FEMINISMS AND FEMINIST MOVEMENTS

Feminism and Neo-Malthusianism

19th-21st centuries

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ABSTRACT

Feminism and neo-Malthusianism took form as movements in Europe in the late nineteenth century. Only a few radical feminists shared the views of neo-Malthusians, while reformists emphasized the value of maternity, and used it to legitimize their demands in the face of populationist governments. The second half of the twentieth century marked a turning point, as the positions of these two branches grew closer together, fostered by scientific advances in contraception.

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Feminism and neo-Malthusianism are two doctrines, with the first having the ambition of women's emancipation, and the second recommending birth control without restricting sexuality. Feminists thus sought to liberate women from their “subjection,” a term used by the British philosopher John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) in his *The Subjection of Women* (1869), which caused a great sensation, while neo-Malthusians took inspiration from the ideas of the Anglican priest Thomas Robert Malthus (1766-1834). His famous *Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798) shows that population grows faster than means of subsistence, and recommends moral restraint, with abstinence alone used to limit births. Dissociating sexuality and reproduction, neo-Malthusians prescribed recourse to means of contraception. Their position was not widely shared by the majority of feminists during the nineteenth century, who as reformists were skittish on sexual matters for strategic reasons of respectability. The primary enemy of these feminists was the civil code, which established masculine domination in a large part of Europe.

In the late nineteenth century, feminists and neo-Malthusians organized themselves in independent movements, essentially feminine for the former, and mixed for the latter. *The Malthusian League*, the first neo-Malthusian association, was founded in London in 1877 by the English feminist Annie Besant (1847-1933) and presided over by her compatriot Charles Robert Drysdale (1829-1907), and by his partner Alice Drysdale Vickery (1844-1929) after his death. In 1892 in Paris, the *Congrès général des sociétés féministes*—the first to call itself as such—declared that maternity was a “social function,” and campaigned for improvements in childbearing conditions and for the granting of a maternity allowance. Neo-Malthusianism spread to Holland, where Aletta Jacobs (1854-1929) and her husband founded a league in 1881, to Sweden in the 1880s with the economist Knut Wicksell (1851-1926), and to Germany as well (1893). In France, Paul Robin (1837-1912), an internationalist Bakuninite who supported coeducation of the sexes, created in 1896 the first French neo-Malthusian association, the League for Human Regeneration, convinced of the need to control births in order to improve the condition of workers and women. In 1900, the neo-Malthusians assembled in a Universal Federation of Human Regeneration presided over by Charles Robert Drysdale, with England, Germany, Belgium, France, and Holland participating. At the Hague conference in 1910, an International Neo-Malthusian Bureau was opened, presided over by the indispensable Drysdale, with the Frenchman Gabriel Hardy, the pseudonym of Gabriel Giroud (1870-1945), as treasurer. This effort to gather together was shared by the feminists that made up national councils, such as in Germany (1897), Great Britain and Sweden (1898), Denmark (1899), France (1901), Austria and Italy (1903), Hungary and Norway (1904), Belgium (1906), Bulgaria and Greece (1908), Finland (1911), and Portugal (1914). Continuing to favour a reformist strategy suitable for their integration in the world of politics, these councils came to demand the right to vote, and did not approve of the positions of the neo-Malthusians, who were often anarchists and who on the contrary did not seek to establish links with the world of politics, seeing suffrage as an alienation. Only radical feminists shared their struggle. The French doctor Madeleine Pelletier (1874-1939) defended the sexual education of girls (*L’émancipation sexuelle de la femme*, 1911) and even conducted abortions (*Le droit à l’avortement*, 1913). Her compatriot Nelly Roussel (1878-1922) also became an advocate of freedom over maternity.

In the name of the *Union sacrée*, European feminists and neo-Malthusians suspended their demands during the Great War. The demographic bloodletting provoked by the conflict led to the suppression of neo-Malthusian movements: in France, the law of July 31 1920, dubbed “heinous” by Roussel, cracked down on the inducement of abortion and contraceptive propaganda, and that of March 27 1923 criminalized abortion in order to facilitate its penalization. Reformist feminists took part in this struggle against depopulation and asserted maternity as a social function, which they wielded as an argument to justify the granting of the right to vote, which was the primary goal of the interwar period. These positions were confirmed during the *états généraux du féminisme* (feminist general assemblies) organized by the *Conseil national des femmes françaises* in 1929, which brought together over two hundred and forty feminist associations. Nevertheless, in Great Britain, the Scottish suffragette Marie Stopes (1880-1958), author of *Wise Parenthood* (1918), which was translated into ten languages, created in 1921 the first *Mother’s clinic* instructing married women in contraception methods, while remaining opposed to abortion. During

the 1930s, the neo-Malthusians experienced an increase in activity. The Humbert-Eugène couple (1870-1944), especially Jeanne (1890-1986), crisscrossed France giving lectures on liberty and maternity. Other neo-Malthusian French feminists, such as Yvonne Netter (1889-1985), belonged to the World League for Sexual Reform on a Scientific Basis, founded in 1928 by the sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld (1868-1935), which survived until 1937. It included important figures such as the future *résistante* Berthie Albrecht (1883-1943), Gabriel Hardy, Eugène Humbert, the writer Victor Margueritte (1866-1942), and the German feminist Hélène Stöcker (1869-1943). Although during the interwar period neo-Malthusianism gained victories—such as authorization for abortion in the Soviet Union from 1920-1936, Republican Spain in 1936, and Sweden in 1938—it also suffered strong repression in the context of natalist policies in Italy, with the Rocco Code in 1930, and in France, with the *Code de la famille* in 1939. In Nazi Germany, the Nuremberg laws punished more severely abortions by women considered Aryan, but encouraged them for eugenic reasons. Under the Vichy regime, abortion became a crime against the state in 1942: Eugène Humbert was incarcerated, and Marie-Louise Giraud was guillotined in 1943 for conducting abortions.

The post-war period glorified maternity; it was the moment of the baby boom, nevertheless the discovery of the contraceptive pill in the 1950s brought about radical change. It promoted the medical control of births, which was encouraged by associations that supported a full and meaningful maternity (France, 1956, *La maternité heureuse*). Beginning in the 1970s, the right of women to control their bodies, and to thus choose maternity, became the primary demand of second-wave feminism. From that point on, the goals of feminists and neo-Malthusians grew closer, and even converged on the question of free and freely available abortion.

Although at the beginning of the twenty-first century the voluntary interruption of pregnancy is legal, thanks notably to feminist campaigns, in almost all countries in the European Union (except in Malta and Cyprus; in Ireland, Luxembourg, and Poland it is legal but very restrictive), no right is acquired permanently, and the Spanish government's attempt in 2013 to take a step backwards should, despite its failure, encourage defenders of women's rights to remain constantly vigilant.

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