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**The Evolution of Birth  
Control as a Reproductive  
Right: a Historical Analysis  
from the 17th to the 20th  
century**

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## INTRODUCTION

The present work examines the emergence of birth control as a reproductive right, delving into the historical struggles and triumphs that have contributed to shaping the recognition at the international level of individuals' right to manage their own bodies. More precisely, its aim is to investigate how the economy and politics have played a part in this.

The discussion over reproductive rights is a central arena for societal change, especially since the events recently happened in the United States that demonstrate once again how the terrain of human rights and individual autonomy is dynamic for better or for worse. The US Supreme Court's overturning of the constitutional guarantee of abortion *Roe v. Wade* is precisely one of the main reasons that led me to discuss this topic. I was curious to know more about what was the process that originally led to the establishment of a right-to-birth regulation. Added to this is a personal interest in how women shaped history and contributed to the events of the past.

To understand the evolution of birth control and the emergence of reproductive rights, this thesis is divided into three chapters. The first one wants to give a historical contextualization of English society in the Early Modern Age. The choice of this state and historical period is dictated by the fact that the starting point for the writing of this dissertation is Thomas R. Malthus (1766-1834). Malthus was a British clergyman and economist, one of the very first scholars to reflect on demographic patterns and the relationship between population growth and economic development. He is best known for his theory of diminishing returns, namely that without constraints the population expands more rapidly than the available food and resources. He advocated in favor of techniques to limit population growth, such as abstinence, which did not include the use of contraceptives. However, his theory represents the basis for the development, in the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth century, of neo-Malthusianism. An ideology that, starting from the fears of overpopulation expressed by Malthus, encouraged the use of contraceptives to regulate and limit demographic growth. Therefore, Malthus is pivotal for the aim of this thesis, and examining his historical context means gaining an

understanding of the origin and the motivation that first encouraged the use of birth control. Hence, the first chapter describes the structure of society, the family, and the role that women played in English society in the Early Modern Age. At the time there was in fact a very precise idea of how each person should behave and what each person should do within their family and the society where they lived. Therefore, I wanted to investigate whether people respected societal expectations and how birth control fit into this system. The practice of regulating pregnancies, indeed, has a long and complicated history that is closely linked to social norms, political agendas, and economic factors. Knowing about the past is essential in comprehending the difficulties and developments that have influenced the diffusion of birth control. With this in mind, essential for the analysis of family dynamics, is *Of Domestic Duties*<sup>1</sup> by William Gouge (1575-1670). This work is one of the main moral and behavioral guides of the period to discuss family life. It is useful as it gives a representation of the relationship expected to exist among husband, wife, children, and other family members. For what concerns secondary sources two are noteworthy. Firstly, *An Ordered Society: Gender and Class in Early Modern England*<sup>2</sup> by Amussen, in her book she analyses the relationship that was expected to exist within families and villages, as well as the worries and the consequent anxiety to maintain a gender and class order in society. Secondly, *When Gossips Meet: Women, family, and Neighbourhood in Early Modern England*<sup>3</sup> by Capp that, focusing on the unwealthy population, highlights the position that women played in such a structured society and with which methods they were able to challenge the role that was imposed on them.

The second chapter deals with the topic of birth control as an instrument for the welfare of the population and the state. The number of inhabitants of a country has always been central to its politics since on it depended elements such as the amount of taxes that could be collected and the size of the army, and thus the possibility of defending or attacking other territories. Throughout the centuries, various currents of thought developed around this element, each with its own beliefs as to how the population

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<sup>1</sup> Gouge, W. (1622). *Of domestical duties*. London: Printed by Iohn Haviland for William Bladen.

<sup>2</sup> Amussen, S. D. (1993). *An ordered society: gender and class in early modern England*. Columbia University Press.

<sup>3</sup> Capp, B. (2003). *When gossips meet: Women, family, and neighbourhood in early modern England*. Oxford University Press.

should be managed to ensure development and well-being. Between the Sixteenth and the Eighteenth century, in Europe, there was general support for demographic growth thanks to Mercantilism. This was an economic system based on the idea that to create national power and wealth states needed to increase exportations while limiting importations. For this to happen, one of the central aspects was having a large population to provide a labor force to support economic activities and this translated into demographic policies to encourage population growth. At the end of the Eighteenth century, therefore, Malthus with his fears of overpopulation represented a break with the past. Furthermore, during these centuries, the population was a subject of debate among academics. To comprehend what was the vision of the time and how it changed, the thesis exposes the thoughts of various scholars who participated in the discussion by analyzing their works. The most significant primary source is Malthus' *An Essay on the Principle of Population*<sup>4</sup> as he is the starting point for the elaboration of this thesis and in this work, he not only articulates his personal perspective on the population but also analyses the views espoused by other prominent authors, including Godwin, Condorcet, Wallace, Hume, and Smith. Consequently, Malthus offers an overview of the discourse surrounding population issues. In order to present a more complete understanding of the intellectual landscape of the period, this thesis encompasses also the texts of the aforementioned authors, as well as other theorists such as Montesquieu, Petty, and Graunt. The thinkers taken into consideration are both French and English because the number of people was an issue that interested all states. However, special attention is given to the discussion in England. To conclude, the chapter also exposes the emergence of neo-Malthusian thought, which, as mentioned, is an important element that encourages the use of contraceptives and thus the emergence of reproductive rights.

The third and last chapter focuses on the Twentieth century. This period was characterized by events, such as the two world wars, that inevitably left indelible marks and radically changed the way of looking at things. In this context, more attention began to be paid to less protected categories of people, among which there were women. It was

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<sup>4</sup> Malthus, T. R. (1798). *An Essay on the Principle of Population: Or, A View of Its Past and Present Effects on Human Happiness, with an Inquiry Into Our Prospects Respecting the Future Removal Or Mitigation of the Evils which it Occasions* (1<sup>st</sup> ed.). London: J. Johnson.

in this century that the fight for reproductive rights began to gain momentum, with women who started to join forces to advocate for their rights. The main context where this happened was the United States where movements that wanted to give more freedom and rights to women emerged. A focal point to comprehend this phenomenon is the story of Margaret Sanger (1879-1966), a pioneer of the American birth control movement. She enables a better comprehension of how the diffusion of contraceptives in the early half of the Twentieth century was strongly interrelated with economic and political factors and how it depended on the support of other movements like eugenics. This was a movement that gained prominence between the Nineteenth and the Twentieth centuries and intended to limit the proliferation of some undesirable traits to improve individuals' genetics. This and the birth control movement, even if driven by different motivations, shared the desire to promote contraception and therefore for a period supported each other. Subsequently, the chapter deals with the post-Second World War era, when birth control evolved and became known as family planning. From this, emerged programs that aimed at limiting demographic growth in developing countries.

In conclusion, the last aspect addressed in the thesis concerns the change of approach to contraception that took place at the international level within the UN. Indeed, this body had the essential role of providing the place, namely the Conference on Population and Development held in Tehran in 1994, in which women's rights to sexual and reproductive health were recognized. Regarding the secondary sources utilized, the most prominent include *Population Control I: birth of an Ideology*<sup>5</sup> by Hartmann, which highlights the birth of population control by tracking its origins to the American birth control movement and its connection to English neo-Malthusians, and *Here to Stay: The Evolution of sexual and reproductive health and Rights in international human rights law*<sup>6</sup> by Pizzarossa. It furnished an examination of the evolution of reproductive rights and its contentious nature, through the analysis of the most salient UN conferences held in the

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<sup>5</sup> Hartmann, B. (1997). Population control I: birth of an ideology. *International Journal of Health Services*, 27(3), 523–540.

<sup>6</sup> Pizzarossa, L. B. (2018). Here to Stay: The evolution of sexual and reproductive health and Rights in international human rights law. *Laws*, 7(3), 29. <https://doi.org/10.3390/laws7030029>

second half of the twentieth century, offering an insight into the shifting attitudes towards population control.

## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **THE ENGLISH SOCIETY IN THE EARLY MODERN AGE**

Understanding the historical context and the specific events that have occurred is crucial to comprehending the development of events that led to the emergence of reproductive rights.

Therefore, this thesis begins by describing English society during Early Modern England. The reason for this country and time is to be found in the events. In fact, England is an exemplary case of what was also happening in other states of the world, and of which there are numerous documents available. Moreover, as the purpose of this thesis is to reconstruct the emergence of reproductive rights, more precisely of birth control, and as Malthus is central to this topic (see chapters 2.2 and 2.3), the most logical choice was to talk about the context in which he lived and in which contraception began to be addressed more widely.

#### **1.1. The public and private organization of the English society**

##### *1.1.1. Public order*

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, English society was hierarchically organized. Englishmen were concerned with the idea that a natural order of things existed: everyone and everything had a specific role to play and to respect. This led to the creation of a social hierarchy where people, based on different criteria, were divided into social ranks. At the head of the nation, there was a monarch who was thought to have absolute power over the whole state. This political theory was inspired by biblical knowledge: by the idea that the king's powers derived from God. Therefore, on the basis of the relationship between God and the rest of the population, there was a relationship between the king and the subjects. The main book which talks about this concept is *Patriarcha* where Filmer affirms that monarchs are superior and cannot be controlled in any way by the people "for as Kingly Power is by the Law of God, so it hath no inferior Law to limit it."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Filmer, S. (1680). *Patriarcha, or the Natural Power of Kings*. London: Richard Chiswell, pp. 12

Identifying a clear stratification of society is not easy. Scholars have different opinions about how people are organized. Examples of this diversity are Harrison who divided the society into gentlemen (composed of nobility, knights, esquires, and general gentlemen), citizens and burgesses of the cities, yeomen of the countryside, and then the rest of the poor (including laborers, poor husbandmen, artifices and servants); Thomas Wilson who, instead, distinguished among nobles, gentry (divided into titled and professional men), citizens, yeomen, artisans, and rural laborers; to conclude, Gregory King who divided similarly to Wilson, however, King's division was based on the kind of occupation.<sup>8</sup> Scholars disagree on the impact that these ranks had on relations among people, and on which elements, at the time, were considered the most important to establish the rank.

In particular, to identify the stratification of society, wealth and territories were the main elements that people of the seventeenth century considered. Political power was indeed strictly related to income and territory because the king to govern needed to have the consent and the collaboration of local élites who were the richest families of the communities.<sup>9</sup> Hence, being rich meant also being socially strong and widely influential in politics. Notwithstanding, among the various elements considered to differentiate between social classes, there were also lifestyle, birth, and occupation. Therefore, in addition to properties and money, other criteria carried the weight of establishing the social rank of people and for this reason, there were cases when merchants, even though they were as rich as gentlemen, belonged to a lower class compared to gentlemen.<sup>10</sup> It should also be highlighted that prosperity was not absolute and people rich in one region could appear not so wealthy in another area.

Early modern society, however, was predominately rural, and the majority of the population was part of the inferior ranks. The biggest gap in the social hierarchy was between the gentlemen and the non-gentlemen: the former belonged to the upper classes, while the latter was at the basis of the stratification. Their relations functioned

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<sup>8</sup> Fletcher, A., & Stevenson, J. (Eds.). (1987). *Order and disorder in early modern England*. Cambridge University Press, pp. 1; Wrightson, K. (1982). *English Society 1580-1680*. Routledge University Press, pp. 4-5

<sup>9</sup> Stone, L. (1966). Social Mobility in England, 1500-1700. *Past & Present*, 33, pp. 21-22

<sup>10</sup> Wrightson, K. (1982). *English Society 1580-1680*. Routledge University Press, pp. 6

on the basis of reciprocity where the rich, in exchange for obedience and respect, guaranteed to take care of the inferior classes.<sup>11</sup> Nonetheless, it is important not to see social classes as homogeneous blocks: even among the same rank there were differences and some people were poorer than others, an example is the class of gentlemen that could be divided into “greater”, “upper”, “middling” and “lesser” or “parish”.<sup>12</sup>

The hierarchy could be clearly observed in churches. Because, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, religion was an essential element and parishes had a crucial role in managing the respect of the social order, seats were a representation of the status level and in the church, they were assigned according to the social hierarchy. The fact of being able to demonstrate the social position during Sunday services – which were mandatory for all citizens – was fundamental and it was not infrequent that this could lead to disputes and contestations where some wanted to challenge other people’s seats while some tried to defend theirs. In some cases, in addition to a social division, there was also a separation between men and women: they sat in two different parts of the church. This, for example, was common in Norfolk, where it continued to exist in the nineteenth century as well, even though only among the poor.<sup>13</sup> At times, instead, people did not have a seat, it was the case of servants and single people; however, this could happen also with children.

Notwithstanding, even though English society was hierarchically organized, social mobility was something common at the time: families could change their status by worsening or improving it. This last possibility was a slow process that has been estimated, on average, took three generations to be recognized by the rest of the population.<sup>14</sup> Thus the structure of society was not fixed.

In the Early Modern period, most people lived in villages rather than in cities or urban areas, and they were organized in local communities. This meant that people living in the same area were linked together by relations of friendship and neighborliness, as well

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<sup>11</sup> Amussen, S. D. (1993). *An ordered society: gender and class in early modern England*. Columbia University Press, pp. 134-137

<sup>12</sup> Wrightson, K. (1982). *English Society 1580-1680*. Routledge University Press, pp. 9

<sup>13</sup> Amussen, S. D. (1993). *An ordered society: gender and class in early modern England*. Columbia University Press, pp. 138-144

<sup>14</sup> Stone, L. (1966). Social Mobility in England, 1500-1700. *Past & Present*, 33, pp. 17

as by kinship – these kinds of relationships could develop both in villages and in cities, for example, among people living on the same street. Relations between people in the community were particularly close: they had a strong sense of belonging, and they supported each other in many aspects of everyday life both in the economic and social fields. This happened, for example, in the case of unfair taxes, exploitation of lands (which was decided by the community as a whole), unwelcome neighbors, or disapproved marriages, when members of the community would join their forces to confront the situation. The community, hence, had a major impact on people's lives, and due to this reason, it was important to be accepted by the rest of the members in order to have support when it was needed.

Living in communities meant that people had to behave respecting standards of social behavior created by the community where they lived. Among these, there was the prohibition of keeping a behavior that could lead to violence, like mocking or quarreling,<sup>15</sup> and those who did not respect them could be excluded from the community. Norms were not only about public behavior, but they could also affect families within their homes, for example impeding husbands to beat their wives or women to dominate their men. All these standards had the aim of maintaining common peace among people and avoiding the subversion of the order of society. Considering their importance, it was necessary to have someone who monitored people's conduct and this role was played by neighbors.

The sense of belonging to a community and affection among neighbors needed to be periodically stimulated. Due to this reason recreational activities, like games and dancing, were organized. Equally significant was to take part in events like weddings, funerals, and childbirth where it was necessary to have some kind of support. Hence, people could use these events to deepen their friendships.<sup>16</sup>

Together with social mobility, Early Modern society was also characterized by geographical mobility. People entering and leaving a community were not rare and

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<sup>15</sup> Gowing L. Hunter M. C. W. & Rubin M. (2005). *Love friendship and faith in Europe 1300-1800*. Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 150-151

<sup>16</sup> Wrightson, K. (1982). *English Society 1580-1680*. Routledge University Press, pp. 41-42

when they moved away, usually, they ended up in another community, with different people but similar rules. For adolescents, coming from either the upper or the lowest social ranks, it was common to move away from home at a certain point in their lives and they did so for various reasons, such as to work as servants of wealthier families, to be employed as seasonal workers or to set up in better businesses. Despite this, the sense of identity kept existing, and communities started to fall apart only when land properties and prosperity began to amass in the hands of a few wealthy people and, consequently, a minority of the population started to hold power.<sup>17</sup>

From this first analysis emerges a structured but at the same time dynamic society where people were expected to respect their social position and where God played a not insignificant role.

### *1.1.2. The internal structure of the family*

At the heart of this society, there was the family which was the basic unit of the economy, society, and gender role (it is worth mentioning that when in historical texts the terms “family” or “household” are used, they do not refer only to the nuclear family – husband, wife, and children – but they are used in a wider sense to include servants and all those who live under the same roof<sup>18</sup>). Households were based on patriarchy: the eldest male, usually the husband, was the head of the family and his social position influenced the social position of the whole household.<sup>19</sup> Women, therefore, had a limited role, they mostly had to obey what their men said.

The structure of the English family was not large and complex: rarely newlyweds lived with their parents or with other relatives. Instead, it was a simple nuclear family composed of a wife, a husband, and their children.<sup>20</sup> Young people were indeed strongly encouraged to marry only once they had obtained economic independence, in such a way as to have the necessary resources to live on their own and to maintain their own

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<sup>17</sup> Kamen, H. (2000). *Early Modern European Society* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Routledge, pp. 10-11

<sup>18</sup> Tadmor, N. (1996). The concept of the household-family in eighteenth-century England. *Past & Present*, 151(1), pp. 112

<sup>19</sup> Houston, R. A. (1986). British Society in the Eighteenth Century. *Journal of British Studies*, 25(4), pp. 457

<sup>20</sup> Wrightson, K. (1982). *English Society 1580-1680*. Routledge University Press, pp. 25

families. Consequently, the average marriage age was relatively high, from the seventeenth till the nineteenth century, 25/26 for women and 27/28 for men<sup>21</sup>. It must be noted that there was a difference between social classes: wealthy people married at a younger age compared to common people.<sup>22</sup>

Marriage was at the basis of the household. This religious union was not only the starting point for creating a family, but it also represented a game changer in people's lives, and therefore it was particularly significant. Specifically, for young men of the middle class, marriage could be a requisite for starting a new business, while for women meant becoming subject to their husbands and being introduced into the world of wives and mothers which basically meant being involved in a circle where, through gossip, they could exchange intimate information, about childbirth and female diseases for example.<sup>23</sup> As a consequence, unmarried women remained excluded from any information about pregnancy and they were not allowed to witness births. They were basically left out of female knowledge.<sup>24</sup>

For what concerns the upper class, instead, marriage represented an economic issue because through holy matrimony they could safeguard their properties, by passing them from father to son. In so doing, gentlemen could ensure that their possessions would not be squandered and thus their future as part of the upper classes would be safe too. This was one of the reasons why rich youths married at a younger age than inferior classes, they wanted to ensure, as soon as possible, their future.

Due to the huge impact that marriage could have on the lives of spouses and on their families, parents exercised a central role in their children's decision to marry in order to verify the integrity of the promised spouse. However, this role progressively diminished over time: in the sixteenth century, parents had absolute power over marriages, therefore, they were arranged without children's consultation; while, at the turn of the seventeenth century, young people were able to gain the right to refuse a match.

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<sup>21</sup> Anderson, M. (1995). *Approaches to the History of the Western Family 1500–1914* (New Studies in Economic and Social History). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 18

<sup>22</sup> Wrightson, K. (1982). *English Society 1580-1680*. Routledge University Press, pp. 46

<sup>23</sup> Gowing, L. (2022). *Gender Relations in Early Modern England*. Routledge, pp. 31

<sup>24</sup> Gowing, L. (1997). Secret Births and Infanticide in Seventeenth-Century England. *Past & Present*, 156, pp. 97

However, it was only at the end of the seventeenth century that children became the authors of their own destinies and were able to choose their partner on the basis of feelings, rather than economic interests, while parents had to restrict themselves to give their consensus, even though they kept a certain level of influence on their children's decisions. Even though this was true for wealthy people, it cannot be extended to the whole of English society. Among inferior classes, indeed, when prosperity did not depend upon marriages, people enjoyed more freedom than the rich in choosing their spouses.<sup>25</sup> Parents had less authority over their children's decisions, and this depended mostly on the fact that poor youths frequently were employed far from home and they also enjoyed the liberty of leaving their village to look for a wife. In communities, indeed, most people were liked by kinship and since incest was forbidden, they had to travel to other villages to find a spouse. This freedom, however, was not absolute; some like the head of the family, the local community, and the feudal lord could intervene and impede this.<sup>26</sup>

As mentioned before, marriage was a sacred union and as such, it was not expected to end but with death. Notwithstanding, divorces could happen, but they were not so common, and they imposed limits on people, such as the impossibility of remarriage. An official separation could, for instance, be asked by a woman victim of violence and beaten by her husband. Nonetheless, there were also various ways to informally divorce, among the upper classes, for example, it was common to live separately because they possessed several houses. In addition, there were cases when marriages could be annulled, for instance, due to male impotence.<sup>27</sup>

The family was the central unit of political and social order. In the seventeenth century, indeed, it was considered a mirror for society, and the household was used as an analogy for the state: just like the father was the head of the family, the king was the head of the state. This has been affirmed, among others, by Filmer who claimed that "if we compare the Natural Rights of a Father with those of a King, we find them all one, without any difference at all but only in the Latitude or Extent of them: as the Father over one Family,

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<sup>25</sup> Wrightson, K. (1982). *English Society 1580-1680*. Routledge University Press, pp. 48

<sup>26</sup> Kamen, H. (2000). *Early Modern European Society* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Routledge, pp. 16

<sup>27</sup> Gowing, L. (2022). *Gender Relations in Early Modern England*. Routledge, pp. 35

so the King as Father over many Families extends his care to preserve, feed, cloth, instruct and defend the whole Commonwealth”<sup>28</sup>. Consequently, because the family was seen as a small society, the household was hierarchically structured too: wives were submitted to their men, while children were subordinated to their parents and servants to their masters. Kids and servants had similar duties and they had to owe obedience and reverence to the same people.<sup>29</sup>

Moreover, in the family, it was also possible to identify a gender hierarchy: women were inferior to men, and people expected ladies to play this role both inside and outside their homes. Women were expected to be docile, obedient, and chaste; while men had to manage their families and monitor the respect of the rules. Despite the rules, people feared a subversion of the social order, and they feared women who did not respect their position within the family because this would mean challenging men’s superiority and their social position. At the time, indeed, it was common to believe that whether women would acquire power or tried to exercise it, society would be thrown into disarray and anarchy. The chaos created by disrespectful women was represented in literary and theatrical works like Richard Brome and Thomas Heywood’s play *The Lancashire Witches* where witchcraft has reversed the course of nature by subverting the social order.<sup>30</sup>

Public and private life, as we intend them today, were therefore significantly correlated. Order in the household was necessary to have order in the village and in the state, this is why everyone needed to respect the social and gender hierarchy. This idea was a common belief in Stuart England, and people learned about their social position and how to behave from when they were kids due to pressure from religion and society. One of the main instruments used to instill the idea of obedience and respect for the hierarchy was the catechism – a document containing questions and answers to explain the basic elements of religious principles and used to educate adults and children about these aspects. More precisely, familial hierarchy was taught through the Fifth Commandment

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<sup>28</sup> Filmer, S. (1680). *Patriarcha, or the Natural Power of Kings*. Richard Chiswell, pp. 24

<sup>29</sup> Amussen, S. D. (1993). *An ordered society: gender and class in early modern England*. Columbia University Press, pp. 1-3

<sup>30</sup> Fletcher, A., & Stevenson, J. (Eds.). (1987). *Order and disorder in early modern England*. Cambridge, pp. 118

about the duty to honor the mother and the father<sup>31</sup>: kids have to obey and respect their parents. However, since there existed an analogy between the family and the nation, this commandment could also be extended to the whole state, it follows that subjects must obey and respect their king. Thus, the general concept could be summed up as people should respect authorities above them, whether they are the king, parents, masters, magistrates, or teachers. The importance of such a Commandment derives from the fact that the Church was a central figure in the education of the population. Most of the people were indeed illiterate, they were not able to read and understand what the Bible or other documents said;<sup>32</sup> consequently, people did not have access to alternative explanations and knowledge. Thus, Christianity was strongly influential, and it used its power to persuade believers to respect patriarchy.

The idea that a well-regulated family means a well-regulated society was deeply rooted in every Englishman to the point that, to safeguard the respect of the patriarchal system within the family, books describing how people should behave were written. They were called moralistic guides or household manuals, and they described standards of conduct that should be respected by family members. In moralistic books, every aspect of private life was controlled, from the relationship between husband and wife to choosing a partner. Authors of moralistic guides contributed to sharing the analogy between the family and the state: “a familie is a little Church and a little common|wealth”<sup>33</sup>. Nonetheless, writers had different points of view about how to apply such parallelism. About this Amussen, in her *An Ordered Society* makes a comparison among four household manuals: Gouge’s *Of Domestic Duties*, Griffith’s *Bethel*, Brathwaite’s *The English Gentleman*, and Jon Dod and Robert Clever’s *A Godly Forme of Household Government* and, as a result, she was able to highlight similarities and differences among their points of view. Some noteworthy dissimilarities, she points out, are about the relationship between wives and husbands, some moral guides were stricter than others

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<sup>31</sup> Amussen, S. D. (1993). *An ordered society: gender and class in early modern England*. Columbia University Press, pp. 34-37; Schochet, G. (1969). II. Patriarchalism, Politics and Mass Attitudes in Stuart England. *The Historical Journal*, 12(3), pp. 424

<sup>32</sup> Schochet, G. (1969). II. Patriarchalism, Politics and Mass Attitudes in Stuart England. *The Historical Journal*, 12(3), pp. 424

<sup>33</sup> Gouge, W. (1622). *Of domestical duties*. London: Printed by Iohn Haviland for William Bladen, pp. 18

about the power that husbands had over their wives for what concerns, for example, whether the man could use violence on his woman or not. All, however, agree that love between parents and God was the glue that holds a family together and they also agree in claiming that wives had to contribute to the family economy.<sup>34</sup> Among writers, women too tried to advise men, even though it was not as common as male writers, an example is Dorothy Leigh's *Mother's Blessing* wrote this work as a guide to her sons. Moreover, there was no shortage of opponents. An example is Thomas Hobbes who claimed that mothers actually had more powers over children than fathers and he also added that the family was not a natural institution. Nonetheless, patriarchy remained central also in the following century<sup>35</sup> and it is not possible to know the impact that household books had on the population. Most of them were destined for people who already shared the same principles contained in the books. Together with household guides, there were other instruments used to remind people about their role in society, like ballads and chapbooks.<sup>36</sup>

Public order was respected until the early seventeenth century when the class hierarchy started to fall apart. This was due because of economic and demographic reasons: a fast increase in the population, inflation, and large-scale land exchanges. Consequently, authorities tried to respond to these changes through the imposition of the social order and the family-state analogy. It was only when the population growth started to come to a halt that the anxiety about having control over people began to decrease.<sup>37</sup>

This was the theory, in practice instead, the relationships between members of the family were not easy, especially those between husband and wife. Women, indeed, exercised an important role in everyday life (paragraph 1.2 will examine this aspect more in-depth) not only by taking care of the house and raising children but also by actively contributing

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<sup>34</sup> Amussen, S. D. (1993). *An ordered society: gender and class in early modern England*. Columbia University Press, pp. 39, 41-43

<sup>35</sup> Amussen, S. D. (1993). *An ordered society: gender and class in early modern England*. Columbia University Press, pp. 63

<sup>36</sup> Capp, B. (2003). *When gossips meet: Women, family, and neighbourhood in early modern England*. Oxford University Press, pp. 11

<sup>37</sup> Fletcher, A., & Stevenson, J. (Eds.). (1987). *Order and disorder in early modern England*. Cambridge University Press, pp. 1; Wrightson, K. (1982). *English Society 1580-1680*. Routledge University Press, pp. 216-217

to family finances. Nonetheless, even though there was a contradiction between the common belief and the reality of facts, the family always had social significance, at least until the seventeenth century.

