malthus built the image of a finite world and "invoked doom so as to galvanize the pursuit of growth", while a really progressive environmental thinking should "accept the world as abundant" so to permit a reappraisal of limits as necessary "self-limitation" aimed at "delimiting a safe space for our freedom" (Kallis 2019, 9). The political-economic stand for degrowth – as firstly theorized by Serge Latouche (Latouche 2006) – openly traces its origin to the Meadows *et al.* Report of 1972 and it is indicative of a way of thinking that attribute the responsibility to invert the ecological crisis to individual behaviours. The degrowth theory misses to assess the way in which the concept of limit has been historically and politically used as a tool to naturalize the conditions of reproduction of life imposed by the capitalist mode of production. Even when focused on the unsustainability of industrial production, rather than on individual practices of consumption, this theoretical model revives the Malthusian stand for natural limits and look for alternative solutions to deal with them.

The emphasis on the impending clash between population growth and limited resource, built after the manner of the Malthusian principle of population, is the reason why authors such as Vogt, Osborn, Hardin and Ehrlich were labelled as Neo-Malthusians. *The Return of Malthus*, published by Biörn-Ola Linner in 2003, was the first politological account of the Post-War renaissance of scarcity economics and conservative political philosophy. This work underlined the then existing connection between the fear of communism by industrialized nations and the birth of a new conservative ideology based on the normative content of the concept of nature. Two years later, another study in political science published by Henrik Urdal tested the premises of

the "conflicting scenario" built by 1970s Neo-Malthusians and found them difficult to support by evidence-based research (Urdal 2005, 417). What Urdal put under the test of statistical enquiry was the assumption that population pressure on renewable resources push societies towards ecological and war catastrophes. More than the mere theoretical outcome of this research, what matter for this bibliographical itinerary is that by recognizing key common elements of the 'green' Post-War translation of Malthus, along with its historical and geographical specificity, this work opened up the space for further investigations which would eventually go beyond the boundaries of political science as a discipline, as Robertson's *The Malthusian Moment*.

In this sense, two more publications on Neo-Malthusian's Post-war environmentalism are worth to be mentioned, as they resumed the work started by Linner, Urdal, and then Robertson to discuss their groundbreaking historical hypothesis. The first is *The Publication Bomb,* published by Robert Mayhew within a volume he himself edited, i.e., *New Perspectives on Malthus*. The title chosen by Mayhew echoes Ehrlich's 1968 best-seller, *The Population Bomb*. By assessing the way in which Malthus's *Essay* was edited between the 1950s and 1970s, along with the number and effective circulation of those editions, Mayhew attempted to specify Robertson theses and to bring them even further: "Neo-Malthusianism was ahead of the game, being a vital catalyst to the 'great synchronization' of modern environmentalism rather than just one part of that assemblage" (Mayhew 2016, 241). This process did not overlap with a wide editorial attempt to collapse Malthus and the ongoing 'green' revival of his theory; this is also why Neo-Malthusian reference to depletion of resources to legitimize poverty, inequality and global population control should be seen in its own light, rather than as a mere replication of Malthus' thought. A recent critical reader in Neo-Malthusian thinking edited by Mayhew contributes to fill in this theoretical gap in the history of political and environmental ideas (Mayhew 2022).

The second contribution on Neo-Malthusian environmentalism – Fabien Locher's work "Neo-Malthusian Environmentalism, World Fisheries Crisis, and the Global Commons" – was published in 2020 as part of a collection of essays that gave life to a special issue of *The Historical Journal* edited by Alison Bashford, Duncan Kelly and Shailaja Fen-

