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Editor

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The rise and rise of the Champagne Malthusians

spiked's editor joined the population-control lobby in a posh church in London as they quaffed 'luxury' drinks and fretted about overbreeding.

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In March 1933, the International Birth Control Movement held a Malthusian Ball in London. In the opulent surroundings of the five-star Dorchester Hotel, the great and the good gathered to discuss the problem of poor people's breeding, the 'Negro issue', the best way to promote 'family planning', and other burning Malthusian dilemmas. All while decked out in diamonds, gowns and tuxedos, doing the foxtrot and clinking their champagne glasses as they mulled over how best to stop the lower specimens of humanity from getting knocked up with such dumb abandon.

Last week I attended a modern-day equivalent of the Malthusian Ball. It was in the luxurious crypt of St Pancras Church in Euston rather than at the Dorchester and there was no dancing this time. But we were invited to drink 'luxury Belgian beer from champagne flutes' and to peruse £1,500 paintings depicting 'teeming crowds' as we debated the 'population problem'. The attendees were more casually dressed than their 1933 forebears - no floor-draping dresses - but once again, in between sips from champagne glasses, men and women with pronunciation far more received than mine gathered to fret over how humankind is spreading like a 'cancer' (their word).

Sponsored by Deus, 'the luxury Belgian beer', and supported by the Optimum Population Trust (OPT), the posh population-control lobby, the Malthusian knees-up kicked off with a 'debate' inside St Pancras Church itself. It felt entirely fitting to be plonked in a pew surrounded by Christian paraphernalia while listening to angry men say things like 'we're doomed' (Roger Martin of the OPT) and 'I am disgusted and sickened' (Aubrey Manning OBE). Just as the original population scaremonger, the Reverend Thomas Malthus (1766-1834), issued warnings about sex and procreation and too many dirt-poor people from a pulpit, so these modern-day Malthusians described human beings as 'environment trashers' in hallowed surroundings, too. Same shit, different church.

Of course when I say it started with a 'debate', I don't mean a debate. The only disagreement between the six panellists was whether the 'population bomb' is still ticking or has been temporarily defused. All agreed that there is a thing called a 'population bomb' - such a swell of sweaty human beings that everything might one day explode and cause environmental apocalypse on a Mad Maxian scale. When the chairman asked if anyone in the audience (about 200 people) thought population growth *wasn't* a problem, only two people put their hands up. One was me. And the other one, when he spoke, turned out to be quite concerned about population growth after all. So it was just me then, hand aloft, being stared at by a churchful of Malthusians, a bit like if a chimney sweep had wandered into that 1933 Ball.

The similarities and differences between the Malthusian Ball 80 years ago and last week's luxury beer-drenched 'debate' are striking. The key similarity is that both the old tiara-wearing Malthusians and the tiara-less ones today can only understand

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humanity's problems in biological terms. Lacking any grasp of how society works - or more to the point how it *doesn't* work sometimes - they instead see all crises as the fault of individual licentiousness and breeding. And possessed of such a deep pessimism that they can only conceive of mankind as pillager of the Earth rather than creator of things and ideas, they have a childlike view of the planet as a larder of limited resources that we are greedily hoovering up.

Then and now, the fatal flaw of Malthusianism is that it views social problems, like poverty and unemployment, as failings on the part of the individual. So it's not because economic affairs are badly organised that some people are unemployed - it's because some dozy women 18 years ago had too many children and now their newly adult sons and daughters are competing for jobs in an overcrowded market. It's not because society has skewed priorities that some people around the world go hungry - it's because very poor African women have too many kids (five-ish, compared to 1.9 in the UK) and these little black babies' demand for food outstrips how much food exists.