## 1.2. The feminine condition

### 1.2.1. *Women's nature*

The English society was patriarchal, based on the role of men who were the main actors in social, political, economic, and domestic fields. While the female sex was relegated to a secondary role because of a natural quality and inherent characteristic: women were considered inferior because they had been created like this. This thesis spread through household guides and found its basis in the scientific and religious worlds. According to the spiritual ideology, women had been created by God as inferior human beings and this found confirmation in the Bible because Eve was created from Adam and not from his head but from his side.<sup>11</sup> Many religious texts had been interpreted, by representatives of the church and not, as a clear explanation of why women were naturally subordinated to men. An example is this paragraph from the Bible

Let a woman learn quietly with all submissiveness. <sup>12</sup>I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet. <sup>13</sup>For Adam was formed first, then Eve; <sup>14</sup>and Adam were not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. <sup>15</sup>Yet she will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith and love and holiness, with self-control.<sup>38</sup>

The inferiority of the female body was confirmed also by science. In the Early Modern Age. The knowledge about bodies and human beings was still limited to Aristotle and Galen who say that women and men are biologically different and from this, it follows that the female sex is inferior. Aristotle, for instance, affirmed women's subservience by claiming that "as between the sexes, the male is by nature superior and the female inferior, the male ruler and the female subject. And the same must also necessarily apply in the case of mankind as a whole"<sup>39</sup>. Studies in biology, therefore, agreed with the

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<sup>38</sup> *The Holy Bible*, English Standard Version. (2016). 1 Timothy 2:12

<sup>39</sup> Aristotle. *Politics*, Book 1, section 1254b. (n.d.b).

religious idea that women were inferior and, consequently, it was claimed that they were made to stay at home, procreate, and take care of the house and children. The female sex was hence relegated to the private sphere. The only exception was the monarchs like Queen Elizabeth. However, queens were justified because it was said that they had a female body but a male spirit,<sup>40</sup> this was claimed by Queen Elizabeth in 1588 at Tilbury “I know I have the body but of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and stomach of a king, and of a king of England too”<sup>41</sup>. Despite this, queens were not seen by the other women as models to be followed because the monarchs presented themselves as exceptions. Women actually had role models, they were faithful and obedient women who respected their social position and behaved according to what they had been taught, an example is Gouge’s wife Elizabeth.

Some authors even tried to change this idea of women as inferior. They tried to give a new interpretation to the Creation story. Worth noticing that they did not try to challenge women's position in the political, social, or economic field; instead, they tried to highlight less significant aspects, like the fact that the female sex deserved more respect. These attempts, however, failed.<sup>42</sup>

Despite the common belief that women were naturally inferior to men, it is worth mentioning that in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, some writers claimed that the two genders could be considered equal. Compared to the Medieval times, in these centuries, there was an increase in women’s status. Anderson and Gordon, in *Witchcraft and the Status of Women*, identify three major elements that enabled this transformation: economic reform, the influence of Puritanism, and female monarchs.<sup>43</sup> Firstly, changes in the agricultural and industrial sectors (such as the diffusion of enclosures and the expansion of industries) increased women’s chances of obtaining a job and therefore of being independent of men. Secondly, Puritanism's ideology improved women’s

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<sup>40</sup> Capp, B. (2003). *When gossips meet: Women, family, and neighbourhood in early modern England*. Oxford University Press, pp. 3-4, 9, 15

<sup>41</sup> The British Library. (2022). *Elizabeth I’s Tilbury Speech*.

<sup>42</sup> Capp, B. (2003). *When gossips meet: Women, family, and neighbourhood in early modern England*. Oxford University Press, pp. 16-17

<sup>43</sup> Anderson, A., & Gordon, R. (1978). Witchcraft and the Status of Women -- The Case of England. *The British Journal of Sociology*, 29(2), pp. 178-180

conditions and gave them more rights. To conclude, even though Queen Elizabeth was not seen as a model to imitate, her military and commercial success had an impact on the way people considered women.

Therefore, the religious, legal, and scientific worlds all agreed on the inferiority of women and despite some weak attempts made, the whole society formally perceived them as not being apt to act alone.

### *1.2.2. Female contribution to the family economy*

Considering the perception of the fairer sex, it is therefore not surprising that the management of the economic and family sphere was mainly handled by the head of the family. While women depended on their men's decisions.

Among the main principles illustrated in conduct books is that men should have power over their women – whether a daughter, a wife, or a servant – and over their living conditions including the financial aspect. With marriage, wives started to depend on their husbands both economically and socially. Marriage was therefore detrimental to women's economic independence and a woman was really free only after her husband's death. According to common law, all wives' possessions became their husband's property, and girls' status became linked to that of their spouses. A woman could possess some properties and manage her own business only with the consent of her husband. There were two ways of doing this: either by negotiating a contract between spouses, before the marriage, that guaranteed women the right to own property, or by transferring a woman's possessions to one of her friends, who would keep it so that she could use it. It follows that widows enjoyed more freedom than married ladies, and even though remarriage was popular, not everyone decided to do so. Unwedded ladies too, just like widows, were independent and they enjoyed legal identity and economic liberties similar to men.<sup>44</sup> The way sexes enjoyed freedoms, however, changed completely when young people were employed as apprentices. Both male and female servants were bound to serve their masters; however, boys once they had finished their period of apprenticeship, were free to start their businesses and be independent. Girls,

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<sup>44</sup> Earle, P. (1989). *The Making of the English Middle Class: Business, Society and Family Life in London 1660-1730*. Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 159

on the other hand, enjoyed more economic freedom as servants because once married they became subordinated to their husbands.<sup>45</sup>

The traditional role of women in society was relegated to their house: cooking, cleaning, looking after children, doing the shopping, and so on. Nonetheless, this was not possible in real life where it was not rare for women to be at the head of the household. It was the case of widows, unmarried women, or wives whose husbands worked far from home.<sup>46</sup> Nubile, as also mentioned before, were particularly free and they could become head of the household if her parents died; nonetheless, it could happen that she was not able to afford to live there. Being middle-class spinsters was not easy: they were considered a failure and not useful to society. Moreover, precisely because they did not have a close male figure, they were looked at with suspicion as possible threats to the patriarchal order. Single women living in rural areas, sometimes, were even pushed to leave their town to look for job opportunities in the city, where they could work as servants.<sup>47</sup> Therefore, it was not easy to live without a man because together with liberties, spinsters, in many cases, had to face poverty, starvation, and unemployment. For what concerns widows, many are examples of ladies who decided to not remarry and become not only the head of the family but also to keep managing their husbands' activities. Notwithstanding, some were not capable of running a business and, as a consequence, they mostly decided either to ask for help from an external assistant capable of handling activities or from their sons, or they could sell the business to someone else.<sup>48</sup> The possibilities of being independent were few. Most of the widows lived in precarious conditions.

Married women, furthermore, had a central role in the economic life of the household. Among the main tasks carried out, they assisted their husbands with their jobs, such as by being employed in taverns and shops. This was especially crucial in the event that

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<sup>45</sup> Gowing, L. (2022). *Gender Relations in Early Modern England*. Routledge, pp. 43-45

<sup>46</sup> Capp, B. (2003). *When gossips meet: Women, family, and neighbourhood in early modern England*. Oxford University Press, pp. 26

<sup>47</sup> Hill, B. (1994). *Women, work & sexual politics in eighteenth-century England*. Routledge, pp. 229, 231, 235

<sup>48</sup> Hill, B. (1994). *Women, work & sexual politics in eighteenth-century England*. Routledge, pp. 243, 247, 249

men would be unable to work, whether because he was ill, dead, or imprisoned.<sup>49</sup> Specifically, the agricultural sector was one where traditionally there was a high percentage of women employed. Farmers' wives could be employed in practical activities such as dairy, taking care of the vegetable garden, the orchard, and the animals (like pigs and chickens). Or they could be charged with organizing and supervising the work of servants. In addition, there were cases when wives had the duty to manage the farm's finances. Hence, women could have huge responsibilities.<sup>50</sup>

It was up to the husbands to teach their wives a job. Indeed, regardless the social rank, girls lacked working knowledge: ladies who were members of the upper classes married young; therefore, their skills were limited to what their families taught them. Girls of the inferior ranks mostly built experience when working as servants; thus, they did not know anything about conducting business. Despite this, the number of women who ran businesses was not low, especially among widows and unmarried women.<sup>51</sup>

It was also quite diffused for wives to have an occupation independent of that of their husbands. Instances of this are women employed in seasonal work, in medical activities, or in the market – in this last case, they enjoyed a great deal of freedom and independence because they had to move a lot far from home to procure supplies.<sup>52</sup> Another job carried out by women was to take care of children. There were instances when parents could not take care of their own kids; thus, “foster mothers” intervened, for example by hosting youths in their houses, in exchange for a sum of money. Women also played a crucial role in taking care of the sick people and the poor. Whether they were at the hospital or quarantined at home, ladies were employed as nurses, hospital care, housekeepers, and midwives.<sup>53</sup> In addition, Weber claimed that women, even though in theory they could not work as physicians because real doctors were only men<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Earle, P. (1989). *The Making of the English Middle Class: Business, Society and Family Life in London 1660-1730*. Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 161

<sup>50</sup> Hill, B. (1994). *Women, work & sexual politics in eighteenth-century England*. Routledge, pp. 31-32

<sup>51</sup> Earle, P. (1989). *The Making of the English Middle Class: Business, Society and Family Life in London 1660-1730*. Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 163, 167

<sup>52</sup> Capp, B. (2003). *When gossips meet: Women, family, and neighbourhood in early modern England*. Oxford University Press, pp. 47-48

<sup>53</sup> Willen, D. (1988). Women in the Public Sphere in Early Modern England: The Case of the Urban Working Poor. *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, 19(4), pp. 569-572

<sup>54</sup> Weber, A. S. (2003). Women's Early Modern Medical Almanacs in Historical Context. *English*

and women did not have access to the necessary knowledge, had a major role in the English healthcare system. The sixteenth-century medical system in England was a typically male field and based on the College of Physicians which was composed of few male medical scholars.<sup>55</sup> Despite this, women were able to find their own place in this environment and they helped serve in hospitals and during epidemics. Furthermore, they were allowed to practice medicine, even though this was possible only in some limited cases such as in the obstetrical field or, among the poor where they were allowed to operate as surgeons or physicians.<sup>56</sup>

Among working activities, just like in society and in the household, existed gender separation. Some jobs were considered masculine, while others were seen as feminine. In agriculture as well as in commercial, this division was flexible: men and women shared similar tasks.<sup>57</sup> In other sectors, instead, roles were clearly distinguished, for instance, nursing and cleaning were seen as female occupations exclusively. On the other hand, jobs in the guild were forbidden to women, they were reserved for men – even though, crafts that were not part of guilds were accessible to women too.<sup>58</sup> The only possibility a woman had to become part of the corporate order was to receive the right from her dead husband; however, she had significant restrictions to respect.<sup>59</sup> It could also happen that a working field went from being seen as belonging to one sex to belonging to another, such is the case of brewing, which became a male domain.<sup>60</sup>

Because of women's contribution to the family economy, wives sometimes became essential to maintain their families. It could even happen that she was the only working force of the household. Interestingly it is also the fact that women, to a certain extent, could autonomously manage their properties, for example by leaving a will. Despite this,

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*Literary Renaissance*, 33(3), pp. 366

<sup>55</sup> Weber, A. S. (2003). Women's Early Modern Medical Almanacs in Historical Context. *English Literary Renaissance*, 33(3), pp. 364

<sup>56</sup> Weber, A. S. (2003). Women's Early Modern Medical Almanacs in Historical Context. *English Literary Renaissance*, 33(3), pp. 370-372

<sup>57</sup> Gowing, L. (2022). *Gender Relations in Early Modern England*. Routledge, pp. 40-41

<sup>58</sup> Kamen, H. (2000). *Early Modern European Society* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Routledge, pp. 161

<sup>59</sup> Crowston, C. (2008). Women, Gender, and Guilds in Early Modern Europe: An Overview of Recent Research. *International Review of Social History*, 53, pp. 19

<sup>60</sup> Gowing, L. (2022). *Gender Relations in Early Modern England*. Routledge, pp. 40-41

the female workforce represented an inexpensive labor force, and women's wages were far lower than men's.<sup>61</sup>

Although societal expectations and conduct books tried to limit women's behavior, the reality was often very different, and women often found ways to defy these limitations and live life on their own terms. This allowed them to participate in various cultural, social, and economic activities, giving them a sense of empowerment and contribution to society. However, it is important to note that the extent of these liberties and roles varied greatly depending on social rank and family conditions. Overall, though, it is clear that they had a meaningful presence and impact in their communities.

### *1.2.3. Women's social role in the community*

The community was a crucial institution in Early Modern England. Both sexes were part of it, and within it, women were able to create a female network that was essential for their lives. Many elements contributed to the creation of strong relationships between women. Among these, there was the fact of living in the same area, having similar routines, frequenting the same places (the market, the church, neighbor's houses), having alike domestic duties, and therefore sharing similar difficulties. Crucial for becoming part of a community was to be respectful and kind towards their neighbors.<sup>62</sup> People were indeed expected to behave respecting public morality.

The female network involved both the upper- and middle classes. Women by knowing people of the elite and close to the monarch were able to make their families and friends obtain benefits.<sup>63</sup> When poor girls started to work as servants for wealthy families, they cooperated with higher-status women in fulfilling domestic duties and this naturally contributed to creating bonds among women.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Capp, B. (2003). *When gossips meet: Women, family, and neighbourhood in early modern England*. Oxford University Press, pp. 30, 44

<sup>62</sup> Poska, A., & Zanger, A. (2017). *The Politics of Female Alliance in Early Modern England* (C. Luckyj & N. J. O'Leary, Eds.). University of Nebraska Press, pp. 19-20

<sup>63</sup> Poska, A., & Zanger, A. (2017). *The Politics of Female Alliance in Early Modern England* (C. Luckyj & N. J. O'Leary, Eds.). University of Nebraska Press, pp. 15

<sup>64</sup> Herbert, A. E. (2014). *Female alliances: gender, identity, and friendship in early modern Britain*. Yale University Press, pp. 117

Relationships among women also developed thanks to the practice of gossiping – which even though it was common among men too, has been mostly considered a female practice. Girls, by talking, not only shared knowledge, like information about childbirth, but they also shared frivolous matters, stories, and jokes. In so doing, they spent some good time together and had some entertainment which contributed to forging bonds.<sup>65</sup>

Gossip was not only used to create bonds between people, but it also functioned as the main weapon to question someone's reputation. It was used as a means to put under pressure people who did not behave as they should and who were thought could threaten peace and make them change their conduct. For example, there were rituals that could be used to mock people who were thought did not behave as they should, such as charivari, shaming rituals, and skimmingtons.<sup>66</sup>

Female networks were crucial also to defending women's reputations. In local communities, there were some social non-written rules. People, therefore, had to behave in a certain way and maintain a certain reputation in order not to be excluded from such an organization. Female reputation was linked to sexual behavior. A woman was considered reliable only if she remained chaste, otherwise, she was appointed as a woman of loose morals. Men too had to respect some social rules if they did not want to be dishonored. He had the responsibility to not wife-beating, to perform sexual duties and they had to be superior and subjugate their wives.<sup>67</sup> Nonetheless, men had more chances than women to vindicate themselves.

Being part of a community meant having support. Women asked their neighbors for assistance and advice whenever it was necessary, and it was important for instance in case a wife was accused of a crime by a man: to have a good network meant to have testimonies in support of the accused. Because ladies were considered inferior, often, the accusations and complaints of only one woman were not taken seriously, and men could easily get away with it; however, this could not happen if the prosecutor was supported

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<sup>65</sup> Capp, B. (2003). *When gossips meet: Women, family, and neighbourhood in early modern England*. Oxford University Press, pp. 57

<sup>66</sup> Poska, A., & Zanger, A. (2017). *The Politics of Female Alliance in Early Modern England* (C. Luckyj & N. J. O'Leary, Eds.). University of Nebraska Press, pp. 21

<sup>67</sup> Kamen, H. (2000). *Early Modern European Society* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Routledge, pp. 169-170

by a group of friends. Therefore, collective action was a weapon used to exact revenge for being wronged. The same could happen when a wife had a particularly violent husband, ladies could offer moral, legal, and practical support, for example by hosting the woman in their home in order to avoid further acts of violence. Moreover, they could put social pressure on the accused to modify their behavior, for instance through the above-mentioned rituals.<sup>68</sup> Families could also rely on their neighbors in case they needed to borrow supplies and money.<sup>69</sup> However, only the most respected ladies of the community received help from the other neighbors, due to this it was fundamental to enjoy a good reputation.

Within the community where they lived, women, together with domestic duties, had also a series of other tasks, for example, they were called witnesses before the court, and they helped poor people. However, there is no doubt that one of the women's most important roles was linked to the household. This is true also for what concerns the relationships between neighbors. Female interactions, indeed, were mostly based on topics like pregnancy. In particular, childbirth was the female ambit par excellence because it was managed and controlled by women. The person in charge of delivering the baby was a woman, a midwife. The only exceptions were physicians who were men and who were only called for emergencies. The fact that doctors usually were not present at the time of the delivery could lead to a dispute between the obstetrician and the person in labor, or the midwife and the other women because they could have different opinions about how to operate and whether it was the case of calling a physician or not.<sup>70</sup> Moreover, because the majority of the population was illiterate, knowledge and information about this were mainly transmitted from woman to woman: older mothers were a source of reassurance, recommendations, and advice for new mums. Men, however, could not be completely excluded from pregnancy and labor, and they, for instance, could decide between the midwife and the nurse or offered solidarity and

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<sup>68</sup> Capp, B. (2003). *When gossips meet: Women, family, and neighbourhood in early modern England*. Oxford University Press, pp. 50-51, 58, Poska, A., & Zanger, A. (2017). *The Politics of Female Alliance in Early Modern England* (C. Luckyj & N. J. O'Leary, Eds.). University of Nebraska Press, pp. 19

<sup>69</sup> Poska, A., & Zanger, A. (2017). *The Politics of Female Alliance in Early Modern England* (C. Luckyj & N. J. O'Leary, Eds.). University of Nebraska Press, pp. 36

<sup>70</sup> Pollock, L. A. (1997). Childbearing and female bonding in early modern England\*. *Social History*, 22(3), pp. 298

assistance.<sup>71</sup> Men became even more involved in childbirth and pregnancy starting from the end of the Eighteenth century when men-midwives began to become popular and they entered into a field that had always been seen as an area reserved for women.<sup>72</sup>

Because the delivery was a very sensitive and scary moment for a new mother, a network of ladies was necessary. They offered both emotional and practical support to face the moment of birth and all the future situations linked to it. Therefore, it was a circumstance when girls could create a connection. Being invited to the delivery, as well as to the following events, such as christening and the celebrations, was a way to affirm being part of the community which was fundamental for living well.<sup>73</sup> At the same time, women were called to monitor what was happening in the community. Women's knowledge about reproduction, indeed, was also used as a means to verify whether there were cases of non-morally acceptable behaviors, like infanticide or sex outside marriage.<sup>74</sup>

Even though women's neighborhood networks and gossip were something positive for families. Men had contrasting feelings towards this system. They were indeed scared that this system could be used against them and the order of society. Indeed, gossip allowed ladies a certain degree of independence and transformed them into active agents. Women could talk about whatsoever and this meant also secrets and personal information about their husbands, or wives could use gossip networks as an excuse for other activities.

Worth noticing that women were particularly active in the society where they lived also with riots. These events were a kind of weapon used by poor people to be seen and considered in society. Women were among the major participants, and they felt a sense of legitimacy for what they were doing.<sup>75</sup> Ladies were among the main instigators for

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<sup>71</sup> Pollock, L. A. (1997). Childbearing and female bonding in early modern England\*. *Social History*, 22(3), pp. 294-295

<sup>72</sup> Cody, L. F. (2005). *Birthing the Nation: Sex, Science, and the Conception of Eighteenth-Century Britons*. Oxford University Press on Demand, pp. 10

<sup>73</sup> Capp, B. (2003). *When gossips meet: Women, family, and neighbourhood in early modern England*. Oxford University Press, pp. 50-51, 58

<sup>74</sup> Gowing, L. (2022). *Gender Relations in Early Modern England*. Routledge, pp. 51

<sup>75</sup> Poska, A., & Zanger, A. (2017). *The Politics of Female Alliance in Early Modern England* (C. Luckyj & N. J. O'Leary, Eds.). University of Nebraska Press, pp. 17, 18

many reasons. Firstly, riots erupted because of the increase in grain prices or because of food supplies and women were the ones in charge of going to the market and buying the necessary supplies for the family; consequently, they were those who noticed the changes. Secondly, it was diffused the idea that women would not be punished for revolts.<sup>76</sup> Therefore, despite the idea that women should remain outside the public and political world, they were actually quite central.

Overall, the role of women in early modern society was multifaceted and indispensable. Women's contributions were essential for the stability, well-being, and development of their communities. Despite facing significant obstacles and restrictions, women managed to exert influence and make meaningful contributions to the functioning of their societies.

### **1.3. Birth control**

#### *1.3.1. Preventing an unwanted pregnancy*

Pregnancy is a very special moment for women and parents in general. Nonetheless, in a period where there was limited scientific knowledge and the percentage of death due to births was high both for mothers and for children, being with a child was too important an issue to leave to chance.

It has been estimated that, on average, one-fifth of all toddlers in England did not reach the age of one, and 20% of mothers' deaths were caused by childbirth.<sup>77</sup> Moreover, there were no state aids for families, having a child could be perceived as an extremely scary moment and an economic cost. Having children was expensive. Kids started to become a "profit" only once they were old enough to contribute to family activities, which means after many years. In addition, even when they were old enough to fulfill some domestic duties and to help their parents, around five or seven years old, parents had to keep spending money for them to nourish and clothe them for instance. In addition, children were economic costs not only for their families but also for the community. Because

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<sup>76</sup> Capp, B. (2003). *When gossips meet: Women, family, and neighbourhood in early modern England*. Oxford University Press, pp. 311, 315-316

<sup>77</sup> Kamen, H. (2000). *Early Modern European Society* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Routledge, pp. 18, 163

when parents were not able to take care of their own kids, in many areas, it was up to the parish to support the children.<sup>78</sup>

Birth control was, therefore, more important than ever, to regulate pregnancies, especially for women who were those who risked the most, both physically and socially. Attempts to regulate pregnancies had been made already in the Early Modern period, through the use of abortion, or oral and “mechanical” methods. Notwithstanding, family planning is a practice that efficaciously started to develop only in the twentieth century, with the invention of contraceptives such as the pill and condoms<sup>79</sup>

Prior to the nineteenth century, one of the methods adopted by the community to control births was marriages. People were expected to have children only after marriage; thus, by limiting access to weddings, the number of sons and daughters would be inferior because the higher the age, the fewer women were fertile.<sup>80</sup> Furthermore, society exerted strong pressure on unwed women to refrain from sexual intercourse. This strategy was so successful that the number of children born out of matrimony dropped in the 1660s and 1670s.<sup>81</sup>

Oral techniques included the use of natural contraceptives such as herbs, spices, plants, or conserves of fruits that were thought to prevent women from getting pregnant.<sup>82</sup>

The employed mechanical methods consisted of pessaries, genital baths, and bloodletting. The first one is composed of natural substances to insert into the female genitals or, alternatively, women could do a vaginal enema. Genital baths were instead administered to anesthetize the outer sex organs and thereby reduce erections and orgasms (scholars at the time had the conviction that to get pregnant having an orgasm, by both the man and the woman, was necessary). To conclude, bloodletting was

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<sup>78</sup> Cook, H. (2007). Sexuality and Contraception in Modern England: Doing the History of Reproductive Sexuality. *Journal of Social History*, 40(4), pp. 917

<sup>79</sup> Cook, H. (2007). Sexuality and Contraception in Modern England: Doing the History of Reproductive Sexuality. *Journal of Social History*, 40(4), pp. 917

<sup>80</sup> Cook, H. (2007). Sexuality and Contraception in Modern England: Doing the History of Reproductive Sexuality. *Journal of Social History*, 40(4), pp. 921

<sup>81</sup> Roth, R. (2001). Homicide in Early Modern England 1549-1800: The Need for a Quantitative Synthesis. *Crime, Histoire & Sociétés / Crime, History & Societies*, 5(2), pp. 40

<sup>82</sup> Schnucker, R. V. (1975). Elizabethan Birth Control and Puritan Attitudes. *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 5(4), pp. 657

considered efficient because the belief was that blood was necessary to produce sperm; thus, by removing the blood of a man, he would not be able to have coitus.<sup>83</sup>

Among the mechanical techniques adopted, there were also breastfeeding, abstinence, and coitus interruptus. Today, it is well known that breastfeeding is not a successful contraception. Even when children nurse milk from their mothers, women could become pregnant. Furthermore, it is a method that can be used, of course, only for a short period of time and only if parents have already had a child. Abstinence and coitus interruptus were the most effective; nonetheless, they require strong self-control by both partners.<sup>84</sup> While oral and anal sex cannot be included in the methods used to avoid pregnancies because they were not diffused in England until the twentieth century. Penetration was indeed considered an essential practice by scholars of the time because it was seen as the demonstration of male dominance over women.<sup>85</sup>

Knowledge about these practices mainly circulated among women thanks to midwives and widows who had a longer experience compared to young ladies with regard to childbirth and female issues in general. Indeed, childbirth was women's sphere of competence. The measures were not completely effective; however, they were the only methods they knew, and the only option they had.<sup>86</sup> In addition to female knowledge, in the seventeenth century, handbooks about medical procedures started to circulate thanks to a movement that aimed at freeing this kind of information.<sup>87</sup>

In the Early Modern period, a series of books about maternity and female medicine were published. However, despite these books, the topic of women's diseases was still perceived as taboo.<sup>88</sup> Among books that aimed at informing about health, there were

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<sup>83</sup> Schnucker, R. V. (1975). Elizabethan Birth Control and Puritan Attitudes. *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 5(4), pp. 657-658

<sup>84</sup> Scott, C. (2013). Birth Control and Conceptions of Pregnancy in Seventeenth-Century England. *Retrospectives*, 2(1), pp. 80

<sup>85</sup> Cook, H. (2007). Sexuality and Contraception in Modern England: Doing the History of Reproductive Sexuality. *Journal of Social History*, 40(4), pp. 917-918

<sup>86</sup> Scott, C. (2013). Birth Control and Conceptions of Pregnancy in Seventeenth-Century England. *Retrospectives*, 2(1), pp. 75, 78

<sup>87</sup> Crawford, P. (1981). Attitudes to Menstruation in Seventeenth-Century England. *Past & Present*, 91, pp. 48

<sup>88</sup> Weber, A. S. (2003). Women's Early Modern Medical Almanacs in Historical Context. *English Literary Renaissance*, 33(3), pp. 383-384

almanacs that were widely diffused especially in rural areas. The first one that specialized in female health was Jinner's almanacs which circulated to give advice to ladies and spread gynecological knowledge. It also helped women to control their menstrual periods by noting the start, the end, and the time passed between one period and another one.<sup>89</sup>

In such a society, where resources and opportunities were limited, it was understandable that people would try to control their family size in order to better ensure that they were able to provide for and support each child in a way that aligns with the expectations of their community and to protect themselves and their reputations within a society where social standing and respect were highly valued.