nell and entitled *Malthusian Moments*. The editorial enterprise aimed to assess the many critical issues that have been touched by Malthus' work: "good and bad government; equality and inequality; food and agriculture; sex and death; land-use and land-ownership; development trajectories and economic predictions" (Bashford, Kelly, Fennell 2020, 1). Among the many *moments* – referring both to historical periods and disciplinary interests, rather than a theoretical and political core to be traced in Malthus' thinking – analyzed in the volume, Locher argued that Post-war environmentalism is of utmost importance. By focusing on the specific debate that emerged between the 1950s and 1970s on the planet's stock of maritime resources, the author highlighted the general conceptual premises that allowed Neo-Malthusians to be so influential in the formation of contemporary ecological thinking. First, their application of natural science to the diagnosis of the risks for human societies started from a "systemic understanding of the planet" and converged towards a theoretical construction of "the sense of globality conveyed by the 'global environment' notion" (Locher 2020, 2-3). Secondly, they were successful in giving to their theory a 'future-oriented' character. This aspect was crucial in shaping a new conception of possible disastrous scenarios for humankind in the same historical period in which global threats were being used by neoliberal agendas – such as those developed by the 'New Resource Economics' group – to affirm that the deterioration of the environment could only be stopped by applying market-based solutions to all natural resources.

As proved by recent publications on the topic, the study of the entanglements between Neo-Malthusianism and Environmentalism is both flourishing, and still lacking a deep historical and conceptual perspective. Despite the substantial number of publications in the Environmental Studies that have dealt with Malthus' contribution, only a few scholars have addressed Twentieth-century reappraisal of Malthusian doctrines to highlight the historical discontinuities that constitute the concepts of limit and population, as well as the radical conceptual shift imposed by the application of ecology to the field of human society. Recently, the spread of academic interest in the Environmental History have led intellectual historians toward the attempt to bridge the historical formulation of key concepts of modern political thought (such as society, nature, and government) with current political transformations

determined by the ongoing ecological crisis, in order to critically assess both (Albritton Jonsson 2013; Charbonnier 2020). Pierre Charbonnier, for instance, argued that we should understand that we find ourselves in an "ecological prison" whose cells have been created by our modern quest for freedom and affluence heedless of terrestrial ecological limits (*ibid*., 6; Del Vecchio 2020). Thus, in his perspective the history of modern industrial growth – supported by technological progress – should be seen as a continual effort to escape the "Malthusian trap", while an ecological understanding of our dependance on a limited nature may have the potential to disentangle freedom from economic development. When looking at Malthus' theory of population in his historical context, as well as at its Twentieth-century's environmental revival, it is possible to appreciate how the concept of limit has been the cornerstone of a political thinking aimed at reaffirming the unaffordable universalization of the wealth and freedom enjoyed by a part of the human beings. In this sense, a critical understanding of the historical entanglement between Neo-Malthusianism and environmentalism can be relevant to recognize both the stratified social conditions that lay hidden behind universal concepts such as population and limit, and the attempt to grasp their political legitimization through the reference to nature. To critically address both the way in which Malthus' built his theories on the concepts of scarcity and nature's limit, and how these premises have been reinstated in environmental conservative thought, it is crucial to highlight that the "Malthusian trap" does not regard all people, because variegated are the ways in which individuals across the globe socially relate to nature (Bonasera 2022).

The presence of Neo-Malthusianism at the genetic moment of contemporary environmentalism is an historical issue worth to be accounted for as an important topic in the history of contemporary political thought. On the one hand, the label 'Neo-Malthusian' is not to be used to reduce anti-populationist environmentalism to conceptual strains already established at the beginning of political modernity, thus treating it as a tradition of thought devoid of internal tensions and historical ruptures. On the other hand, that formula should not be reduced to just another *moment* of a decontextualized reappraisal of the alleged Malthusian model. To study Neo-Malthusian environmentalism starting from the discontinuities it introduced in contemporary understanding of global relations of power,

thus from its polemic and political core in relation to changing historical challenges, may lead to significant theoretical gains both for the history of political thought, and its entanglements with environmental studies. Neo-Malthusianism account for a scientific paradigm that leveraged the theoretical acquisitions of ecology to convey a normative content on the founding pillars of the global order and the limit they must pose to the "rising expectations" of wellbeing nourished by 'redundant' people. In this sense, Neo-Malthusians theories reveal the political core of the *Malthusian moment*, namely the problem to naturalize a contested unequal social order. In their attempt to respond to unprecedent challenges, Neo-Malthusians questioned the traditional meaning of key political concepts and categories such as limit, population, development, and freedom by stating that they all should be evaluated considering their 'ecological costs', i.e., that they all should be measured against the alleged 'natural' limits of "Spaceship Earth".

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