Obsessed with the idea of limited resources and the insatiable greed of men, Malthusians' only solution is to save resources by reducing the number of men. A progressive possessed of a social outlook looks at the problems facing mankind and says (in a nutshell) 'we need more stuff' - a Malthusian looks at them and says 'we need fewer people'. Their belief that all the world's problems are caused by there being Too Many People has not only been proved unfounded again and again (we have continually discovered new and improved ways to make and distribute resources), but it also inevitably makes them misanthropic. Those who think human numbers can continue rising should remember that 'unremitting growth is the doctrine of the cancer cell', said Professor John Guillebaud in St Pancras Church, capturing well the Malthusians' view of humanity as a virus on Gaia's person.

Five days of spiked



Yet there are differences, too, between yesteryear's Malthusians and today's. For a start they no longer refer to themselves as Malthusians. The only person who used the M-word during last week's debate was me, much to the irritation of the 200, er, Malthusians. They're extremely careful about what they say. Where the May 1933 edition of *Birth Control Review*, which reported on that year's Malthusian Ball, openly said that 'to get a strong and healthy nation it is essential that we breed from the right stocks' (1), today's Malthusians won't even utter the phrase 'population control'. 'Can we all agree not to use those two words', said Professor Guillebaud. 'Because this is *not* about control.'

'Helping the poor', 'female empowerment', 'choice' - today's Malthusians sound more like feminists than imperialists. Yet there's something creepily disingenuous in their use of the language of rights. The Malthusians' adoption of a PC lingo is a cynical attempt to overcome some massive historic embarrassments. Late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century Malthusianism was tightly tied up with Empire, eugenics, even with Nazism. The discrediting of those racist projects dealt a heavy blow to the population-control lobby and its ideas about superior races and inferior over-breeders (the Malthusian Ball was designed to raise funds to help 'develop interest in birth control in the Far East, especially India') (2). In the mid- to late twentieth century, redfaced Malthusians desperate to distance

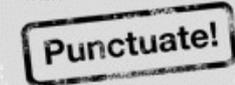
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themselves from their super-shady past started to talk about 'family planning' rather than 'population control' and 'female empowerment in the developing world' rather than 'spreading the propaganda and practice of birth control among the nations that most need it' (as the 1933 *Birth Control Review* more honestly put it).

Yet beneath the PC veneer, there lurk many of the same ideas, and much of the same disingenuousness. I absolutely support the right of women in the developed and developing worlds to have as many or as few children as they choose, and to have access to contraception and abortion services as and when they need them. Yet what the Malthusians are offering women has nothing to do with rights or choice. Already they were starting to use this language in 1933, when the *Birth Control Review* argued that the funds from the Malthusian Ball would guarantee 'the rights of the millions of poor and struggling women' (2), and now things have come full circle with Professor Guillebaud saying last week that it is 'plain wrong to coerce people [in the Third World]'.

Yet when you promote 'family planning' on the basis that too many children will 'destroy biodiversity', on the basis that women are spawning 'environment trashers', on the basis that 'we are doomed' if women keep on breeding irresponsibly, on the basis that our offspring, little more than a species of 'ape', will do 'sick and disgusting' things to the Earth (all direct quotations from last week's Malthusian get-together), then you're not giving women a choice – you're giving them an ultimatum: 'Stop breeding or the planet gets it.' You are polluting their decision-making universe with your own prejudices, using the politics of fear to get them to make the 'right choices'. That *is* coercion. And whether you're doing it in order to create a 'strong and healthy nation', as in 1933, or to 'protect biodiversity', as in 2010, the result is the same: women's freedom of choice is undermined, and ordinary people are branded with the blame for what are in fact social problems.

'Eros has triumphed [and] Gaia is exhausted', said the programme for last week's suicidal shindig in London. Who could possibly think that was a bad thing, the triumph of the god of sex and beauty over the green god Gaia and its constant demands for sacrifice and self-denial? Only a Malthusian, the kind of person who fears the masses enjoying a little bit of Eros because it might just create another mouth to feed, another body to clothe, another arse to wipe.

Brendan O'Neill is editor of *spiked*. Visit his personal website [here](#).



(1) *Birth Control Review*, May 1933: read a PDF version [here](#).

(2) *Birth Control Review*, May 1933: read a PDF version [here](#).

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