### 1.3.2. *Abortion*

The above-mentioned methods aimed to prevent maternity. Nonetheless, in the seventeenth century methods to interrupting pregnancies were diffused too. This practice was indeed a type of family planning, and it was quite common at the time.

In Early Modern England, there was not a clear definition of abortion. In general, this term was used to indicate an interruption of pregnancy whether it was voluntary or accidental. Moreover, it was a controversial issue because it was tolerable whether used to control birth among married women; however, it was condemned when single or adulterous ladies decided to terminate their pregnancies.<sup>90</sup> Furthermore, there was disagreement about when the interruption of pregnancy started to be considered a homicide: once babies were already born or immediately after they started to move into their mother's wombs. Some thought that before quickening – when the mother can feel the first baby's movements – it was allowed to try to end the pregnancy and it was not homicide. This could be due to the fact that the knowledge about pregnancies, at the time, was very scarce – experts thought that a fetus could be considered human only once the mother felt it was moving – and it was hard for a woman to realize to be pregnant because even though menstruations are an essential indicator of whether a

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<sup>89</sup> Thauvette, C. (2010). Sex, Astrology, and the Almanacs of Sarah Jinner. *Early Modern Women*, 5, pp. 244-245

<sup>90</sup> Dolan, F. E. (1994). *Dangerous Familiars: Representations of Domestic Crime in England, 1550 - 1700*. Cornell University Press, pp. 131

woman is with a child or not, at that time, the cessation of the period could be caused by many other reasons, like diseases, and weight gain did not always occur due to malnutrition.<sup>91</sup> In addition, understanding about gynecological aspects was scarce and the main source of information was the Bible where women with menstruation were described as impure<sup>92</sup>: “When a woman has her regular flow of blood, the impurity of her monthly period will last seven days, and anyone who touches her will be unclean till evening.”<sup>93</sup>

Most of the methods used to have a pregnancy termination were natural and they consisted of drinking herbal positions, eating certain types of plants and medicines, or trying some kind of pessary and suppository. It seems, however, that they were efficient only if consumed in large quantities and this could intoxicate women.<sup>94</sup> The idea behind these substances was to induce intense vomiting or bowel movements because this was thought it would cause the death of the fetus.<sup>95</sup>

Knowledge about these substances was transmitted mostly through midwife manuals and recipe books, the same that provided explanations on how to avoid pregnancy. Sometimes, however, suggestions on how to have an abortion were indirect; indeed, by suggesting which plants do not use during pregnancy, a woman could decide to do the opposite just to stop the gestation. Otherwise, some herbs that were prescribed for making a woman’s period back functioned because the woman was pregnant, without her knowing, and they induced the termination of the pregnancy.<sup>96</sup> Examples of these potions were contained also in Jinner’s almanacs.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Spivack, C. (2007). To “Bring Down the Flowers”: The Cultural Context of Abortion Law in Early Modern England. *William and Mary Journal of Women and the Law*, 14(1), pp. 109, 116, 120, 127, 134

<sup>92</sup> Crawford, P. (1981). Attitudes to Menstruation in Seventeenth-Century England. *Past & Present*, 91, pp. 49

<sup>93</sup> *The Holy Bible*, English Standard Version. (2016). Leviticus 15:19

<sup>94</sup> Cook, H. (2007). Sexuality and Contraception in Modern England: Doing the History of Reproductive Sexuality. *Journal of Social History*, 40(4), pp. 916

<sup>95</sup> Schnucker, R. V. (1975). Elizabethan Birth Control and Puritan Attitudes. *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 5(4), pp. 659

<sup>96</sup> Weber, A. S. (2003). Women’s Early Modern Medical Almanacs in Historical Context. *English Literary Renaissance*, 33(3), pp 389

<sup>97</sup> Thauvette, C. (2010). Sex, Astrology, and the Almanacs of Sarah Jinner. *Early Modern Women*, 5, pp. 246

The practice of abortion, therefore, was widespread even though it represented a contentious method to interrupt pregnancies. The scientific knowledge about a fetus' life was limited and faced scrutiny from religious authorities, the medical community, and the state.

### 1.3.3. *Infanticide*

Another practice quite diffused was the killing of infants which, even though it was illegal, was quite diffused. The highest percentage of homicides committed against children happened in households and it was perpetrated by victims' masters or parents.<sup>98</sup> Both fathers and mothers committed this crime. The former was more likely to kill their children with suffocation or exposure, while the latter would most likely entrust newborns to nurses unable to take care of them; thus, when children died of hardship blame laid on those women.<sup>99</sup>

Despite previous legal attempts to limit infanticide, this phenomenon was still widely diffused. This led to the creation of the 1624 infanticide statute which was "An Act to Prevent the Destroying and Murthering of Bastard Children"<sup>100</sup>. This document, however, concerned only a limited category of people: single mothers who had illegitimate newborns. This was due to the fact that the real aim of these kinds of documents was to safeguard the social order by regulating homeless, single, and disadvantaged women's sexuality. And it was with this in mind, according to Spivack, that authorities tried to limit infanticide in order to limit illicit sexual activities.<sup>101</sup>

As a result of the Act, people started to pay more attention to what happened among them to identify possible infanticides. This led people to investigate their neighborhood whenever they suspected that a single woman was pregnant or had given birth.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Dolan, F. E. (1994). *Dangerous Familiars: Representations of Domestic Crime in England, 1550 - 1700*. Cornell University Press, pp. 122

<sup>99</sup> Dolan, F. E. (1994). *Dangerous Familiars: Representations of Domestic Crime in England, 1550 - 1700*. Cornell University Press, pp. 124

<sup>100</sup> Billingham, J. (2019). Appendix 1. The 1624 Infanticide Act. In *Infanticide in Tudor and Stuart England* (pp. 327-327). Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.

<sup>101</sup> Spivack, C. (2007). To "Bring Down the Flowers": The Cultural Context of Abortion Law in Early Modern England. *William and Mary Journal of Women and the Law*, 14(1), pp. 113-114

<sup>102</sup> Dolan, F. E. (1994). *Dangerous Familiars: Representations of Domestic Crime in England, 1550 - 1700*. Cornell University Press, pp. 133

Unmarried expectant mothers tried to hide their pregnancy as they could, by attributing malaise to illnesses such as colic or wind. Both women and men (although these latter rarely called authorities to investigate) looked for evidence on female suspects' bodies. They were scrutinized: their stomachs and their breasts were examined. Daughters and servants were easy to check because of their social position; the same could not be said for widows or spinsters who enjoyed a certain degree of freedom and independence.<sup>103</sup>

Those who decided to murder their children were mostly unmarried women who worked as servants or had just stopped working because having a child outside the marriage was not well seen by society, and it could endanger women both socially and economically: they were dishonored and publicly humiliated, they would be destined to be employed only in degrading jobs and their chances of getting married dropped.<sup>104</sup> Despite this, illegitimacy was a quite diffused phenomenon in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: around one-fifth of the first newborns were the result of premarital conception.<sup>105</sup> In addition, it could happen that married women as well could decide to end the life of their newborn. In this case, unlike single women, they were more easily excused by the legal system because considered mentally ill.<sup>106</sup>

Among the reasons that led to infanticide, were economic and social circumstances that pushed women, especially unmarried ones, to not be able to take care of their children. Mothers who decided to act in such a way were, indeed, desperate. They thought that they could not act in any other way and that killing their children was the best thing to do for their newborns. Parents were seen as victims of their social and economic situation, unable to give their children a decent life.<sup>107</sup> This theory is supported by the increase of suspected neonaticides and neonaticides that occurred at the end of the sixteenth and at the beginning of the seventeenth century when people's possibility of

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<sup>103</sup> Gowing, L. (1997). Secret Births and Infanticide in Seventeenth-Century England. *Past & Present*, 156, pp. 90-93

<sup>104</sup> Roth, R. (2001). Homicide in Early Modern England 1549-1800: The Need for a Quantitative Synthesis. *Crime, Histoire & Sociétés / Crime, History & Societies*, 5(2), pp. 43

<sup>105</sup> Kamen, H. (2000). *Early Modern European Society* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Routledge, pp. 20

<sup>106</sup> Dolan, F. E. (1994). *Dangerous Familiars: Representations of Domestic Crime in England, 1550 - 1700*. Cornell University Press, pp. 127-128

<sup>107</sup> Dolan, F. E. (1994). *Dangerous Familiars: Representations of Domestic Crime in England, 1550 - 1700*. Cornell University Press, pp. 136-137

supporting their children and creating a house on their own declined. The causes were various, such as falling wages.<sup>108</sup>

Children were believed to be victims of infanticide only if they died when they were completely out of their mothers' bodies. Hence, some women tried to rewrite what happened during birth to make death appear natural, claiming that children were born dead.<sup>109</sup> Due to this, they tried to give birth in the easiest and fastest way possible, describing labor as unexpected, so that the woman could justify why she did not ask for assistance. Thus, contrary to legitimate mothers, illegitimate ones tried to hide as much as they could at the moment of birth so that no one would know what really happened.<sup>110</sup>

Midwives and all the other people present could represent a threat to a woman who was giving birth. Not all the women present at the moment of the delivery were, indeed, new mother's friends, some ladies were there only because they felt that they had to be there. In some cases, ladies were called to be part of the childbirth just in case a child would be stillborn, then there would be witnesses and the mother could not be accused of murder.<sup>111</sup> In addition, during labor new mothers-to-be would be questioned by the midwife to know who the illicit child's father was. The nurse could even blackmail the patient, by claiming that she would not help her if the mother would not say the name. This information was crucial because, according to the law, it was up to the father to maintain the newborn so that it would no longer be the parish's task to take care of the kid.<sup>112</sup>

Ultimately, infanticide was a means of controlling births in early modern England, driven by social, economic, and cultural pressures. While infanticide was condemned as a criminal act, it must also be understood in the context of the social and economic

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<sup>108</sup> Roth, R. (2001). Homicide in Early Modern England 1549-1800: The Need for a Quantitative Synthesis. *Crime, Histoire & Sociétés / Crime, History & Societies*, 5(2), pp. 39

<sup>109</sup> Gowing, L. (1997). Secret Births and Infanticide in Seventeenth-Century England. *Past & Present*, 156, pp. 98

<sup>110</sup> Gowing, L. (1997). Secret Births and Infanticide in Seventeenth-Century England. *Past & Present*, 156, pp. 99

<sup>111</sup> Pollock, L. A. (1997). Childbearing and female bonding in early modern England\*. *Social History*, 22(3), pp. 297-298

<sup>112</sup> Pollock, L. A. (1997). Childbearing and female bonding in early modern England\*. *Social History*, 22(3), pp. 303-304

pressures faced by women in early modern England. It was a desperate measure taken by women who faced dire circumstances and felt that they had no other choice.

## CHAPTER TWO

### FROM ENCOURAGING TO LIMITING BIRTHRATE

As it emerged from the previous chapter, the family was central to governments since there existed a parallelism between it and the state. How people behaved was particularly supervised as they were expected to respect a social order. Nonetheless, people were important also in a broader sense. The size of the population, and thus the number of individuals in it, were in fact considered fundamental to the development of an economically and militarily strong state. Over the years, there have been various scholars and theories each with their own idea of what would make a state stronger. In the Early Modern period, these theories, with some exceptions, were directed towards the belief that the prosperity of a state was directly proportional to the number of its inhabitants. The real game changer for history, but also for the topic of the birth control movement, was Malthus who, by supporting the idea that too numerous populations will not be beneficial, unintentionally started a movement that encouraged contraception.

#### **2.1. The population as an asset**

##### *2.1.1. Mercantilism*

Already during the Greek period and in Aristotle's works, it is possible to find the first references to the importance of supplying men and thus having a large population. Nonetheless, it was only starting from the Seventeenth century, when the mathematics of population developed, and the term "population" began to be used (before words with a vaguer meaning were used, such as "multitude"), that the debate about population exploded.<sup>113</sup>

The general idea in the whole world, at least until the end of the Eighteenth century when Malthus elaborated his doctrine, was that the higher the number of the population, the more powerful the state was, and fundamental for the diffusion of such an idea was the Mercantilism. This ideology, indeed, can be considered the first political and

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<sup>113</sup> Kreager, P. (1991). Early Modern Population Theory: A Reassessment. *Population and Development Review*, 17(2), pp. 213

economic current of thought that connected the regulation of the population to the management of a country, and it was the dominant economic system from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century. At the basis of this theory, there was the idea that a nation's strength depended on money and the number of inhabitants. The former was strictly related to the quantity of precious metals (gold and silver) present in a country since they were the main indicator of prosperity, and if they could not be found in the mines within a state's territory, it could be enhanced by trading: boosting the exportations of manufactured products while reducing importations.<sup>114</sup> A large population, on the other hand, was essential as this meant having a workforce to produce goods for sale, a market where to trade, and a strong army in case of war. Consequently, governments implemented various policies to raise the birthrate, such as discouraging not getting married, promoting marriages, and urging people to have more babies. In addition, they also made the consequence of having a baby out of wedlock less harsh or not harsh at all and built hospitals for abandoned babies.<sup>115</sup> According to Stangland, such incentives to increase inhabitants were only limited by the desire to reduce the number of the poor.

As a demonstration of the importance of a large population, it is possible to observe William Petty's work. He, indeed, was an economist and physician who calculated how much wealth England and Ireland had by looking at how many people lived there, and to do this he applied the so-called "political arithmetic".<sup>116</sup> According to the scholar, indeed, "fewness of people, is real poverty"<sup>117</sup>, as he believed that increasing population was a clear indication of increasing prosperity and he recognized that "thin peopled places" did not have some serious advantages that were instead present in a more populous country, like greater "charge of the cure of their souls" and "ministry", "mutual defence" if invaded, a better "charge of the administrative justice", and people who live isolated by themselves should be self-sufficient when it comes to aspects such

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<sup>114</sup> Stangland, C. (1904). *Pre-Malthusian doctrines of population; a study in the history of economic theory*. New York (State), pp. 119

<sup>115</sup> Stangland, C. (1904). *Pre-Malthusian doctrines of population; a study in the history of economic theory*. New York (State), pp. 123-129

<sup>116</sup> Black, R. D. C. (1985). Theories of population in Britain and Ireland before Malthus. *Quaderni Di Storia Dell'economia Politica*, 3(1), pp. 4, 8

<sup>117</sup> Petty, W. (1769). *Tracts; chiefly relating to Ireland. Containing I. A Treatise of Taxes and Contributions. II. Essays in Political Arithmetic. III. The Political Anatomy of Ireland. By... Sir W. Petty. To which is prefixed his last will*. Boulter Grierson, pp. 19

as defence, medical care, and food supplies.<sup>118</sup> However, he acknowledged that in order for additional resources to be beneficial, there must also be an increase in the efficiency and productivity of labor and natural resources.<sup>119</sup> Moreover, he also recognized that population growth has to come to a halt “when the people of London shall come to be so near the people of England”<sup>120</sup> seeing as, even though an increase in population was positive under some circumstances, it must be controlled to bring profit to the state. Petty’s theory and its political arithmetic derived from another author, particularly famous when talking about population, his friend John Graunt – born in 1620, he was one of the first demographers. This last one, indeed, with his *Natural and Political Observations... on the London Bills of Mortality* published in 1662 marked a turning point in favor of a quantitative approach to population study. From this, the author analyzed English society, and he was able to state the growth of the population follows a geometrical pattern; even though, it faces limitations such as wars and epidemics.<sup>121</sup> From the study of the mortality bills of London, Graunt was able to furnish a schematic description of death causes and he tried to deduce, through different calculations and assumptions, London's population in the seventeenth century.<sup>122</sup> Knowledge about the population’s “Sex, State, Age, Religion, Trade, Rank, or Degree, &c.”<sup>123</sup> he found, was necessary to make trade and government more certain and regular.<sup>124</sup> In a period where population played such an important role in the political and economic aspects, Graunt’s and Petty’s studies provided the necessary tools also to other scholars to better comprehend the impact of phenomena like weather, smallpox, and its inoculation on

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<sup>118</sup> Petty, W. (1769). *Tracts; chiefly relating to Ireland. Containing I. A Treatise of Taxes and Contributions. II. Essays in Political Arithmetic. III. The Political Anatomy of Ireland. By... Sir W. Petty. To which is prefixed his last will.* Boulter Grierson, pp. 219-220

<sup>119</sup> Stangeland, C. (1904). *Pre-Malthusian doctrines of population; a study in the history of economic theory.* New York (State), pp. 144

<sup>120</sup> Petty, W. (1888). *Essays on mankind and political arithmetic* (Vol. 142). Cassell, pp. 36

<sup>121</sup> Stangeland, C. (1904). *Pre-Malthusian doctrines of population; a study in the history of economic theory.* New York (State), pp. 143

<sup>122</sup> Rusnock, A. A. (2002). *Vital accounts: quantifying health and population in eighteenth-century England and France.* Cambridge University Press, pp. 31, 33

<sup>123</sup> Graunt, J. (1939). *Natural and political observations made upon the bills of mortality.* Baltimore: the Johns Hopkins Press. (Original work published 1662), pp. 78

<sup>124</sup> Graunt, J. (1939). *Natural and political observations made upon the bills of mortality.* Baltimore: the Johns Hopkins Press. (Original work published 1662), pp. 79

population trends.<sup>125</sup> Political arithmetic was particularly important as at the time it was the only reliable source for calculating the number of people living in a given area due to popular and religious opposition to a real census.<sup>126</sup>

Since the focus of mercantilism and its writers was on the state's strength and how to enlarge it, in many cases, the discussion of population was only incidental to a wider argument. It is the case of Jean Bodin – jurist and political philosopher – who mentioned the population size when he addressed the issue of “how to prevent those disorders which spring from Excessive Wealth and Excessive poverty”<sup>127</sup>. In this chapter, he stated that a wide multitude of people is necessary in order to have a great number of intermediaries between the rich and the poor. It follows that men should not limit the number of children to have because “the strength of the commonwealth consists in men”<sup>128</sup> and because in such a way there would be a check on “factious seditions”.

Despite the ideas expressed before, already at the turn of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, some academics started to anticipate some of the issues that would later be addressed by Malthus, such as the fear of overpopulation. An example has been presented by Cipolla who showed that in the sixteenth century, people started to diffuse the idea that a certain limit to population extent was necessary. The plague, therefore, went from being seen as a punishment sent by God to discipline humankind (during Medieval times) to being perceived as a means used by nature to regulate the number of people and maintain a balance between the number of people and the limited resources available. An example of this is Giovanni Battista Baliano known as Baliani – mathematician and physician – who, in his *Treatise on the Plague* talked about the “order of nature” in which births and deaths must be balanced by pestilence and war so as not

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<sup>125</sup> Rusnock, A. A. (2002). *Vital accounts: quantifying health and population in eighteenth-century England and France*. Cambridge University Press, pp. 44, 93, 109

<sup>126</sup> Rusnock, A. A. (2002). *Vital accounts: quantifying health and population in eighteenth-century England and France*. Cambridge University Press, pp. 183

<sup>127</sup> Bodin, J., & Tooley, M. J. (1955). *Six books of the commonwealth* (Vol. 56). Oxford: B. Blackwell. (Original work published 1576), pp. 196

<sup>128</sup> Bodin, J., & Tooley, M. J. (1955). *Six books of the commonwealth* (Vol. 56). Oxford: B. Blackwell. (Original work published 1576), pp. 198

to result in an overpopulated world which would cause people to die due to starvation.<sup>129</sup>

Another author to be mentioned is Giovanni Botero – priest, poet, and diplomat – who, in addition to being in favor of a large population, in his work *Treaties On the Causes of the Greatness of Cities*, highlighted that restricted access to natural resources limits population growth. While investigating the reason why cities decline after a period of growth and prosperity, the scholar observed that since “the augmentation of cities, proceeded partly out of the virtue generative of men, and partly out of the virtue nutritive of men”<sup>130</sup> and since the reproductive capacity of humans has remained unchanged over time, it follows that food is the key element that affects population size. Families, indeed, not having access to the necessary resources “either forbare to marry, or, if they did marry, their children oppress with penury, their parents affording them no relief, fled their country, and fought abroad for better fortune.”<sup>131</sup>

Niccolò Machiavelli – philosopher, historian, and diplomat – as well, was in favor of a large population and he added that if a state had a small fertility capacity it was not a problem as there were examples of states, such as Venice, that were able to become bigger by conquering other territories.<sup>132</sup> However, he also recognized that the world, at some point, will be in a situation of overcrowding such that “the world will purge herself in one or another of these three ways [plague, famine or flood], to the end that men, becoming few and contrite, may amend their lives and live with more convenience”<sup>133</sup>.

Therefore, governments implemented policies focused on population growth, especially during the Mercantilist period. However, it was already beginning to be realized among scholars that growth could not be infinite and uncontrollable as there

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<sup>129</sup> Cipolla C. M. (1974). The plague and the pre-Malthus Malthusians. *The Journal of European economic history*, 3, pp. 277-278

<sup>130</sup> Botero, G. (1606). *A Treatise Concerning the Causes of the Magnificencie and Greatness of Cities...* London: T. P [urfoot], pp. 91

<sup>131</sup> Botero, G. (1606). *A Treatise Concerning the Causes of the Magnificencie and Greatness of Cities...* London: T. P [urfoot], pp. 94

<sup>132</sup> Kreager, P. (1991). Early Modern Population Theory: A Reassessment. *Population and Development Review*, 17(2), pp. 217

<sup>133</sup> Machiavelli, N. (2019). *Discourses on the first decade of Titus Livius*. Good Press. (Original work published 1531), pp. 261

were factors, such as access to food, that would cause a decrease in prosperity if they were not taken into account and regulated.

### 2.1.2. *Physiocracy*

As a response to the Mercantilist doctrine, in the eighteenth century in France, the Physiocracy movement was born. The Physiocrats were a group of thinkers centered around François Quesnay – a French economist and physician. His followers, however, limited themselves in trying to make his ideas as popular as possible.

During such a period, people started to realize that well-being was strongly correlated to access to food. As a consequence, contrary to Mercantile thinkers, Physiocrats believed that wealth was not solely determined by the quantity of precious metals a country possessed, but rather by the productivity of its land and the efficiency of its agricultural sector. Thus, they believed that the key to economic prosperity lay in maximizing the output of the agricultural sector and criticized mercantilism for its economic policies focused on manufactured goods and foreign trade. From this, it follows that physiocrats believed that agriculture dictated population size, distribution, and lifestyle.<sup>134</sup>

Moreover, one of the key principles of physiocracy is the concept of the "natural order" of economic activity. According to the physiocrats, the economy is governed by natural laws that determine the distribution of wealth and the allocation of resources. They argued that government intervention in the economy, such as regulations and restrictions on trade and commerce, disrupted the natural order and led to inefficiency and stagnation.

This movement, despite its attempts, has always been misinterpreted as a result of a series of events. Firstly, due to the policies applied by the French First Minister of State, Turgot, who had been identified as a Physiocrat. The maneuvers he applied turned out to be inefficient in improving the French economy and were used by opponents of Physiocracy as a demonstration of the inefficiency of the movement. Secondly and more significant were Adam Smith's writings. He was responsible for the spread of

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<sup>134</sup> Charbit, Y., & Virmani, A. (2002). The Political Failure of an Economic Theory: Physiocracy. *Population (English Edition, 2002-),* 57(6), pp. 856

Physiocratic ideas in Britain. However, the scholar misinterpreted the movement and as a result, people had access to an untrue version.<sup>135</sup>

All in all, Physiocracy had a significant influence on the development of economic thought and policy in the 18th century. Its emphasis on the importance of agriculture as the foundation of wealth and population size, and its advocacy for minimal government intervention in the economy had a lasting impact on subsequent economic theories and population debate.

### 2.1.3. Discussion about population size

The discussion about population was not only about whether it was better to have a great multitude of inhabitants than a smaller number or whether agriculture was central or not, but scholars also argued about whether a decline had taken place in their time or not.

Quesnay among various aspects, raised doubts about the fact that the French population declined instead of growing, and the scholar was not the only one to discuss such an issue. Montesquieu was, indeed, another French author – as well as judge, historian, and political philosopher – who addressed the topic of population size, and he did it in his *Persian Letters* written in 1721. This book was an imaginary correspondence between two Persian travelers who visited for the first time Europe and gave their impressions about its demography and its conditions. In particular, the focus was on France of which it is said that “in no country are they so few in number”<sup>136</sup>. Among the letters, it is possible to have a first idea about the European demographic situation and its problems of underpopulation. About this, the author of the book tries to answer the question “Why is it that the world is so thinly populated in comparison with former times?”<sup>137</sup> by analyzing various aspects. On the one side, natural and environmental elements (he was among the first ones to consider the climate as a central factor that could influence societies) like “universal plagues” and “illnesses which come from changing a good

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<sup>135</sup> Neill, T. P. (1948). Quesnay and Physiocracy. *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 9(2), pp. 154-157

<sup>136</sup> Montesquieu. (1993). *The Persian Letters*. Penguin Classics. (Original work published 1721), pp. 118

<sup>137</sup> Montesquieu. (1993). *The Persian Letters*. Penguin Classics. (Original work published 1721), pp. 202

climate for a bad one, and others which are due simply to the change of climate itself"<sup>138</sup>. On the other side, economic, social, and political aspects such as "the way customs [polygamy and divorce] have changed", "the great number of eunuchs [religious men and women who were not allowed to marry and procreate]", "universal opposition to agriculture and work" as it is the case of lands occupied by savages, and "gentle methods of government" that have the effect of fostering immigration<sup>139</sup>. Hence, Montesquieu predicted a depopulation that would continue in the future as well.

The question of whether there were more or fewer inhabitants in the past later also reached Britain, primarily, sparking a debate between David Hume and Robert Wallace. The latter – minister of the Church of Scotland and economist – was of the view that modernity was decadent compared to the simple virtues of antiquity. The author, indeed, in 1753 in his *Dissertation on the Numbers of Mankind in Ancient and Modern Times* affirmed that trade and commerce, as well as big cities, are detrimental to population growth "as they promote luxury, and prevent many useful hands from being employed in agriculture"<sup>140</sup> while only if "a people preserve their taste, and continue to be industrious, they will multiply prodigiously"<sup>141</sup>. Moreover, according to Wallace, even though it is not possible to know the exact number of the world's population, "mankind must have been much more numerous at a certain period already past, than they have ever been"<sup>142</sup>; however, he added that it is not possible to decree that "mankind are always increasing, and are most numerous in the ages most distant from the beginning; or that they multiply regularly, according to any states law: on the contrary, it is certain, that they multiply irregularly, and may have been more numerous in some preceding, than in some subsequent ages"<sup>143</sup>. The causes for this unstable condition can be traced,

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<sup>138</sup> Montesquieu. (1993). *The Persian Letters*. Penguin Classics. (Original work published 1721), pp. 204, 216-219

<sup>139</sup> Montesquieu. (1993). *The Persian Letters*. Penguin Classics. (Original work published 1721), pp. 206, 209-213, 215-216, 219-220

<sup>140</sup> Wallace, R. (1809). *Dissertation on the Numbers of Mankind, in Ancient and Modern Times* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Edinburgh: Constable. (Original work published 1753), pp. 22

<sup>141</sup> Wallace, R. (1809). *Dissertation on the Numbers of Mankind, in Ancient and Modern Times* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Edinburgh: Constable. (Original work published 1753), pp. 24

<sup>142</sup> Wallace, R. (1809). *Dissertation on the Numbers of Mankind, in Ancient and Modern Times* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Edinburgh: Constable. (Original work published 1753), pp. 11

<sup>143</sup> Wallace, R. (1809). *Dissertation on the Numbers of Mankind, in Ancient and Modern Times* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Edinburgh: Constable. (Original work published 1753), pp. 11-12

according to the author, to a combination of physical or moral factors. The former includes for example the weather conditions, diseases (such as Lues Venerea and Smallpox), and natural disasters; while the latter refers to elements such as poverty, drunkenness, laziness, inability to marry or educate children. In addition to these, other aspects that influence the number of inhabitants of the land are agriculture since “uncultivated can never maintain so many inhabitants as cultivated land”, the quality of climate and soils because “unfruitful soils, cannot produce equal quantities of food [...] as softer and more fertile climes”, the political and institutional division of lands if “the lands are very unequally divided, and are capable of maintaining many more than those who cultivate them, that country must be thinly peopled, unless elegance be studied, and proper encouragement be given to the arts which conduce to it”, the number of marriages and the resulting number of children, and the capacity of fishing and hunting to provide food.<sup>144</sup> Moreover, just like Montesquieu referred to religion, polygamy, and divorce by claiming that they had an impact on the population, Wallace declared that the latter two are a “hinderance” to the increment of mankind. Further factors that negatively impacted population growth emerged by comparing the ancient and the modern times, from which it follows that the situation in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth centuries was more difficult: servants and the poor who, in the past, “seem to have been more certain of subsistence, and to have been better fed”<sup>145</sup>, rules for succession which favored only the oldest son and thus discouraged the younger to marry, privileges that were no longer received by married people, a larger army “among whom few marry, but by whose means so many women are debauched, and venereal distempers spread so wide and so fatally”<sup>146</sup>, European commerce with far regions of the world which resulted in people “excited to desert their native land, and to settle in distant countries, and many have been lost by long voyages and trafficking in unwholesome climates”<sup>147</sup>,

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<sup>144</sup> Wallace, R. (1809). *Dissertation on the Numbers of Mankind, in Ancient and Modern Times* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Edinburgh: Constable. (Original work published 1753), pp. 15-19

<sup>145</sup> Wallace, R. (1809). *Dissertation on the Numbers of Mankind, in Ancient and Modern Times* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Edinburgh: Constable. (Original work published 1753), pp. 91

<sup>146</sup> Wallace, R. (1809). *Dissertation on the Numbers of Mankind, in Ancient and Modern Times* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Edinburgh: Constable. (Original work published 1753), pp. 96

<sup>147</sup> Wallace, R. (1809). *Dissertation on the Numbers of Mankind, in Ancient and Modern Times* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Edinburgh: Constable. (Original work published 1753), pp. 97

abandon of agriculture, and enlargement of states and government that led to the above-mentioned desire for luxury. Furthermore, Wallace expressed concern with regard to the capacity of the Earth to provide resources to feed its inhabitants. He claimed that it is not possible to know for how long this could keep happening, what was certain was that it cannot be forever “unless either its fertility could be continually augmented, or by some secret in nature”<sup>148</sup>. Moreover, he added that space would be a problem too since “there would not even be sufficient room for containing their bodies upon the surface on the earth, or upon any limited surface whatsoever”<sup>149</sup>. Consequently, a solution is necessary to be found. However, according to Wallace, the human race will never agree on which approach is the most suitable; therefore, “force, and arms, must at last decide their quarrels, and the deaths of such as fall in battle, leave sufficient provisions for the survivors, and make room for others to be born”<sup>150</sup>.

David Hume, instead, – a Scottish Enlightenment philosopher, economist, and historian – in his *Of Populousness of the Ancient Nations*, reflects on the fact that despite what was affirmed by Montesquieu and Wallace, during the past there were not more people than in the Eighteenth century, about which he claims that “the humour of blaming the present and admiring the past, is strongly rooted in human nature, and has an influence even on persons endued with the profoundest judgement and most extensive learning”<sup>151</sup>. To sustain his thesis, he talked about the phenomenon of slavery which negatively impacted the number of people since “those who had slaves, in all the richer or more populous countries would discourage the pregnancy of the females, and either destroy or prevent the birth”<sup>152</sup>. Moreover, he addressed issues such as “exposing children” and “hospitals for foundlings”<sup>153</sup> which in earlier times favored procreation,

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<sup>148</sup> Wallace, R. (1761). *Various prospects of mankind, nature, and providence*. London: A. Millar, pp. 115

<sup>149</sup> Wallace, R. (1761). *Various prospects of mankind, nature, and providence*. London: A. Millar, pp. 115-116

<sup>150</sup> Wallace, R. (1761). *Various prospects of mankind, nature, and providence*. London: A. Millar, pp. 119

<sup>151</sup> Hume, D. (1742). *Essays and treatises on several subjects* (Vol. 1). London: A. Millar, pp. 490

<sup>152</sup> Hume, D. (1906). *Hume's Political Discourses*. London: Walter Scott Publishing Co. (Original work published 1752), pp. 115

<sup>153</sup> Hume, D. (1906). *Hume's Political Discourses*. London: Walter Scott Publishing Co. (Original work published 1752), pp. 122-124

as opposed to the situation of modern Europe which was characterized by “perpetual war” more devastating than the modern ones, and “trade, manufactures, industry” that were less flourishing and thus made men’s subsistence harder.<sup>154</sup> In addition, Hume presented the idea that because “the land is at present much better cultivated, and that the woods are cleared which formerly threw a shade upon the earth and kept the rays of the sun from penetrating to it”<sup>155</sup> European territory in the Eighteenth century was warmer and hence encouraged population growth.

As a result of this debate, it is possible to highlight not only the different ideas characterizing scholars of the time but also the many factors that influenced the debate and that will be considered by Malthus when discussing the problem of overpopulation.

## **2.2.Malthus’ life and doctrine**

### *2.2.1. The beginning*

Malthus is fundamental for this thesis as he is considered the main theorist who discussed the issue of the size of the population and its regulation, and the impact that this could have on the economy and the well-being of the people. Following years of discussion regarding the problems of depopulation, he warned people about the danger of having an excessively populated world. Fundamental to better comprehending his point of view is a brief description of his family and of England where he grew up.

Born Thomas Robert Malthus in The Rookery on the 13<sup>th</sup> of February 1766, he was an economist, demographer, and philosopher whose main work is *An Essay on the Principle of Population*. He grew up in England with more densely populated than in the past and together with his family, he was part of the upper-middle class. He was the second son of Daniel, an intellect and enthusiast for Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Thomas received a good education and thanks to his teacher Revered Richard Grave, he learned some important lessons that it is possible to find also in his *Essay*: firstly, the delights of mind, of parody, of exuberant repartee in social and academic life; secondly, to have a happy life, doing

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<sup>154</sup> Hume, D. (1906). *Hume’s Political Discourses*. London: Walter Scott Publishing Co. (Original work published 1752), pp. 128, 138

<sup>155</sup> Hume, D. (1906). *Hume’s Political Discourses*. London: Walter Scott Publishing Co. (Original work published 1752), pp. 164

what is right and being honest are not enough, it is also necessary to be careful with money and plan ahead.<sup>156</sup> In 1782, Thomas was sent to study at the Dissenting Academy under Gilbert Wakefield's tutelage, a biblical scholar. Thanks to his experience here, Malthus learned that reason is important and valuable, and that it is fundamental to be open to considering different ideas without letting strict rules of religion control what is said. Moreover, thanks to Wakefield, Thomas was able to have access to the Jesus College at Cambridge where he studied under the pressure of not spending too much money because the family was not rich, the boy had to be careful and respect a certain budget. At Cambridge, mathematics was fundamental for a student's university career and the possibility of taking a degree depended on the results obtained in math; this was due to the fact that the study there followed the footsteps of former student Isaac Newton. As a result of this experience, Malthus elaborated the idea that pure mathematics would dull the minds of people and it would be useful only if used to improve people's lives in the real world. Once Malthus obtained his degree, he reached a clerical position at Okewood in 1789.<sup>157</sup>

As mentioned above, England where Malthus lived was exceptionally densely populated compared to other European states. The reasons were found in a mortality that was in decline while the birthrate kept increasing.<sup>158</sup> As a consequence, in the second half of the nineteenth century, farming, which did not grow as fast as the number of people, was not able to feed inhabitants causing food crises and the necessity to import more natural resources. In addition to this, England experienced a shortage of wood, and consequently, coal, which resulted in a state's dependence on importations. The solution found to face this critical situation was the Industrial Revolution. This provided a new source of energy and established England as the leading hub for manufacturing in the world.<sup>159</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> Mayhew, R. J. (2014). *Malthus: The Life and Legacies of an Untimely Prophet*. Harvard University Press, pp. 53-55

<sup>157</sup> Mayhew, R. J. (2014). *Malthus: The Life and Legacies of an Untimely Prophet*. Harvard University Press, pp. 57-59

<sup>158</sup> Mayhew, R. J. (2014). *Malthus: The Life and Legacies of an Untimely Prophet*. Harvard University Press, pp. 16

<sup>159</sup> Thomas, B. (1985). Escaping from Constraints: The Industrial Revolution in a Malthusian Context. *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 15(4), pp. 729-731

Both the experiences that Malthus lived in his private life and the economic and social situation that characterized England during the second half of the eighteenth century have affected the scholar and the development of his doctrine.

### 2.2.2. *The problem of over-population*

As demonstrated above, three were the main presumptions around the population debate in the period before Malthus: firstly, a large population was perceived as a positive factor that would lead to a strong and wealthy state; secondly, the world population was less than what the Earth could support and this situation would only arise, if at all, in the distant future; thirdly, God was the one who gave the ability to balance the population growth, the economic development, and the use of natural resources.<sup>160</sup> In contrast to the scholars before him, Malthus disagreed that a large population equates to an effective government and he believed that overpopulation and resource depletion were current issues; hence, there was no more time, and immediate action was necessary.

Malthus' theory is based on the risk of overpopulation because "the power of the population is indefinitely greater than the power in the earth to produce subsistence for man"<sup>161</sup>. Thus, at the heart of the Malthusian doctrine, there is the principle that the productive capacity of natural resources and that of human beings had different growth rates. The former reproduced with an arithmetic ratio which means by addition (1, 2, 3, 4, 5), while the latter with a geometric ratio that is to say by multiplication (1, 2, 4, 8, 16). Because of this, according to the scholar, it would reach a point of no return when there would not be enough resources to feed the whole population, and the world would be in a situation of overpopulation. Consequently, there would be wars, famines, and diseases spread all over the world because of the constant tensions between people's capability of production and reproduction. Specifically, the lower classes of the society, from Malthus' point of view, would be the most damaged by the phenomenon because "the food [...] which before supported seven million must now be divided among seven

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<sup>160</sup> Mayhew, R. J. (2014). *Malthus: The Life and Legacies of an Untimely Prophet*. Harvard University Press, pp. 25

<sup>161</sup> Malthus, T. R. (1798). *An Essay on the Principle of Population*. (1<sup>st</sup> ed.). London: J. Johnson, pp. 4

million and a half or eight million”<sup>162</sup> and “the number of laborers also being above the proportion of the work in the market, the price of labour must tend toward a decrease, while the price of provisions would at the same time tend to rise”<sup>163</sup>.

Precisely because of his negative view about the future and the growth of the population, some misinterpreted Malthus’ words by affirming that he felt satisfied by wars, diseases, and starvation since they all contributed to reducing the number of the population. However, he cared about people, and he did not want to hurt them while trying to help them.<sup>164</sup> In addition to this, Welling found other misconceptions about Malthus’ doctrine. The first one is that it has been often believed that he thought that population reproduction beyond subsistence always shows its effects and causes. Second, even though he admitted that throughout history population and food supply went back and forth and were not constant, it is a common belief that he claimed that over-reproduction is innate in human beings. The third misunderstanding is about the two well-known ratios mentioned above, the arithmetical and the geometrical ones. Malthus, indeed, according to Welling, did not use these rates as mathematical formulas but he used them to illustrate what the possible consequences are<sup>165</sup> and to illustrate how rapidly the population can grow.<sup>166</sup>

Thomas’ aim was the amelioration of the whole society’s living conditions. Thus, he proposed some policies that in his belief could have a positive impact. Firstly, societies should use preventive methods to control population growth in such a way as to minimize war, starvation, and plagues. As a result, he was critical of the Poor Law 1601 which contrary to Malthus’ idea, urged parishes to financially support people who could not work. Hence, it did not avert a problematic situation, but it just tried to remedy it. Furthermore, according to Malthus, this Law did not limit the number of births and created a further problem by giving resources to the poor. This, indeed, led to an increase in prices for everyone else and rendered destitute people dependent on state economic

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<sup>162</sup> Malthus, T. R. (1798). *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (1<sup>st</sup> ed.). London: J. Johnson, pp. 9

<sup>163</sup> Malthus, T. R. (1798). *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (1<sup>st</sup> ed.). London: J. Johnson, pp. 9

<sup>164</sup> Welling, J. C. (1888). The Law of Malthus. *American Anthropologist*, 1(1), pp. 6

<sup>165</sup> Welling, J. C. (1888). The Law of Malthus. *American Anthropologist*, 1(1), pp. 3-4

<sup>166</sup> Price, D. (1998). Of Population and False Hopes: Malthus and His Legacy. *Population and Environment*, 19(3), p. 208

aid<sup>167</sup>. Moreover, the Law had the defect of “tending to increase population without increasing the means for its support, and thus to depress the condition of those that are not supported by parishes, and, consequently, to create more poor”<sup>168</sup>. Secondly, he asked authorities to not only try to prevent people from having kids, when they cannot support them but also to find a way to increment as much as possible the cultivation of natural resources. The aim was to allow all the people to have access to what they needed to live a respectable life, seeing as “encouragements to agriculture would tend to furnish the market with an increasing quantity of healthy work, and at the same time, by augmenting the produce of the country, would raise the comparative price of labour and ameliorate the condition of the labourer”<sup>169</sup>. Incentives were particularly important in those rural areas where lands were barren.<sup>170</sup> In addition, Malthus sustained that it was necessary to finance the agricultural sector rather than manufacture and trade because

the labour employed in trade and manufactures is sufficiently productive to individuals, but it certainly is not productive in the same degree to the state. Every accession to the food of a country tends to the immediate benefit of the whole society; but the fortunes made in trade tend but in a remote and uncertain manner to the same end, and in some respects have even a contrary tendency.<sup>171</sup>

This was the case in modern Europe where agriculture was positive for the whole society while improvements in the other two fields, manufacturing and trade, were positive only for some people. A further factor that could lead to a general improvement in people's living conditions was, from Malthus' point of view, a state intervention in the “system of natural liberty”. More specifically he was in favor of a system of free education because this would also allow the poor the ability to judge what they read or hear from others, and it would give them the opportunity of being intellectually independent. Subsequently, he wrote in favor of the enlargement of the right to vote, the creation of a free health care system for poor people, state aid for people moving to another country,

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<sup>167</sup> Mayhew, R. J. (2014). *Malthus: The Life and Legacies of an Untimely Prophet*. Harvard University Press, pp. 71

<sup>168</sup> Malthus, T. R. (1798). *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (1<sup>st</sup> ed.). London: J. Johnson, pp. 30

<sup>169</sup> Malthus, T. R. (1798). *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (1<sup>st</sup> ed.). London: J. Johnson, pp. 30

<sup>170</sup> Mayhew, R. J. (2014). *Malthus: The Life and Legacies of an Untimely Prophet*. Harvard University Press, pp. 72

<sup>171</sup> Malthus, T. R. (1798). *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (1<sup>st</sup> ed.). London: J. Johnson, pp. 105

and state support for families who had more than six kids. He was also equally contrary to children working in factories and free commerce if it only advanced merchants and not regular people.<sup>172</sup>

To conclude, the management of the population for Malthus was a serious issue that was going to lead England and the whole world into a state of chaos if not stopped. For this reason, he furnished concrete solutions. Malthus, on the other hand, was aware that calling for a revolution could not produce the necessary results, yet he believed that simply seeing and understanding the problem could bring benefits.

### 2.2.3. *The Essay*

All Malthus' ideas and all the aspects previously mentioned had been presented for the first time in 1798 in the first edition of the *Essay*. This work was "a conversation with a friend, on the subject of Mr Godwin's essay on 'Avarice and Profusion' in his *Enquirer*."<sup>173</sup> As reported in the subtitle of the book *An Essay on the Principle of Population, as it Affects the Future Improvement of Society with Remarks on the Speculations of Mr. Godwin, M. Condorcet, and Other Writers*, this work aimed to be a response to the various theories elaborated during the eighteenth century. However, Malthus' first edition of the book had a limit: he did not consider rationality, rather his studies were limited to the problem of hunger and sex, and some of the mentioned aspects were only deepened in later editions.<sup>174</sup>

Behind Malthus's decision to write the *Essay*, Mayhew identifies three incentives. The first one is Malthus's economic situation. While he was at Cambridge, he studied a lot, but he also had a lot of fun, such as canoeing, shooting, skating, and so on; however, after having obtained the degree, Thomas had to return to his parent's house, and he had limited economic resources that would not allow him to continue the life he had before. Hence, writing was a good alternative to earn some money and obtain economic independence. His first attempt to earn economic independence through writing was *The Crisis* written in 1796 which, unfortunately, was not a success in financial terms. It

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<sup>172</sup> Bonar, J. (1885). *Malthus and his work*. Macmillan and Company, pp. 343

<sup>173</sup> Malthus, T. R. (1798). *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (1<sup>st</sup> ed.). London: J. Johnson, pp. VII

<sup>174</sup> Petersen, W. (1971). The Malthus-Godwin Debate, Then and Now. *Demography*, 8(1), pp. 17

was only a couple of years later that he was finally able to achieve fame and money thanks to his masterpiece.<sup>175</sup> The second catalyst is Surrey, the place where the Malthus family lived. A rural area where most of the people were hardly able to have the necessary financial resources to buy the essentials and to survive. At the time, indeed, it was a disadvantaged area that was positively affected only by the Poor Relief – an act that obliged parishes to collect taxes to help people who could not work. What Malthus saw in this place – poverty, starvation, and industrious – contributed to inspiring him to write his book. The third and last aspect that should be considered to better understand the book is the historical context where the author lived. It was a moment of numerous tumults: the French Revolution, and the Irish Rebellion (even though he did not know about these two events, fear and paranoia were in the air), The Royal Navy had weakened because of mutiny, in India, there were rebellions, attacks of French and Irish, food riots. All these numerous issues were the ones that gave Thomas the necessary inspiration.<sup>176</sup>

For what concerns the content of the book, a central point presented in the first pages and then proposed again throughout the work is the importance of bringing evidence to support the thesis. Malthus, indeed, affirms that “a just theory will always be confirmed by experiment [...] on few subjects can any theory be pronounced just, till all the arguments against it have been maturely weighed and clearly and consistently refuted.”<sup>177</sup> Due to this, in the course of the book, the author presents concrete examples in support of his theory (such as the case of the United States of America that have known a strong increase in population<sup>178</sup>) and he immediately begins to criticize scholars like Wallace, Godwin, Smith, and Condorcet who, according to him, did not respect this basic and essential procedure and forgot to prove their theories.

According to Malthus, then, the problem of high reproductive capacity was not only a characteristic of human beings but also of living beings in general: plants and animals

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<sup>175</sup> Mayhew, R. J. (2014). *Malthus: The Life and Legacies of an Untimely Prophet*. Harvard University Press, pp. 60-61

<sup>176</sup> Mayhew, R. J. (2014). *Malthus: The Life and Legacies of an Untimely Prophet*. Harvard University Press, pp. 62-64

<sup>177</sup> Malthus, T. R. (1798). *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (1<sup>st</sup> ed.). London: J. Johnson, pp. 2

<sup>178</sup> Malthus, T. R. (1798). *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (1<sup>st</sup> ed.). London: J. Johnson, pp. 7

included, however, “the race of plants and the race of animals shrink under this great restrictive law. And the race of man cannot, by any efforts of reason, escape from it. Among plants and animals, its effects are waste of seed, sickness, and premature death. Among mankind, misery, and vice.”<sup>179</sup> Thus, animals have a characteristic that allows them to not be interested in the problem of overpopulation. Because they are guided by instinct and because there is a natural food chain, they are able to maintain the number of individuals below a risk threshold. This, as said, is not true for human beings who act according to reason and have more difficulties in maintaining a balance between population and resources.<sup>180</sup> He, therefore, had a very pessimistic view of people’s future “I see no way by which man can escape from the weight of this law which pervades all animated nature. No fancied equality, no agrarian regulations in their utmost extent, could remove the pressure of it even for a single century”.<sup>181</sup> Nonetheless, according to the author even the freest societies, taking the example of the United States, have some checks. This means that in every state some elements influence and limit people’s reproduction and these can be “preventive checks” or “positive checks”. The former involves people’s voluntary actions, examples are celibacy, abstinence, infanticide, and abortion; hence, as the term itself indicates, they are useful to impede the birth of children by preventing it from happening.<sup>182</sup> The latter, instead, aim at limiting an increase that had already started; thus, people have no control over these checks, and these are, for instance, diseases, misery, famine, and war.<sup>183</sup>

Another part of the book is dedicated to criticizing other scholars’ theories and one of the main issues addressed is how academics failed to see the reality of facts. They thought that problems of lack of resources and space would be a question that concerns a far-off future. Additionally, academics before Malthus believed that human beings would be strong enough to deal with these issues. An example is Nicolas de Condorcet

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<sup>179</sup> Malthus, T. R. (1798). *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (1<sup>st</sup> ed.). London: J. Johnson, pp. 5

<sup>180</sup> Mayhew, R. J. (2014). *Malthus: The Life and Legacies of an Untimely Prophet*. Harvard University Press, pp. 68

<sup>181</sup> Malthus, T. R. (1798). *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (1<sup>st</sup> ed.). London: J. Johnson, pp. 5

<sup>182</sup> Malthus, T. R. (1798). *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (1<sup>st</sup> ed.). London: J. Johnson, pp. 17-22

<sup>183</sup> Malthus, T. R. (1798). *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (1<sup>st</sup> ed.). London: J. Johnson, pp. 23-31

– a mathematician and philosopher –, his “picture of what may be expected to happen when the number of men shall surpass the means of their subsistence is justly drawn [...] Mr Condorcet, however, goes on to say that should the period, which he conceives to be so distant, ever arrive, the human race, and the advocates for the perfectibility of man, need not be alarmed at it.”<sup>184</sup> According to Thomas, instead, this theory was the result of a utopia, and scholars like Condorcet overrated human reason by thinking that people are able to control their instincts.

Another scholar mentioned by Malthus was Adam Smith – an economist and philosopher. Thomas, indeed, took into consideration Smith’s analysis of the population but, even though they agreed on some general aspects, if their theories are observed in detail, it is possible to see some main differences. Malthus, in fact, started from Smith’s ideas in order to elaborate his own analysis. They agreed on the fact that it was unavoidable to have some restrictions on how many people should be born because there were few opportunities to increase the economic capacities of the society. Hence, there were not enough financial resources to support everyone. However, the two scholars disagreed about what was the best strategy to limit the population. Smith thought that increasing or decreasing the mortality rate was sufficient to control population rises; while Malthus’ brilliance led him to understand that Smith’s suggestion would allow a decrease in the population, but this would only be positive for the higher classes, whereas the poor would keep living in precarious living conditions. On the other hand, Malthus, as a result of the research that he conducted in Europe, claimed that it was necessary to change people’s habits by modifying the frequency of marriages and births (thus intervening in preventive checks) because this would be more efficient in keeping the population stable and this measure would be beneficial for all the social classes. Thus, he was the first one able to see the importance of what will be called “the West European marriage system”.<sup>185</sup> Furthermore, Malthus, in contrast to Smith, believed that the variations in the economic and demographic variables were connected and these oscillations could help improve the lives of the poor workers.

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<sup>184</sup> Malthus, T. R. (1798). *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (1<sup>st</sup> ed.). London: J. Johnson, pp. 48

<sup>185</sup> Wrigley, E. A. (1988). The Limits to Growth: Malthus and the Classical Economists. *Population and Development Review*, 14, pp. 37-38

However, this was clearly not enough. To have improvements in the conditions for everyone was indeed necessary, he claimed, to focus on more than just money and population. This is why he considered other aspects too, such as culture and politics. Even in areas where there were the necessary conditions to have a prosperous life for everyone, this did not correspond to reality, and this led him to arrive at a comprehensive evaluation of the socioeconomic factors that influence a society's prosperity and demographic patterns.<sup>186</sup> Malthus and Smith, together with another classical economic thinker, Ricardo, believed that there was a serious problem linked to the land: there was a limited amount of territory. The land cannot be created or extended, hence, the economic growth linked to this factor is limited too. Also in this case, however, there was something on which they did not agree: how the limits to growth would affect wages because as pointed out by Malthus and Ricardo, the minimum living standards were not absolute, they depended on the lifestyle conditions of each community.<sup>187</sup>

In addition to Condorcet and Smith, Malthus also criticized William Godwin – a political philosopher and journalist – who attributed “almost all the vices and misery that are seen in civil society to human institutions”<sup>188</sup>. Godwin's main work is *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* where he demonstrates of being optimistic about the future of the earth and of the population by claiming that due to the fact that a wide expanse of lands was at the time still uncultivated, “myriads of centuries of still increasing population may probably pass away, and the earth still be found sufficient for the subsistence of its inhabitants”<sup>189</sup>. He was indeed strongly convinced that mind could overtake sentiments and passion; therefore, whether it would arrive the moment to limit the number of inhabitants, men would be able to do so, to control their instincts and to limit procreation because “if we have in any respect a little power now, and if the mind be essentially progressive, that power may, and, barring any extraordinary concussions

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<sup>186</sup> Wrigley, E. A. (1988). The Limits to Growth: Malthus and the Classical Economists. *Population and Development Review*, 14, pp. 38-39

<sup>187</sup> Wrigley, E. A. (1988). The Limits to Growth: Malthus and the Classical Economists. *Population and Development Review*, 14, pp. 40

<sup>188</sup> Malthus, T. R. (1798). *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (1<sup>st</sup> ed.). London: J. Johnson, pp. 56

<sup>189</sup> Godwin, W. (1793). *An enquiry concerning political justice: And Its Influence on General Virtue and Happiness* (Vol. 2). London: Print. for G.G.J. and J. Robinson, pp. 861

of nature, infallibly will, extend beyond any bounds we are able to prescribe to it"<sup>190</sup>. Malthus, on the other hand, thought that there was no evidence in support of Godwin's theory that as people become more rational, they would be able to find a way to live better and longer because it was in humans' nature to follow instinct. Thomas tried to demonstrate how outlandish he was by trying to imagine how society would be if Godwin's theory were applied and the result was a nation based on economic inequalities and poverty.<sup>191</sup> A further point on which Malthus did not agree with Godwin was the alleged decrease in sexual desire that humans would encounter in the future, which would prevent continued procreation. However, as pointed out by Malthus, "no move towards the extinction of the passion between the sexes has taken place in the five or six thousand years that the world has existed"<sup>192</sup> so what factors indicate that it could diminish in the eighteenth century?

The figure of Godwin also proved significant for Malthus because following *Essay* throughout the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century a debate arose between the two, partly publicly and partly privately. From this discussion, a modified version of the *Essay* was born. Malthus, indeed, admitted that "[the first edition] was written on the impulse of the occasion, and from the few materials which were then within my reach in a country situation"<sup>193</sup>. Thus, in the new edition, he decided to take into consideration the possibility that people could rationally control sexuality as declared by Godwin, and together with the above-mentioned positive and preventive checks, he added "moral restraint" which means that if human beings wanted, they could be able to stop following their instinct and thus reproducing with control<sup>194</sup> and this basically meant late marriage, that, according to him, was one of the best ways to reduce the number of the population. The idea behind this was that people should procreate only once they were able to provide for their children; hence, only once

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<sup>190</sup> Godwin, W. (1793). *An enquiry concerning political justice: And Its Influence on General Virtue and Happiness* (Vol. 2). London: Print. for G.G.J. and J. Robinson, pp. 863

<sup>191</sup> Mayhew, R. J. (2014). *Malthus: The Life and Legacies of an Untimely Prophet*. Harvard University Press, pp. 69-70; Malthus, T. R. (1798). *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (1<sup>st</sup> ed.). London: J. Johnson, pp. 57-65

<sup>192</sup> Malthus, T. R. (1798). *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (1<sup>st</sup> ed.). London: J. Johnson, pp. 66

<sup>193</sup> Malthus, T. R. (1872). *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (7<sup>th</sup> ed.). Edinburgh, London: Ballantyne and Company, pp. v

<sup>194</sup> Petersen, W. (1971). The Malthus-Godwin Debate, Then and Now. *Demography*, 8(1), pp. 18-19

they had a secure economic entrance and a secure life. This small change made a huge difference in Malthus' way of thinking, and he passed from being extremely negative to slightly positive: there was a chance for human beings. In such a way Godwin and Malthus's ideas came closer. Nonetheless, there were still profound differences between the two. The former forecasted equality between the poor and the rich, while the latter affirmed that it was necessary to help unwealthy people to ameliorate their financial and living conditions. The consequence of this financial aid is a decrease in births, according to Malthus, because advancing the status level means acquiring habits and lifestyle of the new class which in the case of the poor meant becoming part of the middle class and reducing the number of children.<sup>195</sup> After Malthus accepted some of Godwin's critics, Godwin, in 1820, responded with *Of Population: An Enquiry Concerning the Power of Increase in the Numbers of Mankind*. However, Godwin, when criticizing Malthus, did not consider the second version of the *Essay* where the author made some modifications to accept the previous critics, Godwin only refers to the first publication. Hence, *Of Population* was unsuccessful.

This was not the only modification underwent by Malthus, as throughout his lifetime he kept modifying his work: the more he learned the more he added details to the *Essay*, this led to analyzing and responding to many other authors that over the course of time formulated their theories about the population debate. The changes were possible because of his job as a professor of political economy which allowed him to have access to always new resources and to spend his whole life teaching and conducting research. As a result, different editions of the book were published.<sup>196</sup>

Particularly significant for this thesis, however, is the fact that Malthus never professed in favor of contraceptives, like the ones that have been used in those centuries, because he considered them immoral and because they might remove the engine that encourages improvement.<sup>197</sup>

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<sup>195</sup> Petersen, W. (1971). The Malthus-Godwin Debate, Then and Now. *Demography*, 8(1), pp. 19

<sup>196</sup> Price, D. (1998). Of Population and False Hopes: Malthus and His Legacy. *Population and Environment*, 19(3), pp. 210

<sup>197</sup> Petersen, W. (1971). The Malthus-Godwin Debate, Then and Now. *Demography*, 8(1), pp. 19

To conclude Malthus's doctrine was interpreted by many as a call for population control to avoid the dire consequences he predicted. Even though he never explicitly addressed birth control as a solution, his ideas worked as a catalyst for the debate about population management. This laid the groundwork for future thinkers and activists to advocate for birth control as a means to address overpopulation and promote individual reproductive rights.

## **2.3. Towards birth control right**

### *2.3.1. The Neo-Malthusian theory*

The Malthusian theory resulted in a movement, namely Neo-Malthusianism, that even though just like Thomas believed that overpopulation would lead to famine, poverty, and environmental degradation, its members were characterized for being favorable towards the use of contraceptive methods in order to control the number of the population and for rejecting the idea of late marriages. Hence, they were active in spreading and promoting birth control.

The birth control movement was spurred for the first time in 1818 by James Mill's outspokenness on the matter – he was a philosopher and economist who lived at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In his article "Colony" published in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, the scholar declared that

What are the best means of checking the progress of population [...] It is, indeed, the most important practical problem to which the wisdom of the politician and moralist can be applied. It has, till this time, been miserably evaded by all those who have meddled with the subject, as well as by all those who were called upon by their situation to find a remedy for the evils to which it relates. And yet, if the superstitions of the nursery were discarded, and the principle of utility kept steadily in view, a solution might not be very difficult to be found.<sup>198</sup>

However, after this first article, Mill did not write anything else on the matter and it was only after several years that scholars returned to the subject.

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<sup>198</sup> Mill, J. (1825). *Colony*. J. Innes. pp. 12-13

Among the main actors of the Neo-Malthusian doctrine are Francis Place, Richard Carlile, and Robert Dale Owen who, in the order in which they are written, influenced each other in the publication of books and works to incentivize the diffusion of contraceptive methods.

Francis Place was a British radical reformer born in London in 1771 who in the 1820s became a Malthusian. Starting from this doctrine, he elaborated his own belief according to which even though “he defends Malthus’ general position, he turns to denounce the crude statement in the “Principle of Population,” that no man has a “right” to public support, and that therefore the system of Poor Relief should be entirely abolished”<sup>199</sup>. Moreover, Place disagreed with Malthus about the use of contraceptive methods: while Thomas was contrary to this practice and claimed that the best method was the delay of marriage, Francis was critical of this practice and preferred instead other methods. Starting from that point onward, therefore, he consistently supported the Neo-Malthusian view and in 1822 he published a book called *Illustrations and Proofs of the Principle of Population* where he analyzes Malthus’ and Godwin’s affirmations and gave his opinions about them. According to the author, “It is time [...] that those who really understand the cause of a redundant, unhappy, miserable, and considerably vicious population, and the means of preventing the redundancy, should clearly, freely, openly, and fearlessly point out the means”<sup>200</sup>. Contrary to Malthus who insisted on delaying marriages in order to control pregnancies, Place highlighted that this practice could become problematic since “The most effectual mode of demising promiscuous intercourse is marriage”<sup>201</sup> and he added, instead, that contraceptives could really be positive to solve the issue of poor living conditions. Indeed, since, according to the scholar, the problem was the higher number of workers compared to jobs available, “if means were adopted to prevent the breeding of a larger desire to have, and if the labouring part of the population could thus be kept below the demand for labour, wages

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<sup>199</sup> Wallace, G. (1898). *The Life of Francis Place, 1771-1854*. London, New York: Longmans, Green, pp. 164-165

<sup>200</sup> Place, F. (1822) *Illustrations and proofs of the principle of population*. London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, pp. 173-174

<sup>201</sup> Place, F. (1822) *Illustrations and proofs of the principle of population*. London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, pp. 175

would rise so as to afford the means of comfortable subsistence for all, and all might marry”<sup>202</sup>. To better spread his ideas, Place also wrote three handbills addressed and distributed to workers by Place’s supporters.

Place's ideas found a strong ally in Richard Carlile – an English journalist known for being an agitator in favor of universal suffrage and freedom of the press – who fervently supported and promoted them. The journalist, indeed, in 1828, published a pamphlet called *Every Woman’s Book* which aimed at instructing people about sex, love, and marriage. Differently from Malthus, Carlile did not focus on the problem of excessive workers, he preferred instead directing his attention towards contraception, viewing it as a tool for achieving sexual freedom. According to the author, women should not consider the subjects just mentioned as something immoral or private, especially because comparing the two sexes, the author did not see many differences except for the outward aspect.<sup>203</sup> In addition, Carlile affirms that avoiding pregnancy would be beneficiary for society as a whole since “the great obstacle to marriage, under its present form, is the fear of a large family, and the poverty which results therefrom. This removed, marriages would be much more common”<sup>204</sup>. Due to this, he openly exhorts women to use artificial methods such as “a piece of sponge”, wearing a “skin” also known as “glove” during sexual relations or the already well-known coitus interruptus. Nonetheless, there was one method that was not published by the author, which is abortion. This, indeed, was defined as a kind of infanticide as “Conception [...] should not be risked, with any view to subsequent destruction, as prevention is alike moral and legal, while destruction of the fetus is degrading, immoral and illegal”<sup>205</sup>.

Carlile’s book encouraged, likewise, Robert Dale Owen to write *Moral Physiology* in 1831. The author was a Welsh-American social reformer and politician who owes his importance to the fact that he was the first Neo-Malthusian in America; hence, he was the one who brought the birth-control movement to the US where the theories spread and intersected with feminist movements. Worth noticing that even among the members

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<sup>202</sup> Place, F. (1822) *Illustrations and proofs of the principle of population*. London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, pp. 176

<sup>203</sup> Carlile, R. (1828). *Every woman’s book, or, What is love?*. London: R. Carlile, pp. 13

<sup>204</sup> Carlile, R. (1828). *Every woman’s book, or, What is love?*. London: R. Carlile, pp. 32

<sup>205</sup> Carlile, R. (1828). *Every woman’s book, or, What is love?*. London: R. Carlile, pp. 38-40, 42-43

of women's activists developments there was a debate about the use of contraceptive methods since some considered them as not natural and therefore promoted abstinence; nonetheless, they all shared the principle that women should have the choice to determine the timing of their pregnancies.<sup>206</sup> In addition to Carlile's influence, however, Himes identified other reasons that exerted an influence on Owen to advocate in favor of Neo-Malthusianism: a letter from a woman asking for advice on how to avoid further pregnancies since she and his husband could not provide for more children (it was such a missive that made him realize that the problem at hand was common among people), and some debates he had on the distressed caused by this issue.<sup>207</sup> Like all Neo-Malthusians, Owen agreed with Malthus on the fact that there is a problem of overpopulation. Notwithstanding, he added that such a problem does not concern Europe where "there is more than enough land"<sup>208</sup> and it is not the cause of poor living conditions, the real culprit is rather the inability to govern the country, what the author calls "mal-government" since "Monopolies favour the rich, taxes oppress the poor, commercial rivalry grinds its victims to the dust"<sup>209</sup>. To avoid such a situation, the author agrees with Malthus that some kind of control is necessary; however, Owen claimed that getting married later did not solve the problem seeing as "moral restraint would be by the mass neglected, and that the physical check of vice and misery must come into play at last."<sup>210</sup> Consequently, according to the author, the problem of excessive population could be resolved through the use of contraceptive methods such as coitus interruptus which requires strong will, but at the same time it is said to be the easier and the most effective option. The authors also mentioned some of the methods suggested by Carlile in his *Every Woman's Book*; however, Owen decided not to deepen the topic, not because

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<sup>206</sup> Hartmann, B. (1997). Population Control I: Birth of an Ideology. *International Journal of Health Services*, 27(3), pp. 525

<sup>207</sup> Himes, N. E. (1930). Robert Dale Owen, The Pioneer of American Neo-Malthusianism. *American Journal of Sociology*, 35(4), pp. 532-538

<sup>208</sup> Owen, R. D. (1831). *Moral Physiology, Or A Brief and Plain Treatise on the Population Question* (6<sup>th</sup> ed.). New York: Wrights & Owen. (Original work published 1830), pp. 30

<sup>209</sup> Owen, R. D. (1831). *Moral Physiology, Or A Brief and Plain Treatise on the Population Question* (6<sup>th</sup> ed.). New York: Wrights & Owen. (Original work published 1830), pp. 30

<sup>210</sup> Owen, R. D. (1831). *Moral Physiology, Or A Brief and Plain Treatise on the Population Question* (6<sup>th</sup> ed.). New York: Wrights & Owen. (Original work published 1830), pp. 27

he did not agree with their use but because he doubted the efficacy of these solutions.<sup>211</sup> Interestingly, Owen saw contraceptive measures as a chance for women to make decisions about their own bodies. Motherhood, indeed, when happened outside marriage became the “mark of what is called [women’s] disgrace”<sup>212</sup> while men who selfishly distance themselves from the act committed do not have any kind of consequences in society. About this aspect, Owen suggests that “If we cannot persuade society to revoke its unmanly and unchristian persecution of those who are often the best and gentlest of its members let us, at the least, give to woman what defence we may, against its violence”<sup>213</sup>. This aspect represented a rupture with English scholars, and it helped to create a foundation for the development of the women’s rights movement in the US.

From this, it is hinted that Malthus provided food for thought. The ideas derived from him not only spread the debate as far as the new continent but also broadened the discourse by introducing the idea that contraception was not only a social and economic issue. In fact, it was extended by recognizing that it represented a right for women.

### 2.3.2. *The Malthusian League*

The new movement that was created, resulted in the Bradlaugh-Besant trial and the consequent Malthusian League which can be defined as the two major engines for the diffusion of contraceptive methods.

Charles Bradlaugh and Annie Besant were two activists who lived during the nineteenth century and who became particularly famous after the republication of a book called *The Fruits of Philosophy* (which was printed with a different subtitle: *An Essay on the Population Question*). The pamphlet was written by Charles Knowlton – an American doctor – in 1832 and it was originally printed anonymously in Massachusetts where it was considered illegal because of the American law which did not allow the publication of

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<sup>211</sup> Owen, R. D. (1831). *Moral Physiology, Or A Brief and Plain Treatise on the Population Question* (6<sup>th</sup> ed.). New York: Wrights & Owen. (Original work published 1830), pp. 66

<sup>212</sup> Owen, R. D. (1831). *Moral Physiology, Or A Brief and Plain Treatise on the Population Question* (6<sup>th</sup> ed.). New York: Wrights & Owen. (Original work published 1830), pp. 45

<sup>213</sup> Owen, R. D. (1831). *Moral Physiology, Or A Brief and Plain Treatise on the Population Question* (6<sup>th</sup> ed.). New York: Wrights & Owen. (Original work published 1830), pp. 46

immoral and offensive content. The book, indeed, refers to the problem of overpopulation and how to manage it through preventive checks. Precisely this last aspect was at the center of criticism even though Knowlton's aim was only to provide education to individuals on the functioning of the reproductive system and the various available contraceptive methods so that people would be empowered to make informed decisions since "every man has a natural right both to receive and convey a knowledge of all the facts and discoveries of every art and science"<sup>214</sup>.

Already from the first pages of the book, the author disapproves of what was asserted by Malthus in his *Essay*, about using celibacy and late marriages to prevent births, affirming that "foolish is to suppose that men and women will become monks and nuns during the very holiday of their existence, and abjure during the fairest years of life the nearest and dearest of social relations, to avert a catastrophe which they and perhaps their children will not live to witness"<sup>215</sup>, adding that men are not made to stay alone because this could lead to negative consequences among which there are diseases and anxiety which weakens the whole body system. Due to this reason, the author spent the second chapter explaining how the male and female reproductive systems work and the third chapter analyzing the contraceptive methods known at the time including the already well-known withdrawal and others which implied covering used by men, introducing a moistened sponge into the vagina, and syringing with a particular mix of liquid substances the female sex organ after the relation.

When it was first published, the book circulated with no limitations. Problems arose only when Besant and Bradlaugh decided to publish a new edition and sent a notice of what they were doing to magistrates and the police. As a result, a trial was held based on the question of "whether or not the defendants [Besant and Bradlaugh] were entitled to sell for sixpence this book [...] to every person to whom it may occur that it is interesting, or amusing, or exciting to the morbid appetite, to purchase a book of this description"<sup>216</sup>

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<sup>214</sup> Knowlton, C. (1891). *Fruits of philosophy*. San Francisco: the Readers Library. (Original work published 1832), pp. 26

<sup>215</sup> Knowlton, C. (1891). *Fruits of philosophy*. San Francisco: the Readers Library. (Original work published 1832), pp. 18-19

<sup>216</sup> Bradlaugh, C., & Besant, A. (1877). *The Queen v. Charles Bradlaugh and Annie Besant: (Specially reported)*, Queen's Bench Division, Freethought Pub. Co., pp. 6

and whether the book could be considered obscene or not. According to the Solicitor-General, indeed, the pamphlet was an “obscene libel” which “destroy and corrupt the moral of the people”<sup>217</sup>, with the aim of “permit people, independent of marriage, to gratify their passions [...] to tell everybody how they may do that, and yet have no children, whether they are married or not”<sup>218</sup> and that “no human being would allow that book to lie on his table; no decently educated English husband would allow even his wife to have it”<sup>219</sup>. On the other side, the two defendants claim that their intent was solely “to prevent the curse of pauperism”<sup>220</sup>: to help the poorest people to improve their living conditions by limiting the number of children they have to maintain; not to destroy marriage, as alleged by the prosecution, but to “make it more widely prevalent, not to encourage prostitution, but to destroy that which is a very prolific source of prostitution, the shrinking of young men from marriage because of the terrible responsibility that marriage often brings with it”<sup>221</sup>; and to alleviate crime and misery by applying checks after marriage which are not natural (such as diseases) but which work. To sustain their thesis, the two authors brought proof demonstrating that the pamphlet was not an obscene work, as alleged, but it was for all intents and purposes a medical work that covers the same topics as the other medicine textbooks. This had been proven by comparing Knowlton’s pamphlet with many other authors’ works that at the time were recognized as being scientific without the shadow of a doubt and by interrogating relevant experts, such as Charles Robert Drysdale – a doctor and birth control activist. From this, it emerged that the language used by Knowlton to write the book was even “delicate and careful in comparison with ordinary medical literature”<sup>222</sup>. Hence, at the end of the fourth day of discussion, the trial ended by declaring the defendants guilty.

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<sup>217</sup> Bradlaugh, C., & Besant, A. (1877). *The Queen v. Charles Bradlaugh and Annie Besant: (Specially reported)*, Queen’s Bench Division, Freethought Pub. Co., pp. 5

<sup>218</sup> Bradlaugh, C., & Besant, A. (1877). *The Queen v. Charles Bradlaugh and Annie Besant: (Specially reported)*, Queen’s Bench Division, Freethought Pub. Co., pp. 21

<sup>219</sup> Bradlaugh, C., & Besant, A. (1877). *The Queen v. Charles Bradlaugh and Annie Besant: (Specially reported)*, Queen’s Bench Division, Freethought Pub. Co., pp. 251

<sup>220</sup> Bradlaugh, C., & Besant, A. (1877). *The Queen v. Charles Bradlaugh and Annie Besant: (Specially reported)*, Queen’s Bench Division, Freethought Pub. Co., pp. 60

<sup>221</sup> Bradlaugh, C., & Besant, A. (1877). *The Queen v. Charles Bradlaugh and Annie Besant: (Specially reported)*, Queen’s Bench Division, Freethought Pub. Co., pp. 61

<sup>222</sup> Bradlaugh, C., & Besant, A. (1877). *The Queen v. Charles Bradlaugh and Annie Besant: (Specially reported)*, Queen’s Bench Division, Freethought Pub. Co., pp. 233

Seeing as *The Fruits of Philosophy* was recognized as being a medical book, it had the aim of providing information to the public, and “using knowledge wrongly does not make the knowledge obscene”, indeed, “the fault of the misuse does not lie with the giver of the knowledge, it lies with the person who abuses the knowledge”<sup>223</sup>.

The Bradlaugh-Besant trial, therefore, was a turning point because it generated considerable publicity for *The Fruits of Philosophy* and its topic. As admitted by the Solicitor-General<sup>224</sup> and Besant “the pamphlet had a small sale for years back of about 700 copies annually, and for the number that have been sold since our arrest, you must blame the prosecution, and not me. It is the prosecution which has given importance to this book”<sup>225</sup> and which made it possible to reach 125.000 copies sold. Furthermore, many were the newspapers that brought attention to Knowlton’s book and his ideas. Despite their being aware that the publicity was helping the Neo-Malthusian cause, they kept reporting and talking about the legal proceedings.<sup>226</sup>

The second important event, as mentioned above, was the creation of the Malthusian League in 1877 which, as affirmed by Besant in her autobiography, was created “as a useful result of the prosecution”<sup>227</sup> to spread the ideas of Neo-Malthusianism. The main instruments used by the organism were lectures, tracts, and the press. For what concerns the first method, lectures were delivered to present the organizations’ ideas to the public in cities like London and Newcastle and they aimed to give talks to a wide audience about population issues. Among the speakers, there were Besant, Bradlaugh, and Drysdale. With regard to the tracts, ten were those published, including Drysdale’s *The Principle of Population*. While, as far as the press is concerned, its use played a significant role and two were the main journals used: the *National Reform* which was edited by Bradlaugh, and the George Standring’s *Republican*. In addition to these two, Drysdale

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<sup>223</sup> Bradlaugh, C., & Besant, A. (1877). *The Queen v. Charles Bradlaugh and Annie Besant: (Specially reported)*, Queen’s Bench Division, Freethought Pub. Co., pp. 131

<sup>224</sup> Bradlaugh, C., & Besant, A. (1877). *The Queen v. Charles Bradlaugh and Annie Besant: (Specially reported)*, Queen’s Bench Division, Freethought Pub. Co., pp. 149, 249

<sup>225</sup> Bradlaugh, C., & Besant, A. (1877). *The Queen v. Charles Bradlaugh and Annie Besant: (Specially reported)*, Queen’s Bench Division, Freethought Pub. Co., pp. 30

<sup>226</sup> Banks, J. A., & Banks, O. (1954). The Bradlaugh-Besant Trial and the English Newspapers. *Population Studies*, 8(1), pp. 24

<sup>227</sup> Besant, A. (1893). *Annie Besant: An Autobiography* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). London: T. Fisher Unwin, pp. 229

proposed and then created a new journal called *The Malthusian*.<sup>228</sup> This last one was the most relevant. The first number was published in 1879 with the aim “to serve as an organ of that portion of Society which, accepting the Malthusian theory of population as an incontrovertible truth, has resolved that it shall no longer be passed by in silence by statesmen and political reformers”<sup>229</sup>. Among the contents proposed in the first number were also the objectives and the principles of the League. Additionally, another way to use the press was to produce leaflets on the subject.

Despite the attempts made by the League, there were still many obstacles that the movement had to face to spread their ideas. One of the main problems was the law which did not allow the publication of information about how to prevent pregnancies. An example of this is Doctor Henry Arthur Allbutt who published a work called *The Wife's Handbook* in 1888 with the aim

to save the lives and preserve the health of thousands of women, to rescue from death and disease children who may be born, to teach the young wife how to order her health during the most important period of her life, to remove from her mind the popular ignorance in which she may have been reared, and to enable her to learn truths concerning her duties as wife and mother<sup>230</sup>

and who aimed at achieving the goal by indicating, among various information, “how to prevent conception when advised by the doctor”<sup>231</sup>. Due to this handbook, however, he suffered serious negative consequences before the General Medical Council. The case was brought before the Queen's Bench who did not support the physician. Doctors were, indeed, a second difficult issue since there were many who did not agree with the League and expressed concern about the promotion of contraception.<sup>232</sup> In addition to the legal and scientific world, the religious sphere also represented a problem for the Malthusian League. Indeed, even though it was only in the first half of the twentieth century that the

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<sup>228</sup> D'Arcy, F. (1977). The Malthusian League and the Resistance to Birth Control Propaganda in Late Victorian Britain. *Population Studies*, 31(3), pp. 429-432

<sup>229</sup> League, M. (1879). *The Malthusian*. [Vol.1, no.1 is of the 2nd ed.]. [Continued as] *The New generation*. [Continued as] *The Malthusian*. N.S., pp. 5

<sup>230</sup> Allbutt, H. A. (1888). *The wife's handbook* (7<sup>th</sup> ed.). London: R. Forder, pp. 3

<sup>231</sup> Allbutt, H. A. (1888). *The wife's handbook* (7<sup>th</sup> ed.). London: R. Forder, pp. 47

<sup>232</sup> D'Arcy, F. (1977). The Malthusian League and the Resistance to Birth Control Propaganda in Late Victorian Britain. *Population Studies*, 31(3), pp. 434-435

Church of Rome and the Church of England clearly expressed their disagreement with the movement, already in the Nineteenth century they expressed some concern about the use of contraception.<sup>233</sup> Moreover, a further issue that negatively influenced the way people saw the League was what D'Arcy defined as "the pride in the empire" which means that some believed that having an empire meant becoming richer and therefore no need to worry about limited resources, while some even claimed that to obtain a well-being it was necessary to have a strong empire and therefore to not decrease the number of the population.<sup>234</sup> The last barrier to the acceptance of the Neo-Malthusian theory to be mentioned was the belief, based on Darwin's ideas, that the strongest would prevail. Those who agreed with this theory claimed that people should not interfere in the natural course of events and, therefore, contraception should not be used because, in the end, only those who have the right qualities and hence who are meant to survive will live.<sup>235</sup>

To conclude, the Bradlaugh-Besant trial and the Malthusian League are central factors that allowed the spread of contraceptive methods in England but also the United States by defining them as the final solution to the problem of overpopulation. This was therefore an important step to incentivize birth control and subsequently reproductive rights.

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<sup>233</sup> D'Arcy, F. (1977). The Malthusian League and the Resistance to Birth Control Propaganda in Late Victorian Britain. *Population Studies*, 31(3), pp. 435

<sup>234</sup> D'Arcy, F. (1977). The Malthusian League and the Resistance to Birth Control Propaganda in Late Victorian Britain. *Population Studies*, 31(3), pp. 436

<sup>235</sup> D'Arcy, F. (1977). The Malthusian League and the Resistance to Birth Control Propaganda in Late Victorian Britain. *Population Studies*, 31(3), pp. 439

## CHAPTER THREE

### POPULATION CONTROL BECOMES A FUNDAMENTAL RIGHT

From the previous chapter, it follows that the diffusion of contraceptive methods and the politics for the control of the population were closely linked to the socio-economic aspect. This did not change for most of the twentieth century. Indeed, after an initial moment in which the attention of the birth control movement was to guarantee access to reproductive knowledge, it returned to be used as an instrument to limit population reproduction. This was made possible by the merging of the birth control movement with other currents of thought, such as neo-Malthusianism (which, albeit somewhat discontinuously, was present throughout the century), eugenics, and family planning programs. On the other hand, towards the end of the twentieth century, at the international level, greater attention was given to human rights and the situation of women. They were recognized as essential aspects of bringing development around the world. Consequently, there was the recognition of family planning programs and thus birth control as reproductive rights.

It should be noted that, since the birth control movement strongly developed in the United States, from now on the focus of this thesis will inevitably shift from England. If this were not the case, it would not be possible to give a complete picture of how birth control has become a right internationally recognized.

#### **3.1.From birth control to family planning**

##### *3.1.1. The beginning of the birth control movement*

At the beginning of the twentieth century, while Europe was experiencing the First World War and its consequences, in the United States a birth control movement was seeing the light. Fundamental to its strengthening were neo-Malthusianism, anarchism, and socialism.

Among the leading exponents of the movement was Emma Goldman. She was an American anarchist born in 1869 and a prolific writer and lecturer, whose work helped to popularize anarchism in the United States. She defined anarchism as “the philosophy

of a new social order based on liberty unrestricted by manmade law; the theory that all forms of government rest on violence, and are therefore wrong and harmful, as well as unnecessary"<sup>236</sup>. She was known for her work in agitating masses in favor of birth control as she was also an outspoken advocate for women's rights, free speech, and labor rights. A significant factor in the development of his ideas on birth control was neo-Malthusianism. The Malthusian League marked a turning point in her life in 1900 when she attended the first Neo-Malthusian Conference in Paris. From such an experience she learned a lot about contraception and once she returned to the States, she started to promote this practice in lectures and in her periodical *Mother Earth*. She took "a socialist neo-Malthusian position"<sup>237</sup> claiming that the female sex for a long time had "her knees before the altar of duty as imposed by God, by Capitalism, by the State, and by Morality"<sup>238</sup>. Women are those responsible for the reproduction of the race, risking their health and their life for this; consequently, Goldman claimed that "women should have the knowledge that would enable her to recuperate during a period of from three to five years between each pregnancy, which alone would give her physical and mental well-being and the opportunity to take better care of the children already in existence"<sup>239</sup>. The reason behind this way of thinking can be found by looking at her working life. She, initially, worked as a prison nurse, and then, after a training school in Vienna where she earned a diploma in midwifery and nursing, she started to work as a midwife. A job that as admitted herself "was not very lucrative, only the poorest foreign element resorting to such services"; however, "it furnished an excellent field for experience"<sup>240</sup> because it allowed her to see first-hand the problems faced by the poorest people. During this experience, she was especially confronted with the despair that women from the lower classes felt when faced with unwanted pregnancies. They sought by all means methods to terminate them, even at the cost of endangering their own lives by drinking

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<sup>236</sup> Goldman, E. (1911). *Anarchism and other essays* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). New York-London: Mother Earth Publishing Association. (Original Work Published 1910), pp. 22

<sup>237</sup> Hodgson, D., & Watkins, S. C. (1997). Feminists and Neo-Malthusians: Past and Present Alliances. *Population and Development Review*, 23(3), pp. 474

<sup>238</sup> Goldman, E. (1916). The social aspects of birth control. *Mother Earth*, 11(2), pp. 2

<sup>239</sup> Goldman, E. (1916). The social aspects of birth control. *Mother Earth*, 11(2), pp. 2

<sup>240</sup> Goldman, E. (2012). *Living my life* (Vol. 1). Courier Corporation. (Original work published 1931), pp. 138

concoctions and using unsharp instruments to perform abortions. Goldman tried to help them as much as she could but never went so far as to perform an abortion because this could endanger the patients' lives. She tried to ask for advice from some physicians; nonetheless, this resulted in a failure as they blamed women for their situation.<sup>241</sup> Thus, she became one of the most prominent figures who fought for the birth control movement. She helped to bring the issue of birth control to the forefront of public debate.

Neo-Malthusianism and anarchism-socialism were an inspiration also for another pioneer of the birth control movement: Margaret Sanger. She was an activist particularly significant because she was the one who, in 1914, coined the term "birth control" since, according to her, "a new movement was starting, and the baby had to have a name"<sup>242</sup>. Important to Sanger's battle was Goldman, as initially, she adopted the same orientation. The two women, indeed, shared the fact that they both worked as nurses, and for Sanger, like for Goldman, such an experience left a mark: desperate women asked her how to limit pregnancies, and when doctors were asked what could be done for these young ladies, they proved reluctant to help them. Thus, she decided to learn the necessary knowledge herself.

Sanger aimed to instruct the masses about birth control so as to give them the possibility to choose to limit their pregnancies. Therefore, in 1914, to spread her ideas, she created a monthly paper called *The Woman Rebel* with the aim to "stimulate working women to think for themselves and to build up a conscious fighting character"<sup>243</sup>; however "when its mission was accomplished and the words "birth control" were on their way to be a symbol of woman's freedom in all civilized tongues, the journal went out of existence"<sup>244</sup>. In 1915, after the creation of *The Woman Rebel*, Sanger founded the National Birth Control League (NBCL), the first birth control organization in America. Its aim was to teach people about contraception and to change laws that made it hard to get information about preventing maternity. Initially, indeed, the attention of Sanger was on allowing

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<sup>241</sup> Goldman, E. (2012). *Living my life* (Vol. 1). Courier Corporation. (Original work published 1931), pp. 138-139

<sup>242</sup> Sanger, M. (1938). *Margaret Sanger; An autobiography* (1st ed.). New York, W. W. Norton, pp. 107

<sup>243</sup> Sanger, M. (1914). The woman rebel: no gods no masters. *The Woman Rebel*, 1(1).

<sup>244</sup> Sanger, M. (1920). *Woman and the new Race*. New York: Brentano, pp. 214

people to know how to prevent pregnancies. This was particularly hard in the United States, where the regulation of information about contraception was strict. To discourage the use of devices for birth prevention, in 1873 a federal act “for the Suppression of Trade in, and Circulation of, obscene Literature and Articles of Immoral Use”<sup>245</sup> was approved since all the necessary information about contraception circulated through the press and literature. Such document was the first of a series of laws called the Comstock Law, after its chief proponent Anthony Comstock, and became the regular bureaucratic procedure until the 1960s. However, its legacy and impact on the freedom of expression and reproductive rights in the United States continue to be discussed and debated to this day. Violations of the Act were considered serious offenses, and those convicted could face severe penalties. The law provided for punishments that included imprisonment with hard labor for up to five years and fines.<sup>246</sup>

Among the victims of the Comstock Act was *The Woman Rebel* which was confiscated. Considering the few options that Sanger had and the fact that she neither wanted to stop the publication, nor go to jail, she decided to flee the country and go to Europe, but not without committing another act of dubious legality. Just before taking the train, in fact, she printed and left ten thousand copies of *Family Limitation* with friends and relatives. This was a manual containing the best techniques for terminating pregnancies, these included douches, “sheath or letter”, the pessary, sponges, and vaginal tablets.<sup>247</sup> Furthermore, Sanger emphasized the importance of women being able to feel comfortable in their own bodies and to care for their own health without needing support from men, and in this document, for the first and last time, she mentioned abortion.<sup>248</sup>

During Sanger’s journey in the Old Continent, she deepened her knowledge about the Malthusian doctrine and the neo-Malthusian League. Among her various stops in

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<sup>245</sup> American Memory. “A Century of Lawmaking for a New Nation: U.S. Congressional Documents and Debates, 1774–1875.” Statutes at Large, 42nd Congress, 3rd Session, 598.

<sup>246</sup> Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia (2023, August 16). Comstock Act. *Encyclopedia Britannica*

<sup>247</sup> Sanger, M. (1914). *Family Limitation*. New York: Review Pub. Co., pp. 7, 9, 11-13

<sup>248</sup> Engelman, P. C. (2011). *A history of the birth control movement in America*. Bloomsbury Publishing USA, pp. 44

Europe, she decided to also visit France and England where the debate about birth control was freer, she found, than in the United States. She came in contact with Drysdale whose encounter “drew confirmation of the purity of my endeavor, something essential for me to take back to America”<sup>249</sup>. Moreover, during her stay, she learned about Aletta Jacobs who created the world's first contraceptive clinic. This was opened in 1882 in Amsterdam. Jacob was an important figure in the fight for birth control in the Netherlands as she was the first female Dutch physician and an international leader. She was a leader of the Dutch IWSA (International Women Suffrage Movement) and one of the most notable members of the WILPF (Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom).<sup>250</sup> Accordingly, Sanger visited Amsterdam to better understand the strategy used there. This experience was enlightening for her, and she affirmed that she “could no longer look upon it [the birth control movement] as a struggle for free speech” because she realized that “it involved much more than talks, books, or pamphlets. These were not enough”<sup>251</sup>. Therefore, Margaret Sanger's trip to Europe played a central role in shaping her vision of birth control and reproductive rights. Exposure to progressive ideas and interactions with European activists influenced her advocacy work and the creation of organizations dedicated to promoting control of fertility and women's health. When she turned to America, Sanger had a renewed commitment to birth control, and she led the movement to undergo a significant change. The European experience, indeed, reinforced her belief that access to contraception was vital to women's reproductive autonomy and overall well-being. Consequently, she adopted a more neo-Malthusian approach and in 1916 founded her own clinic, namely The Brownsville Clinic. This was the second in the world and it taught women “what contraception was; that abortion was the wrong way [...] that contraception was the better way, the safer way”<sup>252</sup>. The Clinic worked not without enormous legal problems since it violated Comstock laws, and this led to the arrest of both Sanger and her sister. This was then

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<sup>249</sup> Sanger, M. (1938). *Margaret Sanger; An autobiography* (1<sup>st</sup> ed.). New York, W. W. Norton, pp. 131

<sup>250</sup> Rupp, L. J. (1997). Sexuality and Politics in the Early Twentieth Century: The Case of the International Women’s Movement. *Feminist Studies*, 23(3), pp. 581, 591

<sup>251</sup> Sanger, M. (1938). *Margaret Sanger; An autobiography* (1<sup>st</sup> ed.). New York, W. W. Norton, pp. 152

<sup>252</sup> Sanger, M. (1938). *Margaret Sanger; An autobiography* (1<sup>st</sup> ed.). New York, W. W. Norton, pp. 217

compounded by the fact that no doctors attended it and the authorities shut it down not long after its opening.<sup>253</sup>

When Sanger and the NBCL sought supporters for their initiative, they naturally turned to the feminist movement, which seemed the most in line with their ideology. Notwithstanding, suffragettes turned them down.<sup>254</sup> Contrary to what some may think, at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, the main engine for the development of birth control was not feminism but neo-Malthusian and the Left. In fact, Feminists' focus, initially, was women's entitlement to vote since they suffered a lack of political rights and representation, in addition to other aspects, such as women's economic independence, right to work, and access to education. It was only after the 1920s when American women gained the right to vote, that feminists gave more attention to gender inequality and access to birth control.<sup>255</sup> Despite the denial from suffragists, support came from the Socialist Party and the anarchists which contributed to sustaining *The Woman Rebel*. In addition to these, considerable assistance was given by the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). This organization was born in 1905 with the aim of establishing a collective of employees who possess the necessary tools for production and sales. The IWW, therefore, did not have the primary goal of spreading birth control, it used the movement to reach its goal and thought that birth control was crucial for working-class women to give them more autonomy in their lives. Ultimately, this would be advantageous for the working class as a whole.<sup>256</sup> However, this movement was particularly supportive when Sanger was put to trial for her publications and had to leave the country. In such a difficult moment, the left-wing women demonstrated their support for the activist by printing and distributing hundreds of thousands of copies of the pamphlet and some of the IWW members concretely assisted

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<sup>253</sup> Johnson, R. C. (1977). Feminism, Philanthropy and Science in the Development of The Oral Contraceptive Pill. *Pharmacy in History*, 19(2), pp. 64

<sup>254</sup> Sanger, M. (1938). *Margaret Sanger; An autobiography* (1<sup>st</sup> ed.). New York, W. W. Norton, pp. 108

<sup>255</sup> Malinowska, A. (2020). Waves of Feminism. *The international encyclopedia of gender, media, and communication*, 1, pp. 2-3

<sup>256</sup> Whitney, J. (2022). The Working Class Birth of Birth Control. *Graduate Review*, 2(2), 8, pp. 4

Sanger during the trial by gathering funds to cover her legal fees at the trial sent letters to demonstrate their solidarity.<sup>257</sup>

The support of the radicals, however, started to weaken after 1916. They, indeed, found that all the discussion around women's problems was reducing the focus on the more important class conflict and revolution.<sup>258</sup> Furthermore, while Sanger was abroad the NBCL reorganized itself and the newly chosen leader was Mary Warren Dennett – suffragette and birth control advocate. Dennett was another important figure and she reunited in her both the fight for birth control and for the right to vote. Initially, she was part of suffragist organizations like the Massachusetts Woman Suffrage Association and then the National American Suffrage Association. Subsequently, she left the Association, and she founded the NBCL<sup>259</sup>(worth noticing that there were many other suffragettes who supported the birth control movement; nonetheless, they were not as were not so significant for the movement or they preferred not to expose themselves too much). With Sanger's return, she reapproached to the NBCL; however, its members tried to distance themselves from her as much as possible since it “disagreed with my methods, my tactics, with everything I had done. Such an organization as theirs, the function of which was primarily to change the laws in an orderly and proper manner, could not logically sanction anyone who had broken those laws”<sup>260</sup>. By 1917, many were organizations created around the country. However, results were limited and in 1919 the NBCL changed its name to the Voluntary Parenthood League.

In 1917, Sanger definitely broke with the Left. Since that year the Bolshevik Revolution erupted, people feared the spread of communism within their borders and the government dismantled the IWW network.<sup>261</sup> It was precisely that same year that Sanger started working on reviving a journal called *Birth Control Review*. It had the aim of giving

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<sup>257</sup> Jensen, J. M. (1981). The Evolution of Margaret Sanger's "Family Limitation" Pamphlet, 1914-1921. *Signs*, 6(3), pp. 549

<sup>258</sup> Hartmann, B. (1997). Population control I: birth of an ideology. *International Journal of Health Services*, 27(3), pp. 526

<sup>259</sup> Prescott, H. M., & Thompson, L. M. (2020). A Right to Ourselves: Women's Suffrage and the Birth Control Movement. *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*, 19(4), pp. 551.

<sup>260</sup> Sanger, M. (1938). *Margaret Sanger; An autobiography* (1<sup>st</sup> ed.). New York, W. W. Norton, pp. 180

<sup>261</sup> Hodgson, D., & Watkins, S. C. (1997). Feminists and Neo-Malthusians: Past and Present Alliances. *Population and Development Review*, 23(3), pp. 475

voice to all those who want to write their “vision of what birth control will bring to the human race” and “to render articulate the aspiration of humanity toward conscious and voluntary motherhood”<sup>262</sup>. As admitted by Sanger herself, due to the outbreak of World War I and the entry of the United States into the conflict in 1916, the *Review* “was the only forward step”<sup>263</sup> made by the birth control movement. After World War I and the weakening of the Left, Sanger realized that she needed new allies. She sought the support and expertise of scientists and physicians which resulted in a rapprochement of the eugenics movement.

Despite not being the only advocator for birth control, Sanger is seen as the symbol of early feminist ideas and worries. Therefore, studying her work as a birth control advocate helps us see how feminism, neo-Malthusianism, and eugenics are connected.

### 3.1.2. *Eugenics*

To better understand the development of the birth control movement over time, it is also important to talk about eugenics. This worldwide movement, in fact, was for a time intertwined with the movement led by Sanger.

Eugenics was first founded in the nineteenth century as a discipline that aimed to apply the principles of genetic selection in order to improve the genetic quality of the human population. The term was coined by Francis Galton in 1883 and inspiration derived from the theory of natural selection of Charles Darwin.<sup>264</sup> At that time, it was mostly utopian; however, over the years, such a movement increasingly acquired consent.

The eugenics movement gained popularity in many Western countries where its ideas were used to justify various social and political initiatives, such as immigration restrictions, forced sterilization, and marriage laws. The idea was indeed that behind social and financial inequalities there were biological aspects. Thus, according to scholars in this field, it was, therefore, necessary to limit the spread of the genetic makeup that was conducive to poor living conditions.<sup>265</sup> This is why, part of eugenicists,

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<sup>262</sup> Sanger, M. (1917). Shall we Break this law. *The Birth Control Review*, 1(1), pp. 3

<sup>263</sup> Sanger, M. (1938). *Margaret Sanger; An autobiography* (1<sup>st</sup> ed.). New York, W. W. Norton, pp. 256

<sup>264</sup> Wilson, P. K. (2023, August 17). *eugenics*. *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

<sup>265</sup> Gordon, L. (1975). The politics of birth control, 1920-1940: the impact of professionals. *International Journal of Health Services*, 5(2), pp. 266-267

turned to the control of the population with positive and negative eugenics. The former wanted to advocate for the procreation of “favorable” individuals, while the latter wanted to hinder the procreation of “undesirable” genes, and this is where the birth control movement and family planning fit in.<sup>266</sup>

Due to its desire to limit the breeding of part of the population, eugenics ended up sustaining birth control and the use of contraceptive methods at the beginning of the Twentieth century. Such a movement had a major impact in the United States; however, it was not limited there, as it was also diffused throughout Europe. In particular, in England, it intertwined with the neo-Malthusian which, as already discussed, had a major role in incentivizing the use of contraceptives. One of the main aspects that contributed to the cooperation of the Malthusian League with the eugenic movement was the great reduction of the number of people that happened to start at the end of the nineteenth century and that characterized especially the middle class.<sup>267</sup> This awareness of the declining birth rate was closely linked with the fear that this would bring a weakening of the British population, and thus, a threat to the future of the nation and its position as a global power.<sup>268</sup> In addition, neo-Malthusians saw negative eugenics as a helpful tool in reducing overpopulation and rising poverty, even though they did not share the eugenic approach of selective breeding.<sup>269</sup>

With the outbreak of the First World War, however, relations between the two movements began to sour since the positive eugenics started to gain more attention. Subsequently, the Malthusian League was definitely set aside due to the emergence of the birth control movement in the States<sup>270</sup> which argued that access to birth control and family planning was essential for improving the health and well-being of both individuals and society as a whole.

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<sup>266</sup> Wilson, P. K. (2023, August 17). *eugenics*. *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

<sup>267</sup> Soloway, R. A. (1978). Neo-Malthusians, Eugenists, and the Declining Birth-Rate in England, 1900-1918. *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies*, 10(3), pp. 266

<sup>268</sup> Soloway, R. A. (1978). Neo-Malthusians, Eugenists, and the Declining Birth-Rate in England, 1900-1918. *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies*, 10(3), pp. 267

<sup>269</sup> Soloway, R. A. (1978). Neo-Malthusians, Eugenists, and the Declining Birth-Rate in England, 1900-1918. *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies*, 10(3), pp. 272

<sup>270</sup> Soloway, R. A. (1978). Neo-Malthusians, Eugenists, and the Declining Birth-Rate in England, 1900-1918. *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies*, 10(3), pp. 284

In the 1920s, eugenics and the birth control movement found common ground in their shared goal of controlling the population and promoting the idea of a "perfect" society. Indeed, even though the majority of eugenicists did not support the promotion of women's rights through the diffusion of contraceptives, some of them saw in the birth control movement a common aim to promote conversations and educate the public on sexual subjects. A further factor that brought the two movements closer together was the open stance that birth controllers had towards eugenicists.<sup>271</sup> This has been demonstrated by Sanger who, in 1925, during the Sixth International Malthusian and Birth Control Conference, gave the opportunity to the eugenics movement to express their ideas and to have an exchange of ideas with her movement, "the eugenists wanted to shift the birth control emphasis from less children for the poor to more children for the rich. We went back to that and sought first to stop the multiplication of the unfit. This appeared the most important and greatest step towards race betterment"<sup>272</sup>. After World War I, in fact, Sanger started to focus on the benefits of birth control for society, not just for single individuals. She shared some of the concerns of eugenicists on population control and was associated with them. In general, advocates of birth control began to embrace eugenicist principles. They no longer emphasized the importance of birth control for women's freedom. Hence, whereas previously the birth control movement promoted the concept of having fewer children for financial purposes, now it prioritizes the advantages of having a small, well-thought-out family.<sup>273</sup> The aim for Sanger and her British equivalent Marie Stopes was to prioritize eugenics principles to render birth control more acceptable.<sup>274</sup>

Eugenics movement was also involved in supporting the establishment of birth control clinics, such as the one founded by Stopes in London in 1921, and the Clinical Research Bureau (CBR) opened by Sanger in 1923 in New York<sup>275</sup>. By 1926, indeed, the Eugenics

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<sup>271</sup> Gordon, L. (1975). The politics of birth control, 1920-1940: the impact of professionals. *International Journal of Health Services*, 5(2), pp. 268

<sup>272</sup> Sanger, M. (1938). *Margaret Sanger; An autobiography* (1<sup>st</sup> ed.). New York, W. W. Norton, pp. 375

<sup>273</sup> Mass, B. (1974). An historical sketch of the American population control movement. *International Journal of Health Services*, 4(4), pp. 654-655

<sup>274</sup> Borell, M. (1987). Biologists and the Promotion of Birth Control Research, 1918-1938. *Journal of the History of Biology*, 20(1), pp. 57

<sup>275</sup> Soloway, R. A. (1995). The "Perfect Contraceptive": Eugenics and Birth Control Research in Britain and America in the Interwar Years. *Journal of Contemporary History*, 30(4), pp. 639

Society affirmed that positive eugenics was likely less effective than negative eugenics. Hence, it openly joined the movement for birth control and started to not only financially support clinics but also study, research, and analyze the best contraceptive methods thanks to the data provided by clinics.<sup>276</sup> To produce the best contraceptive possible, it was necessary to recruit scientists and physicians; however, the task was not easy either in the United States or in England, as men were skeptics and conservative about sexual reform.<sup>277</sup> It was only after some time that they changed their mind and started to see birth control as part of a broader scientific discourse.<sup>278</sup>

In spite of the first success with the studies, eugenics experienced a major setback that according to Soloway was caused by three elements: the sharp slowdown in population growth in the 1930s shifted the general focus from unequal birth rates, Hitler's use of eugenics to eliminate certain races, and the lack of confidence in the idea that it was possible to identify and eliminate negative traits from the population.<sup>279</sup>

To conclude, eugenics had an impact on the birth control movement, creating a complex and controversial connection between the two. The concept of eugenics provided a scientific rationale supporting the birth control movement. Notwithstanding, it is important to note that eugenics was also employed as a rationale for enacting compulsory sterilization legislation which permitted the sterilization of individuals with cognitive impairments or socially marginalized groups. Consequently, the birth control movement distanced itself from eugenic principles, focusing on broader goals of reproductive rights and access to contraception for all individuals.

However, the topic of birth control kept being considered more of a social issue rather than a scientific or medical one. It is necessary to wait until after The Second World War,

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<sup>276</sup> Soloway, R. A. (1995). The "Perfect Contraceptive": Eugenics and Birth Control Research in Britain and America in the Interwar Years. *Journal of Contemporary History*, 30(4), pp. 640

<sup>277</sup> Soloway, R. A. (1995). The "Perfect Contraceptive": Eugenics and Birth Control Research in Britain and America in the Interwar Years. *Journal of Contemporary History*, 30(4), pp. 648-649

<sup>278</sup> Borell, M. (1987). Biologists and the Promotion of Birth Control Research, 1918-1938. *Journal of the History of Biology*, 20(1), pp. 77

<sup>279</sup> Soloway, R. A. (1995). The "Perfect Contraceptive": Eugenics and Birth Control Research in Britain and America in the Interwar Years. *Journal of Contemporary History*, 30(4), pp. 659-660

with a renewed interest in population studies that birth control will attract interest from a wider public.

### 3.1.3. Population control after the Second World War

In the latter half of the 20th century, a consensus began to emerge regarding the importance of tackling not only the prevention of unplanned pregnancies but also the wider concerns surrounding reproductive wellbeing. The term “family planning” became a more accepted expression for discussing contraception and it substituted discussions about “birth control”. Consequently, the birth control movement underwent significant changes that were reflected in a structural change too. In 1939, the American Birth Control League (ABCL) and the Birth Control Clinical Research Bureau (BCCRB) merged and established the Birth Control Federation of America (BCFA) which, after some years, in 1942, took the name of Planned Parenthood.<sup>280</sup> Something similar happened also in the UK where due to a fear of depopulation, the term birth control was substituted and organizations such as the National Birth Control Association (NBCA), in 1939, were transformed into the Family Planning Association (FPA).<sup>281</sup>

Moreover, following the Second World War, with eugenics losing its centrality because of the horrors of Fascism and Nazism, and the number of births increasing, depopulation was no more an issue that worried scholars in Western countries. Nonetheless, another issue came to light, the situation of underdeveloped countries.

Due to the implementation of more affordable health-care solutions, the population of Third World countries was experiencing rapid growth which was dangerous as it could limit industrialization projects.<sup>282</sup> Western countries, indeed, heavily depended on raw materials imported from underdeveloped countries.<sup>283</sup> Hence, the focus shifted to the idea of encouraging the use of contraceptives and, therefore, the adoption of family planning programs to limit population growth in decolonizing and developing

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<sup>280</sup> Hartmann, B. (1997). Population control I: birth of an ideology. *International Journal of Health Services*, 27(3), pp. 529

<sup>281</sup> Leathard, A. (1980). *Fight for Family Planning*. Springer, pp. 67-68

<sup>282</sup> Hodgson, D., & Watkins, S. C. (1997). Feminists and Neo-Malthusians: Past and Present Alliances. *Population and Development Review*, 23(3), pp. 478-479

<sup>283</sup> Mass, B. (1974). An historical sketch of the American population control movement. *International Journal of Health Services*, 4(4), pp. 658

countries. A demonstration of this shift is observable by looking at the UN meetings. In 1954 there was the first international meeting on population centered on Western nations and statistic methods; however, during a second conference in 1965, attention moved to the situation in poor nations.<sup>284</sup>

As a result of all the 1950s events and studies, a collaboration between planned parenthood proponents and population specialists was created. The two movements, indeed, shared the goal of spreading contraceptive techniques in countries where people had limited access to resources allowing them to exercise control over births. By the 1960s, scholars claimed that the population problem extended way beyond Asia, where it was first thought to be circumscribed, reaching all Third World countries.<sup>285</sup> Consequently, these years were marked by a return of the neo-Malthusian fears of a global disaster due to a too elevated birthrate compared to available resources. This concern was further raised by the publication, in 1968, of a book called *The Population Bomb* by Ehrlich.<sup>286</sup>

Worries about population growth in the poorest countries of the world were diffused in many Western states in the post-war period. This was demonstrated by the creation, in 1948, of the International Committee on Planned Parenthood (ICPP) which was the union of family planning advocates. Within the Committee there were three current thoughts as to how to solve the problem of overpopulation: firstly, the Dutch and Scandinavians whose focus was on sex education, secondly, the British who advocated for the establishment of clinics and programs, lastly, Americans who prioritized population control and stabilization efforts in Third world nations.<sup>287</sup> Afterward, in 1952, this organization was substituted by the International Planned Parenthood Federation

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<sup>284</sup> Cook, H. (2004). *The long sexual revolution: English women, sex, and contraception 1800-1975*. Oxford University Press, USA, pp. 298

<sup>285</sup> Hodgson, D., & Watkins, S. C. (1997). Feminists and Neo-Malthusians: Past and Present Alliances. *Population and Development Review*, 23(3), pp. 483-484

<sup>286</sup> Cueto, M., Brown, T., & Fee, E. (2019). The Transition from “Family Planning” to “Sexual and Reproductive Rights”. In *The World Health Organization: A History* (Global Health Histories, pp. 146-169). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 149

<sup>287</sup> Weydner, S. (2018). Reproductive Rights and Reproductive Control: Family Planning, Internationalism, and Population Control in the International Planned Parenthood Federation. *Geschichte Und Gesellschaft*, 44(1), pp. 142

(IPPF) which continued its predecessor objective of making family planning globally accepted, finding new contraceptive techniques, and helping local family planning.<sup>288</sup>

Interest in family planning was particularly keen in the United States where several funds and organizations devoted themselves to trying to export ad hoc population management programs abroad. The Rockefeller family turned out to be among the main proponents of population control in the Twentieth century. More precisely John D. Rockefeller III was the one who tried to persuade the family's Foundation to focus on the issue of population control after a journey in Asia and Africa where he realized the importance of such an argument. However, when the Foundation chose not to get more involved in the population besides medical, Rockefeller started his own organization called the Population Council.<sup>289</sup> The Population Council was the result of a conference held in 1952. From such a meeting it resulted that the problem was not merely one of excessive birth rate but also of limited food supply, due to economic and social problems which affect the agricultural sector.<sup>290</sup> In addition to this, various possible solutions were discussed, and it was decided that "the Chairman of the Conference be requested to appoint a Temporary Committee [whose] functions [...] shall be promptly to consider the steps to be taken to bring about the organization at a high level of professional competence and public esteem of an unofficial international Council [the Population Council]"<sup>291</sup>. This organization was, therefore, created with the aim of studying the problem and researching for the adoption of ad hoc programs to be adopted in the neediest countries in Africa and Asia, such as India and Pakistan.<sup>292</sup>

The Rockefeller initiative was further reinforced when the Ford Foundation decided to act in this field as well. Consequently, with the help of the Foundation, the Council

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<sup>288</sup> Weydner, S. (2018). Reproductive Rights and Reproductive Control: Family Planning, Internationalism, and Population Control in the International Planned Parenthood Federation. *Geschichte Und Gesellschaft*, 44(1), pp. 144

<sup>289</sup> Critchlow, D. T. (1995). Birth Control, Population Control, and Family Planning: an overview. *Journal of Policy History*, 7(1), pp. 8

<sup>290</sup> Rockefeller, J. D. (1977). On the Origins of the Population Council. *Population and Development Review*, 3(4), pp. 494

<sup>291</sup> Rockefeller, J. D. (1977). On the Origins of the Population Council. *Population and Development Review*, 3(4), pp. 500

<sup>292</sup> Rockefeller, J. D. (1977). On the Origins of the Population Council. *Population and Development Review*, 3(4), pp. 501-502

established a panel of international experts who reached a consensus on the mechanisms and management of population growth and who worked to establish programs for population control in developing countries.<sup>293</sup> Thus, John D. Rockefeller III became a major supporter of the Committee on Maternal Health. Founded by Robert L. Dickinson, it aimed to find a solution for permanent contraception. For this reason, the Committee started doing research in underdeveloped South American states.<sup>294</sup>

In the 1950s, another organization was involved in promoting population control, this was the Hugh Moore Fund. This was created by Hugh Moore who dedicated his life to the population cause. He was significant as in 1954 he published a pamphlet called *The Population Bomb* that was a precursor for the above-mentioned Ehrlich's work.<sup>295</sup>

Consequently, the US became the leading actor in facing the problem of overpopulation. The above-mentioned organizations, indeed, together with Planned Parenthood, had a role in changing American population policy and led to the creation of family planning programs.<sup>296</sup> Particularly significant for the conduct of studies was India. Two were the reasons behind it: firstly, it was one of the first countries to develop a national program for the management of population, and secondly, both the Population Control and the Ford Foundation studied the country's demography and contraceptive systems.<sup>297</sup> Such studies led some American scholars to claim that the only feasible solution to overpopulation was compulsory sterilization.<sup>298</sup> A technique that, indeed, started to be implemented.

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<sup>293</sup> Critchlow, D. T. (1995). Birth Control, Population Control, and Family Planning: an overview. *Journal of Policy History*, 7(1), pp. 9

<sup>294</sup> Critchlow, D. T. (1995). Birth Control, Population Control, and Family Planning: an overview. *Journal of Policy History*, 7(1), pp. 7

<sup>295</sup> Hartmann, B. (1997). Population control I: birth of an ideology. *International Journal of Health Services*, 27(3), pp. 531

<sup>296</sup> Critchlow, D. T. (1995). Birth Control, Population Control, and Family Planning: an overview. *Journal of Policy History*, 7(1), pp. 9-10, 13

<sup>297</sup> Mass, B. (1974). An historical sketch of the American population control movement. *International Journal of Health Services*, 4(4), pp. 660

<sup>298</sup> Cueto, M., Brown, T., & Fee, E. (2019). The Transition from "Family Planning" to "Sexual and Reproductive Rights". In *The World Health Organization: A History* (Global Health Histories, pp. 146-169). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 153

An interesting point of view, regarding the attempt to limit population growth in non-Western countries such as India, Russia, Japan, and China, comes from Bertrand Russell. He was a British philosopher, logician, and public intellectual who lived between the second half of the nineteenth and the second half of the twentieth century. He entered the population debate with an eugenical approach. He expressed concerns about the fact that in England “there is at present a selective birth-rate of a very singular kind”<sup>299</sup> with a rise in the number of disadvantaged and marginalized individuals, as the proportion of affluent and educated individuals declines. From this, Russell deduced that what is worrying in Western countries is not Malthus’ overpopulation problem or the general decrease in population, but the fact that this degrowth is affecting the most affluent individuals of society.<sup>300</sup> Russell's views on eugenics evolved as he grew less supportive of certain aspects of the movement. Subsequently, one of the issues to which he devoted the most attention was the demographic situation of underdeveloped countries which he saw were characterized by a drop in death rate but not in birth rate. Added to this was poverty and lacking the necessary tools to face population growth. Accordingly, Russell underlined the fact that despite the financial effort made by the United States to encourage birth control policies in these states, effective population management was missing, and the result was disastrous for the states involved. Wealth inequality increased as less developed countries became even more impoverished and affluent countries became even wealthier. Consequently, the solution he proposed was more attention and investments in the villages of the most critical areas with access to resources for contraceptive information and support.<sup>301</sup> Moreover, he attached great importance to scientific development which, he thought, could be instrumental in improving the living conditions of people in developing countries. For this to be possible, however, the author emphasizes the need for three requisites. The first concerned limited population growth and the best way was to recreate the same conditions that first brought a limited demographic rise in the West: “educational

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<sup>299</sup> Russell, B. (1916). Marriage and the Population Question. *International Journal of Ethics*, 26(4), pp. 449

<sup>300</sup> Russell, B. (1916). Marriage and the Population Question. *International Journal of Ethics*, 26(4), pp. 449, 452-453

<sup>301</sup> Russell, B. (1957). “Population Pressure and War,” *The Human Sum*, ed. C.H. Rolph, London, Heinemann

propaganda” hence birth control.<sup>302</sup> The second requisite was the distribution of economic and political powers, while the third and last requirement, according to Russell, could be met with peace, thus with the end of the Cold War, and the subsequent emergence of a single world power, either the United States or Russia.<sup>303</sup> In addition, Russell saw scientific innovation as a solution also for the problem of overpopulation. In 1951 with *The Impact of Science on Society*, he recognized the risk of shortage of food. He claimed that it was possible to avoid such a situation through scientific innovation, like fertilizers and machinery which could enable an increase in the production of raw materials. However, if sufficient scientific development was not possible, Russell claimed that several ways to make the number of a population stable existed. Examples are preventing unwanted pregnancies thanks to contraception, wars, plague, infanticide, or letting history take its course so that a small minority can live well while the rest of the population survives in misery (among these alternatives, birth control was the one he considered best). Nonetheless, for these solutions to be effective, the best manner is to have a “world government” that rationed food otherwise great wars, like the one already experienced during the twentieth century would reoccur.<sup>304</sup> Consequently, the author acknowledges that although the solution is theoretically feasible, in practice it will never be applied.

To conclude, in the after-war, charitable funding groups and collaborative efforts between nations facilitated the widespread availability of low-cost and beneficial birth control options for populations worldwide. Contraceptives were used in developing countries under the name of family planning programs to assist families in limiting the number of their children. Thus, once again, contraception was perceived as a means to achieve an economic and political interest rather than as a woman’s right to control their body.

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<sup>302</sup> Russell, B. (2009). *The basic writings of Bertrand Russell*. Routledge. (Original work published 1961), pp. 626-627

<sup>303</sup> Russell, B. (2009). *The basic writings of Bertrand Russell*. Routledge. (Original work published 1961), pp. 626-627

<sup>304</sup> Russell, B. (2016). *The impact of science on society*. Routledge. (Original work published 1951), pp. 27-28, 101, 103-105, 111

### 3.1.4. A new contraceptive method: the pill

The topic of contraceptives has already been addressed in chapter 1.3. These, however, knew a further development and improvement during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a result of the neo-Bradlaugh-Besant trial and the consequent circulation of *Fruits of Philosophy* that provided space for the dissemination of information on contraception.

The turn of the century was characterized by the improvement of techniques to prevent pregnancy stimulated by the demand of an increasing number of consumers. Two were the main factors that allowed such innovations: better synthetic rubber and the discovery that quinine sulfate can stop sperm from fertilizing eggs. The former was particularly innovative as it facilitated the manufacture of diaphragms, pessaries, and rubber syringes for douches. Then, in 1929 the first latex condom was introduced to the UK market and has since taken its place as the most widely used method. These new techniques made contraception accessible even to the less abject social classes which became the main users of suppositories containing spermicide. In fact, not all users of contraceptives belonged to the same rank and thus had the necessary financial resources to invest in the purchase of the best contraceptives. The lower rank of society mostly used methods such as withdrawal or abortion.<sup>305</sup>

As a result of new contraceptives, a network of retailers was created. Among these were barbers, doctors, herbalists, druggists, and surgical stores. The former was especially apt for such a trade as his clientele was composed exclusively of men. During the early twentieth century, the interest grew even more bringing to the use of the press to advertise products and an extension of contraceptive products.<sup>306</sup> As interest in birth control grew, advice given in books and magazines became more straightforward. They stopped using vague or polite language and started talking openly about how the body works and ways to prevent pregnancy. This happened without opposition. While ordinary people were well disposed to these novelties, the religious and scientific worlds

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<sup>305</sup> Peel, J. (1963). The Manufacture and Retailing of Contraceptives in England. *Population Studies*, 17(2), pp. 115-117, 122

<sup>306</sup> Peel, J. (1963). The Manufacture and Retailing of Contraceptives in England. *Population Studies*, 17(2), pp. 119-120

were concerned about this trend. The latter was especially adverse, with doctors who did not want to address the topic or expressed great skepticism towards the efficiency and safety of contraceptive methods, especially abortion.<sup>307</sup>

Contrary to what happened in the United States, where the Comstock Act prevented the circulation of information concerning contraceptives. In England, there were no laws against making or using birth control, and they could be sold or found easily. The sharing of information about birth control was allowed as long as it did not infringe upon the 1857 Obscene Publications Act, which resulted in charges for some early birth control advocates.<sup>308</sup> This Act marked a shift from the Church's previous role in controlling explicit material. Thus, this act was unique because it was the first legislative attempt to regulate such content and it focused on eradicating the sale of substandard goods by empowering police officers to confiscate and dispose of such material under judicial approval.<sup>309</sup>

Subsequent to these first attempts and the Second World War, a further innovation in the field of birth control was the invention of the contraceptive pill whose inspirer was Sanger. She wanted to create a contraceptive method that allowed women to freely control their bodies. After the failure of her first clinic, The Brownsville Clinic, Sanger realized that she needed the sustain of doctors to proceed with her idea. Therefore, while her efforts to gain support for birth control at that time were met with resistance, she continued to push for its acceptance and eventually founded the American Birth Control League (ABCL), in 1921.<sup>310</sup> Some years later, then, the Clinical Research Bureau saw the light alongside the League. This was particularly significant as it became the office of a female doctor, namely Dr. Bocker, and was a way to circumvent the law against distributing contraceptives which stipulated that only doctors could distribute contraceptives. This contributed, as mentioned earlier, to the break that occurred with

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<sup>307</sup> Engelman, P. C. (2011). *A history of the birth control movement in America*. Bloomsbury Publishing USA, pp. 12-13

<sup>308</sup> Leathard, A. (1980). *Fight for Family Planning*. Springer, pp. 21

<sup>309</sup> Manchester, C. (1988). Lord Campbell's act: England's first obscenity statute. *The Journal of Legal History*, 9(2), pp. 223

<sup>310</sup> Borell, M. (1987). Biologists and the Promotion of Birth Control Research, 1918-1938. *Journal of the History of Biology*, 20(1), pp. 53

the Left and shifted the movement's focus toward eugenics.<sup>311</sup> Sanger searched for medical support in other countries asking them to give relevance to this topic. Nonetheless, doctors' interest in birth control was not based on individuals' right to decide the number of children, rather it was based on the advantages of using contraception for population control.<sup>312</sup>

Despite the encountered difficulties, in the 1930s, Sanger was able to attract the interest of the Rockefeller family, through the Bureau of Social Hygiene. This foundation was established at the beginning of the twentieth century with the goal of reforming regulations surrounding issues such as sex, crime, and misconduct – in particular the elimination of prostitution – subsequently, it enlarged its interest to include birth control.<sup>313</sup> Thanks to the Bureau and the Rockefeller Foundation the search for contraceptives underwent a development that led, for example, to the creation of new spermicides.

With the advent of the Second World War, the interest in the development of a new contraceptive method stalled. The initiative was only resumed in 1950 by Sanger when she asked the director of Planned Parenthood to develop a new contraceptive.<sup>314</sup> At first, the foundation responded favorably to the proposal and financed the project, led by Dr Pincus, to create a contraceptive pill. Eventually, however, the Federation departed from what was the original vision. As a result, Katharine McCormick, who was a feminist, decided to take over the project and funded the rest of the research. Therefore, thanks to this woman, a contraceptive Pill was created. It follows that without her intervention there could have been no advancement in the search for a new contraceptive<sup>315</sup>

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<sup>311</sup> Johnson, R. C. (1977). Feminism, Philanthropy and Science in the Development of The Oral Contraceptive Pill. *Pharmacy in History*, 19(2), pp. 64-65

<sup>312</sup> Borell, M. (1987). Biologists and the Promotion of Birth Control Research, 1918-1938. *Journal of the History of Biology*, 20(1), pp. 54

<sup>313</sup> Borell, M. (1987). Biologists and the Promotion of Birth Control Research, 1918-1938. *Journal of the History of Biology*, 20(1), pp. 64-65

<sup>314</sup> Johnson, R. C. (1977). Feminism, Philanthropy and Science in the Development of The Oral Contraceptive Pill. *Pharmacy in History*, 19(2), pp. 67-68

<sup>315</sup> Johnson, R. C. (1977). Feminism, Philanthropy and Science in the Development of The Oral Contraceptive Pill. *Pharmacy in History*, 19(2), pp. 73

In the 1950s, the Rockefeller Foundation was also important as it financed the necessary research for the development of the first contraceptive pill. The first field tests were held in Los Angeles and Puerto Rico.<sup>316</sup>

The problems with the Pill were not solved with its invention. Further problems emerged when it began to be used. In England, for example, its distribution was the responsibility of the Family Planning Association (FPA), an organization created in 1939.<sup>317</sup> After the introduction of this contraceptive, however, women were the ones who insisted on a more widespread prescription while they were facing resistance from their doctors.<sup>318</sup> Contrary to other contraceptives, women strongly depended on physicians for its use since it could only be distributed by clinics. This constituted a problem since the distribution of this drug was limited to married or engaged women.<sup>319</sup> At the time, there still existed a prejudice linked to having sex before marriage and in Britain. It was only in 1964 that the first clinic for non-married women was created and four years later, the FPA finally allowed the use of the pill to nubile as well.<sup>320</sup> An additional obstacle that had to be surmounted was doctors' critical attitude. A part of them, indeed, did not look favorably on contraceptive methods as they were accused of giving people the freedom to engage in sexual activities at any time. The British response to such a situation was to allow doctors to charge their National Health Service patients for the drug. Consequently, the position of doctors regarding the pill went from one extreme to the other. After a first aversion, medical personnel started to ignore the drug's potential side effects and prescribe it to anyone.<sup>321</sup> This last point was particularly sensible as it created several problems in both the United States and Great Britain as both countries lacked

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<sup>316</sup> Hodgson, D., & Watkins, S. C. (1997). Feminists and Neo-Malthusians: Past and Present Alliances. *Population and Development Review*, 23(3), pp. 481

<sup>317</sup> Cook, H. (2004). *The long sexual revolution: English women, sex, and contraception 1800-1975*. Oxford University Press, USA, pp. 274

<sup>318</sup> Cook, H. (2004). *The long sexual revolution: English women, sex, and contraception 1800-1975*. Oxford University Press, USA, pp. 279

<sup>319</sup> Cook, H. (2004). *The long sexual revolution: English women, sex, and contraception 1800-1975*. Oxford University Press, USA, pp. 272

<sup>320</sup> Cook, H. (2004). *The long sexual revolution: English women, sex, and contraception 1800-1975*. Oxford University Press, USA, pp. 288, 290

<sup>321</sup> Cook, H. (2004). *The long sexual revolution: English women, sex, and contraception 1800-1975*. Oxford University Press, USA, pp. 280-281

comprehensive regulations concerning the introduction of this type of medicine.<sup>322</sup> However, further studies and trials have downplayed the extent of the negative effects. This, coupled with the creation of the abortion pill, has therefore diverted attention away from the contraceptive pill, which has become socially and medically accepted.<sup>323</sup>

With the invention and diffusion of the Pill, there was also a more opening of society to female sexuality. A hardcore that did not accept the use of contraceptives kept existing; however, it changed its target, no longer focusing on whether or not marriage had taken place, but instead focusing on the age of young women who wanted to start using contraceptive methods.<sup>324</sup>

The pill had a great impact on everyday life, and it contributed to pave the way for the development of reproductive rights. In addition to population control, indeed, its invention was revolutionary as it impacted family planning by empowering women to decide about their own bodies and their families. Therefore, it was instrumental in fostering the recognition of sexual and reproductive rights.

## **3.2. The rise of birth control as a right**

### *3.2.1. The international recognition of family planning as a human right*

In parallel with popular movements and private organizations, the issue of population size also began to be addressed internationally. The United Nations, in fact, although not long in coming, emphasized the importance of addressing population growth as a key global concern for countries. Due to this reason, the UN starting from the 1950s organized a series of meetings in which population was the central topic. These represented the early steps for the future advancement, at the international level, of rights associated with sexual and reproductive health.

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<sup>322</sup> Junod, S. W., & Marks, L. (2002). Women's Trials: The Approval of the First Oral Contraceptive Pill in the United States and Great Britain. *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences*, 57(2), pp. 124-126

<sup>323</sup> Junod, S. W., & Marks, L. (2002). Women's Trials: The Approval of the First Oral Contraceptive Pill in the United States and Great Britain. *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences*, 57(2), pp. 160

<sup>324</sup> Cook, H. (2004). *The long sexual revolution: English women, sex, and contraception 1800-1975*. Oxford University Press, USA, pp. 294

In spite of the efforts made by the American organizations, at the beginning of the 1960s UN organizations still did not support family-planning programs. They were hesitant to address the problems caused by population growth as the problem was not perceived to address the human rights sphere.<sup>325</sup> Nevertheless, it did not take the UN long to start realizing that global population growth had implications for development, health, and the well-being of individuals and communities; hence, to support family-planning programs.

The first meeting covering such topics was the World Population Conference held in Rome in 1954. Some years after the first World Population Conference, another meeting was held to discuss the problems deriving from population growth. This was the Belgrade Conference in 1965. As a result of this, governments of various states started to realize the negative implications of overpopulation and a neo-Malthusian approach to the question emerged.<sup>326</sup> These first two Conferences were characterized to exclusively address demographics from member governments with the aim of discussing scientific aspects and general problems concerning the population and not forming population policies.<sup>327</sup>

A pivotal moment was the International Conference on Human Rights held in Teheran in 1968. The assembly played a key role in establishing the fundamental principles of human rights as well as the freedom of individuals to make choices regarding their bodies. Two were the main results obtained: firstly, in the Proclamation it was highlighted that “parents have a basic human right to determine freely and responsibly the number and the spacing of their children”<sup>328</sup>. Secondly and more importantly, it was recognized that controlling the population had positive implications for human rights as “the present rapid rate of population growth in some areas of the world hampers the

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<sup>325</sup> Cueto, M., Brown, T., & Fee, E. (2019). The Transition from “Family Planning” to “Sexual and Reproductive Rights”. In *The World Health Organization: A History* (Global Health Histories, pp. 146-169). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 154

<sup>326</sup> Pizzarossa, L. B. (2018). Here to Stay: The evolution of sexual and reproductive health and Rights in international human rights law. *Laws*, 7(3), pp. 2

<sup>327</sup> Finkle, J. L., & McIntosh, C. A. (2002). United Nations Population Conferences: Shaping the Policy Agenda for the Twenty-First Century. *Studies in Family Planning*, 33(1), pp. 12

<sup>328</sup> United Nations Population Division. (1968). *Resolution XVIII: Human Rights Aspects of Family Planning, Final Act of the International Conference on Human Rights A/CONF. 32/41*. New York: United Nations Population Division, pp. 15

struggle against hunger and poverty, and in particular reduces the possibilities of rapidly achieving adequate standards of living”<sup>329</sup>. Initially, the body assigned this task was the WHO; nonetheless, due to the lack of a firm position on the subject prompted the states to create a new organization and in 1969 the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) was created.<sup>330</sup> This is an important step forward because the importance of family planning and reproductive rights as essential elements for development has been internationally recognized.

Starting from the 1970s, population control stopped being considered a topic for demographers and started, instead, to be addressed with an intergovernmental approach. Crucial for this change of attitude was the Bucharest World Population Conference held in 1974. Unlike other UN conferences that dealt with individuals in need, this Conference aimed to provide aid to governments in developing countries to support family planning programs.<sup>331</sup> The reasons behind such a change of approach are numerous, such as the increasing number of data and demographers from developing countries, greater acceptance of contraceptive use, and more practicable family-planning programs.<sup>332</sup> As a result of this Conference, there was the World Population Plan of Action (WPPA) which acknowledged aspects such as a more right-based approach which means that policies and programs must respect and protect the rights of people when making decisions about their reproductive health, the importance of women and the recognition of their equality and rights in all aspects of everyday life, family planning as a key element for there to be a development and consequently the necessity to provide information about it.<sup>333</sup> Despite the progress resulting from this meeting, this project met

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<sup>329</sup> United Nations Population Division. (1968). *Resolution XVIII: Human Rights Aspects of Family Planning, Final Act of the International Conference on Human Rights A/CONF. 32/41*. New York: United Nations Population Division, pp. 15

<sup>330</sup> Cueto, M., Brown, T., & Fee, E. (2019). The Transition from “Family Planning” to “Sexual and Reproductive Rights”. In *The World Health Organization: A History* (Global Health Histories, pp. 146-169). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 160

<sup>331</sup> Cueto, M., Brown, T., & Fee, E. (2019). The Transition from “Family Planning” to “Sexual and Reproductive Rights”. In *The World Health Organization: A History* (Global Health Histories, pp. 146-169). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 161

<sup>332</sup> Finkle, J. L., & McIntosh, C. A. (2002). United Nations Population Conferences: Shaping the Policy Agenda for the Twenty-First Century. *Studies in Family Planning*, 33(1), pp. 13

<sup>333</sup> United Nations Population Division. (1974). *UN World Population Conference. 1974. World Population Plan of Action (WPPA). Bucharest. E/CONF. 50/19*. New York: United Nations Population Division, pp. 9-14

with opposition from third-world states, as they believed that the root cause of poverty was insufficient development, not an excessive population.<sup>334</sup> A deeper analysis however revealed that their skepticism was linked to the fear of losing their sovereignty. Accordingly, developing states asked for a modern worldwide financial arrangement that would diminish the gap between them and the rich countries.<sup>335</sup> Therefore, the Bucharest International Population Conference had controversial effects. On the one hand, it contributed to the advancement of the links between population, development, and human rights. On the other hand, even though the international community recognized the right to reproductive autonomy, states like China and India kept developing their campaigns for fertility control which gave no freedom to their citizens.<sup>336</sup>

Confirmation of a new approach emerged from the second International Conference on Population held in Mexico City in 1984. In such a meeting, there was a further advancement for the implementation of the WPPA. However, despite the efforts made so far to incentivize the use of family-planning policies, much criticism was raised about these projects during the Conference. The population debate, indeed, saw a change during the 1980s when states started to criticize overly rigid policies, such as those that promoted sterilization as a practice to limit population growth or the one adopted by China and India.<sup>337</sup> The Holy Church firmly objected to the decision that had been taken about population control. Particularly strong was their disapproval of abortion.<sup>338</sup> Concurrently, the government of the US also turned to a conservative approach toward contraceptives and started to advocate for initiatives that promoted increased childbirth. The adopted medical programs were criticized for providing substandard care

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<sup>334</sup> Pizzarossa, L. B. (2018). Here to Stay: The evolution of sexual and reproductive health and Rights in international human rights law. *Laws*, 7(3), pp. 3

<sup>335</sup> Finkle, J. L., & McIntosh, C. A. (2002). United Nations Population Conferences: Shaping the Policy Agenda for the Twenty-First Century. *Studies in Family Planning*, 33(1), pp. 13-14

<sup>336</sup> Gwatkin, D. R. (1985). *The state of the world's population movement: Implications of the 1984 Mexico City conference*, 13(4), pp. 559

<sup>337</sup> Cueto, M., Brown, T., & Fee, E. (2019). The Transition from "Family Planning" to "Sexual and Reproductive Rights". In *The World Health Organization: A History* (Global Health Histories, pp. 146-169). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 163

<sup>338</sup> Pizzarossa, L. B. (2018). Here to Stay: The evolution of sexual and reproductive health and Rights in international human rights law. *Laws*, 7(3), pp. 4-5

endangering the lives of people who underwent surgeries that were prohibited in more developed countries, for example, because they were still experimental, or under very poor hygienic and sanitary conditions. Additionally, there were concerns about the discriminatory nature of these programs, accused of wanting, in reality, to diminish the presence of black people.<sup>339</sup> Further criticism came from feminists who debated that the way women were addressed was perceived as incorrect since they were described more like passive objects rather than active subjects. In other words, the efforts toward the development of reproductive rights seemed too narrow and still too much focused merely on birth control. Moreover, the debate during the Conference was perceived as ignoring the problem of inequalities, since the main focus was on limiting the reproductive capacities of poor women and not on, for example, redistributing lands and resources or providing access to medical and educational infrastructures.<sup>340</sup> Although reproductive rights were still being acknowledged, the Conference addressed some aspects of reproductive health. Moreover, the Conference was a controversial meeting that nevertheless had an impact on the discussion about population policies and programs.

The intervention of the UN in the population debate attracted international attention to the use of family planning as a key strategy for promoting human development and addressing global population challenges. However, in the 1960s, this view started to change with the recognition of the importance of the rights of individuals and the consequent integration of human rights into family planning programs.

### 3.2.2. *The emergence of sexual and reproductive rights*

In 1994, there was the third conference on population, after Bucharest and Mexico City. This was the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), held in Cairo and it represented a major turning point for the discussion on population and women as instead of only managing population growth, it also emphasizes the

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<sup>339</sup> Cueto, M., Brown, T., & Fee, E. (2019). The Transition from “Family Planning” to “Sexual and Reproductive Rights”. In *The World Health Organization: A History* (Global Health Histories, pp. 146-169). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 164

<sup>340</sup> Pizzarossa, L. B. (2018). Here to Stay: The evolution of sexual and reproductive health and Rights in international human rights law. *Laws*, 7(3), pp. 4-5

importance of practicing safe sex and preventing pregnancy without any form of pressure or prejudice.

The Conference was the moment in which the expression “reproductive rights” entered the international community. This term was originally coined in 1984, during a non-institutional meeting, namely the First International Meeting on Women and Health in Amsterdam. Initially, it was used to refer to the fight in favor of abortion and the use of contraceptives in developed countries.<sup>341</sup> Subsequently, with the intervention of the ICPD, it became linked to “rights that are already recognized in national laws, international human rights documents, and other consensus documents”<sup>342</sup>. These were the right to health, to life, and to equality and non-discrimination, to mention just a few.<sup>343</sup>

The ICPD, therefore, focused on a right-based approach recognizing reproductive rights as fundamental human rights that recognize the basic rights of all couples and individuals to decide freely and responsibly the number, spacing, and timing of their children and to have the information and means to do so, and the right to attain the highest standard of sexual and reproductive health. It also includes their right to make decisions concerning reproduction free of discrimination, coercion, and violence.<sup>344</sup>

In addition, to elaborate its definition of reproductive rights, the Conference further developed the definition of reproductive health, first introduced by the World Health Organization. It referred to the possibility of people having a sexual life that was both safe and satisfying<sup>345</sup> which implies that people have the right to be informed and to have access to safe, effective, affordable, and acceptable methods of family planning of their choice, as well as other methods of their choice for regulation of fertility which are not

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<sup>341</sup> Pizzarossa, L. B. (2018). Here to Stay: The evolution of sexual and reproductive health and Rights in international human rights law. *Laws*, 7(3), pp. 6

<sup>342</sup> UN International Conference on Population and Development. (1994). *Programme of Action adopted at the International Conference on Population and Development*. ST/ESA/SER.A/149, pp. 30

<sup>343</sup> Pizzarossa, L. B. (2018). Here to Stay: The evolution of sexual and reproductive health and Rights in international human rights law. *Laws*, 7(3), pp. 8-9

<sup>344</sup> UN International Conference on Population and Development. (1994). *Programme of Action adopted at the International Conference on Population and Development*. ST/ESA/SER.A/149, pp. 30

<sup>345</sup> Pizzarossa, L. B. (2018). Here to Stay: The evolution of sexual and reproductive health and Rights in international human rights law. *Laws*, 7(3), pp. 6

against the law, and the right of access to appropriate health-care services that will enable women to go safely through pregnancy and childbirth and provide couples with the best chance of having a healthy infant.<sup>346</sup>

The Cairo Conference was significant also because it represented a compromise on the issue of abortion. As it is well known, this topic was and is very controversial and the ICPD did not ask for the legalization of this practice in all the state members claiming that “in no case should abortion be promoted as a method of family planning [...] attempts should be made to eliminate the need for abortion”<sup>347</sup>. However, it required countries to discuss with their citizens the risks deriving from the practice. While, in the countries where this practice was legal, the Conference demanded to guarantee the safety of women who decided to practice abortion<sup>348</sup> with “access to quality services” and “post-abortion counselling, education and family-planning services”<sup>349</sup>.

Following the ICPD, the governments involved ultimately agreed on a new strategy to deal with population and development.<sup>350</sup> The legitimization of states’ policies started to be linked to the respect of women’s rights and without this respect, they could not be considered legal. This is derived from the idea that in absence of the respect for these rights, it is not possible to have development.<sup>351</sup> While women were first considered as tools to achieve an end, they later became the main focus of discussion. Policies and decisions were made no longer to implement population control programs but to safeguard their well-being.<sup>352</sup>

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<sup>346</sup> UN International Conference on Population and Development. (1994). *Programme of Action adopted at the International Conference on Population and Development*. ST/ESA/SER.A/149, pp. 30

<sup>347</sup> UN International Conference on Population and Development. (1994). *Programme of Action adopted at the International Conference on Population and Development*. ST/ESA/SER.A/149, pp. 44

<sup>348</sup> Pizzarossa, L. B. (2018). Here to Stay: The evolution of sexual and reproductive health and Rights in international human rights law. *Laws*, 7(3), pp. 9

<sup>349</sup> UN International Conference on Population and Development. (1994). *Programme of Action adopted at the International Conference on Population and Development*. ST/ESA/SER.A/149, pp. 44

<sup>350</sup> Hempel, M. (1996). Reproductive health and rights: origins of and challenges to the ICPD Agenda. *Health Transition Review*, 6(1), pp. 73

<sup>351</sup> Pizzarossa, L. B. (2018). Here to Stay: The evolution of sexual and reproductive health and Rights in international human rights law. *Laws*, 7(3), pp. 6

<sup>352</sup> Shalev, C. (2000). Rights to Sexual and Reproductive Health: The ICPD and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. *Health and Human Rights*, 4(2), pp. 40

The influence of this new health-centered approach emerged during the ICPD where a new way of running UN Conferences on Population was introduced. In fact, subjects that before did not have a voice had had a chance to be heard. Among these, there were NGOs which were included as never before, feminists, and members of social-justice movements both in developed and developing countries. On the contrary, prior to the UNPD, UN Conferences on Population mostly involved a male perspective with ideas coming mainly from governments and only restricted numbers of experts and organizations.<sup>353</sup>

It is important to note that feminist health advocates and women's NGOs strongly influenced and thus contributed to the creation of the Programme of Action resulting from the Conference. They, indeed, provided the necessary information for the elaboration of the final act.<sup>354</sup> Women's organizations were particularly important as, in addition to advancing the fight for women's rights, they inspired the UN to establish the International Women's Year in 1975. As a consequence of this, the Decade for Women was then established and a new phase centered on the gentle sex started, this resulted in a series of World Conferences on Women.<sup>355</sup> In addition, since the 1980s, feminist movements elaborated the idea that women's reproductive health was linked to their position in the financial, social, and familial fields. Thus, these groups aimed at improving women's conditions by focusing on their health and by offering them more assistance such as ensuring the possibility of choosing between a greater number of contraceptive methods, including abortion.<sup>356</sup> Hence, the attention was no longer limited to birth control options, but it was extended to a broader reproductive health approach. Such a vision started to be adopted by international agencies (examples are the IPPF, the Population Council, and the Ford Foundation) and research.<sup>357</sup>

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<sup>353</sup> Hempel, M. (1996). Reproductive health and rights: origins of and challenges to the ICPD Agenda. *Health Transition Review*, 6(1), pp. 77

<sup>354</sup> Hempel, M. (1996). Reproductive health and rights: origins of and challenges to the ICPD Agenda. *Health Transition Review*, 6(1), pp. 73

<sup>355</sup> Chen, M. A. (1995). Engendering World Conferences: The International Women's Movement and the United Nations. *Third World Quarterly*, 16(3), pp. 478

<sup>356</sup> Hempel, M. (1996). Reproductive health and rights: origins of and challenges to the ICPD Agenda. *Health Transition Review*, 6(1), pp. 74

<sup>357</sup> Hempel, M. (1996). Reproductive health and rights: origins of and challenges to the ICPD Agenda. *Health Transition Review*, 6(1), pp. 75

All in all, it was thanks to a series of conferences, which culminated with the ICPD that led to the emergence of reproductive rights at the international level. In particular, the ICPD was a landmark that significantly transformed the discourse on human rights and reproduction. The right to have children and make decisions about one's body has become an important part of human rights discussions around the world. In addition, the Conference reinforced women's rights. It placed them at the forefront of the global agenda by recognizing that reproductive health and rights are part of a broader human rights debate.

## CONCLUSIONS

What emerged from this thesis is that reproductive rights have a long and complex history that is deeply intertwined with social, political, and economic factors. Through centuries, there has been a transformation that led to an evolution of birth control from a clandestine and controversial practice to an essential for individuals to have the right to decide over their reproduction. Many were the elements that contributed to the emergence of such a transition and this thesis has examined the main factors.

The first chapter elucidates that already in the Early Modern period, there was an interest in checking and controlling the population to maintain order. Everyone was expected to behave most appropriately so as not to subvert the social structure. This concerned people both in their public and private lives. The family, indeed, since it was seen as the mirror of society, was expected to respect a hierarchy of power in which women were subordinate to men due to religious and scientific principles. Despite the prevailing literature and concerted efforts to regulate the populace, women were able to carve out their own spaces within their families. They assumed the role of breadwinners and contributed financially whenever necessary. Furthermore, in the community where they lived, women created a network of interpersonal relationships, with which they were able to influence the events that took place. For instance, by questioning the reputation, and therefore the trustworthiness, of people. In this scenario, they also found a way to control their family size by limiting their pregnancies. This was not a pursuit aimed at asserting control over their bodies in the modern sense; rather, they were looking for a way to have control over the number of children. While it was too early for the literature of the time to offer explicit and unambiguous explanations of how contraceptives worked, considering the topic a taboo, women sought information through other channels. By word-of-mouth, they were able to obtain the necessary information to try to limit births. From this, it resulted that the most prevalent methods included herbal and spice concoctions, intimate washing, breastfeeding, coitus interruptus, abortion, and infanticide. They were indicative of early attempts to exercise reproductive choices even though knowledge about this matter was scientifically limited.

The history of contraceptive methods and their diffusion started long before the Early Modern Age which is described in this document. However, it emerged that it was in the period between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries that birth control started to be more discussed. This surge in interest was influenced by various factors like the advent of political arithmetic, the implementation of mercantilist economic policies, and the emergence of Malthusian and neo-Malthusian theories. Even though they differed viewpoints on what was the most appropriate size of the population or whether it was increasing or decreasing compared to the past, what emerged was that these ideologies helped to demonstrate the importance of taking population into account in order to achieve prosperity within a state. Consequently, the formulation of policies to encourage or restrict demographic growth became imperative. It is also interesting to note that the turning point in the debate about contraception was Malthus. Contrary to the prevailing notion that the larger the population, the stronger the state, Malthus' reasoning introduced a shift emphasizing the necessity of limiting population growth in order to have better living conditions. Moreover, even though he was a reverend and not an advocate for contraception, his theory inspired other scholars to establish the Malthusian League. Expanding upon Malthus' ideas, its members took the theory further by advocating the need to limit the birth rate through the dissemination of contraceptive methods. The result was a movement that in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, played a pivotal role in spreading knowledge about birth control and contraception.

A further element worth noticing is that even though in the twentieth century, greater attention started to be given to human rights and their protection, it was only in 1994 with the International Conference on Population and Development (ICDP) that reproductive rights started to be seen as such. Since its beginning, the birth control movement has been intertwined with other ideologies, such as neo-Malthusianism and eugenics. While these promoted the idea that controlling the size of the population was necessary, they also fostered the notion of women's contraception being an instrument to achieve economic and political objectives. Through the observation of the conferences held by the UN, it became evident that only towards the end of the century, with the internationalization of the discourse, birth control was elevated to a critical element of women's rights and autonomy. In the post-World War II era, indeed, although the focus

of family planning programs expanded beyond wealthy nations to include developing countries, its motivations remained largely rooted in economic and political considerations. Crucial for a change to happen was the invention of the contraceptive pill and the feminist movement which shifted attention to the necessity of guaranteeing women access to contraception that went beyond just personal preferences, marking a significant step towards recognizing and securing women's reproductive rights.

All in all, the evolution of birth control into a reproductive right represents a profound shift that manifested in the twentieth century but had its origins several centuries earlier. Through the analysis of historical, cultural, and political aspects, this thesis illustrates the multifaceted factors that contributed to the acceptance of birth control as a fundamental right within the international context.

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## RIASSUNTO

La presente tesi tratta della nascita dei diritti riproduttivi e, in particolar modo come, l'aspetto economico e politico abbiano influenzato la trasformazione del controllo delle nascite da una strategia economica per il benessere dello stato a un diritto internazionale. Per raggiungere tale obiettivo, il testo è stato diviso in tre capitoli.

Il primo si focalizza sulla struttura della società inglese dell'età moderna. La scelta è ricaduta su questo stato, in quanto vi sono numerose documentazioni a riguardo e anche perché uno dei fattori più importanti per comprendere questo sviluppo è lo studioso inglese Thomas Malthus. Di conseguenza, comprendere la società dove è vissuto rende più facile comprendere lo sviluppo delle sue idee. Da questa prima parte se ne evince una società strutturata in diverse classi a seconda di vari elementi, come il tipo di lavoro svolto o le proprietà possedute, con l'obiettivo di mantenere un controllo sulla popolazione. L'ordine sociale era molto importante e per questo le persone stesse si impegnavano a farlo rispettare vigilando gli uni sugli altri per assicurarsi che non venissero infrante le regole. Ciò era facilitato dal fatto che la maggior parte della popolazione viveva in villaggi. Il cuore pulsante della società era la famiglia e questi due elementi venivano utilizzati uno come lo specchio dell'altro: il re era il padre del suo popolo e il capofamiglia il sovrano della sua casa. Di conseguenza, la famiglia, proprio come la società, aveva una struttura precisa (il capo era l'uomo più anziano a cui seguiva la moglie, i figli e i servitori) e delle regole che dovevano essere rispettate per non andare incontro a una sovversione. Le donne erano quindi ufficialmente rlegate a un ruolo di sottomissione agli uomini così come era stabilito dalle sacre scritture, dalle conoscenze scientifiche del tempo e anche da appositi manuali nella quale venivano indicati i ruoli che ognuno aveva nella famiglia e nella società e che quindi servivano a mantenere l'ordine. Nonostante ciò che veniva detto e ribadito, le donne avevano però un ruolo centrale nella famiglia. Nella maggior parte dei casi esse, infatti, erano il pilastro fondamentale su cui si basava l'economia familiare o erano addirittura capofamiglia, nel caso di vedove, nubili o donne i cui mariti lavoravano lontani da casa. Questa loro intraprendenza e importanza esisteva sia nel privato della casa che nel pubblico. Le

donne, infatti, erano soggetti attivi anche nella società dove, ad esempio, grazie alla creazione di legami interpersonali con le altre vicine potevano mettere in dubbio la reputazione e quindi l'affidabilità di una persona con il solo chiacchiericcio oppure potevano essere chiamate come testimoni in tribunale in caso di violenza domestica. Questo tipo di legame, inoltre, era essenziale nel momento del parto, in quanto le conoscenze mediche erano molto limitate, per cui potersi affidare a chi aveva più esperienza poteva fare la differenza tra la vite e la morte. Lo stesso valeva per la prevenzione di gravidanze non volute. Al tempo, infatti, seppur in modo rudimentale, le persone e soprattutto le donne, cercavano di limitare il numero di figli. Ma, come detto, le informazioni a riguardo erano scarse e si basavano per lo più sul passaparola. Vi erano anche dei libri a riguardo, ma dato che l'argomento era visto come un tabù, non erano molto diffusi. Le tecniche più utilizzate consistevano nel bere intrugli di spezie ed erbe nella speranza di causare un'interruzione di gravidanza, l'allattamento (che si credeva impedisse di restare incinta), l'astinenza e il coito interrotto. Un altro metodo diffuso, seppur illegale, consisteva nell'infanticidio il quale veniva praticato per lo più da donne povere e disperate.

Il secondo capitolo si focalizza invece sulla necessità di controllare il numero della popolazione con l'obiettivo d'incrementare il benessere delle persone e dello stato. Numerosi erano infatti gli studiosi che a partire dal Seicento si focalizzarono sullo studio della popolazione. Tra questi vi erano Graunt e Petty, i quali sono i fondatori dell'aritmetica politica. Essi furono i primi ad analizzare i dati sulla mortalità di Londra per dedurre conoscenze necessarie per prendere le migliori decisioni politiche: capendo quali erano le cause di morte, era infatti possibile capire quali fattori incidessero maggiormente e quindi come intervenire per evitarli. Altri autori citati che trattarono del tema del controllo del numero della popolazione sono Bodin, Cipolla, Baliani, Botero e Machiavelli. Nel Settecento, l'idea più diffusa era quella mercantilista secondo cui la ricchezza di uno stato dipendeva dal possesso di metalli preziosi, i quali si ottenevano per la maggiore con il commercio. Da qui derivava l'idea che più la forza lavoro di uno stato era ampia, e quindi il numero di abitanti, più si poteva commercializzare e ottenere metalli. A questa teoria si oppose la fisiocrazia, fondata in Francia da Quesnay, essa si basava sull'idea che la ricchezza di uno stato si basasse sulla capacità del settore agricolo

piuttosto che sui metalli preziosi. Un altro aspetto sulla quale gli studiosi discussero molto fu se la popolazione stava crescendo o diminuendo rispetto al passato. A questo riguardo è stato presentato il pensiero di diversi studiosi, i quali crearono un vero e proprio dibattito riguardo a quali potessero essere i fattori che portarono a un aumento o a una diminuzione del numero di abitanti. Tra gli autori analizzati vi sono Montesquieu e Wallace, i quali sostenevano che la popolazione stava diminuendo; mentre studiosi come Hume sostenevano l'idea opposta secondo cui il numero di persone stesse crescendo. La vera svolta nel dibattito sulla popolazione ci fu con Malthus, il quale presentò la teoria secondo cui le persone si moltiplicano a una velocità molto più elevata rispetto alle risorse naturali che sono necessarie alla loro sopravvivenza. Di conseguenza, se la crescita non si arresta il risultato sarà catastrofico con guerre e carestie. Malthus elaborò la sua teoria nell'opera chiamata *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, originariamente pubblicata nel 1798. In essa, lo studioso analizzò i pensieri di altri autori, tra cui Godwin, Smith e Condorcet. A questa versione estremamente pessimista, per cui non vi era possibilità di salvezza, seguirono altre edizioni con le quali lo studioso si aprì alla possibilità che le cose potrebbero cambiare se la popolazione iniziasse a limitare la sua crescita. La soluzione proposta dall'autore non era però la contraccezione in quanto, essendo lui un uomo di fede, non ne condivideva l'utilizzo. Invece, riteneva che la scelta migliore fosse quella di ritardare i matrimoni e quindi la nascita dei figli. Questa teoria fece da catalizzatore per la nascita del movimento neomaltusiano. Esso si basava sugli stessi timori di Malthus riguardo al rischio di un'eccessiva popolosità, ciò che differiva era il come gestire tale problematica. La soluzione proposta dai neomaltusiani, tra cui i più incisivi furono Place, Carlile e Owen, era quella di fare ricorso all'uso di contraccettivi. Questo movimento si organizzò nella lega maltusiana e ottenne molta visibilità, soprattutto a seguito del processo che si tenne contro Bradlaugh e Besant. Essi erano due attivisti neomaltusiani che decisero di ripubblicare l'opera di Knowlton chiamata *The Fruits of Philosophy*. Scritta e messa in circolazione nel 1832 senza creare scandali di alcun tipo, la sua ripubblicazione scatenò una protesta che portò al processo sopra citato. Il quale ottenne grande visibilità grazie alla stampa e di conseguenza fu centrale nell'espandere le teorie neomaltusiane sulla necessità di usare contraccettivi per limitare le nascite.

Il terzo e ultimo capitolo è dedicato al Ventesimo secolo e a come fu possibile la nascita di un diritto riproduttivo vero e proprio. Il movimento neomaltusiano ebbe un ruolo importante in questo, dato che la sua influenza raggiunse anche gli Stati Uniti, dove il movimento per il controllo delle nascite stava nascendo. Quest'ultimo movimento, guidato da Sanger, fu un passo importante verso il riconoscimento di un diritto di limitare le nascite in quanto prima insieme al neomaltusianismo, all'anarchismo e al socialismo, successivamente con l'eugenetica e le politiche per la pianificazione familiare, la questione del controllo delle nascite divenne centrale nei discorsi politici ed economici degli stati sia occidentali che orientali. In particolar modo, successivamente alla Seconda guerra mondiale, l'attenzione degli Stati Uniti e dell'ONU si spostò sulla gestione demografica dei paesi in via di sviluppo in quanto sulla base della loro condizione dipendeva anche il benessere dei paesi più ricchi. Come dimostrato dalle conferenze organizzate dalle Nazioni Unite, però il controllo delle nascite era visto solamente come uno strumento economico. Un punto di svolta verso un approccio umanistico delle politiche demografiche si ebbe con la prima Conferenza Internazionale sui Diritti Umani tenutasi a Teheran nel 1968, con essa infatti venne riconosciuto la necessità di limitare le nascite per garantire alle persone dei paesi in via di sviluppo il godimento di diritti umani quali, ad esempio, l'accesso al cibo e la lotta alla povertà. Un ulteriore passo verso il riconoscimento dei diritti riproduttivi fu fatto, nel 1974 a Bucarest, con la prima Conferenza mondiale sulla Popolazione. Con questo incontro furono direttamente coinvolti i governi degli stati per cui la questione demografica passò dall'essere considerata un argomento solo per demografi a parte integrante dell'agenda politica degli stati e soprattutto di quelli sottosviluppati. Sarà solo nel 1994 durante la Conferenza del Cairo su popolazione e sviluppo, che il termine "diritti riproduttivi" venne ufficialmente introdotto a livello internazionale e con esso vennero riconosciuti come diritti fondamentali. Inoltre, i governi concordarono su una nuova strategia per gestire la popolazione e lo sviluppo, secondo la quale, perché si potesse avere una politica statale legale era necessario rispettare anche i diritti delle donne. Ciò fu possibile grazie al ruolo sempre più importante giocato dai movimenti femministi nel contesto internazionale.

Per concludere, il percorso che permise l'adozione e il riconoscimento dei diritti riproduttivi analizzato in questo elaborato fu molto lungo e complesso. Partendo dal Seicento quando la popolazione era controllata per garantire il rispetto dell'ordine sociale e la contraccezione era utilizzata seppur considerata un tabù, passando per il Settecento e l'Ottocento quando il dibattito sulla popolazione fiorì con il mercantilismo, la fisiocrazia, il malthusianismo e il neomalthusianismo, e per finire il Novecento, secolo in cui i diritti umani acquisirono sempre più spazio all'interno del dibattito internazionale e con esso si sviluppò il concetto che la pianificazione familiare non dovesse essere solo una politica demografica, ma un diritto vero e proprio di cui chiunque deve poter godere.

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