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# Editorial introduction

David Samways – Editor

The question of how to achieve environmental sustainability inevitably raises a host of conceptual and philosophical problems. Not least amongst these is defining what sustainability itself actually means. Any investigation of this question soon throws up a myriad of other questions regarding the understanding of other ideas and concepts such as nature and wilderness but also of autonomy, the good life, global justice and so on. I will not attempt the somewhat Sisyphean task of defining sustainability in this editorial, but the papers in this edition of the JP&S, although tackling quite different subject matter, nonetheless contain themes, issues and questions which relate directly to this conceptual conundrum. In particular, questions of autonomy and behaviour change, resource distribution and equity, as well as different conceptions of a good life are apparent. These questions are deeply ethical and value dependent and go to the core of the discussion of population and sustainability – making it inescapably political in nature.

In Becky Blackford's paper sustainable food consumption (SFC) is the matter under discussion. Her contribution considers how personal food choices might be influenced to reduce environmental impact and meet demand as the global population grows. As she notes, food security is not a question of agricultural sufficiency since at present more than enough grain is produced to adequately nourish the current world population and possibly accommodate future growth. At base, the persistence of the best part of a billion people living with food insecurity is a distributional issue caused by the growing demand for meat and dairy foods which effectively price the poor out of the global food market. However, the environmental sustainability of the global food system at current levels of resource use is questionable - especially as this relates to the consumption of animal products. Blackford's paper reviews the use of nudge theory in changing food consumption behaviour toward more sustainable choices such as plant-

based and locally sourced products. She concludes that various types of nudges may be effective tools in changing food choices, but that the type of nudge and context are important. Perhaps most interestingly, Blackford's review shows that the most effective nudges are those which target so called "System 1 thinking", the non-deliberative, automatic and intuitive part of consciousness – what the sociologist Anthony Giddens (1984) calls "practical consciousness".

Blackford's paper raises some important issues for those concerned with behaviour change as a factor in environmental sustainability. Many, especially those on the political left (for example Monbiot 2019; Klein, 2014), have argued that, rather than concentrating on individual behaviour-change, only structural systemic transformation can prevent ecological catastrophe. Such arguments are not without merit and draw on a long-standing left-wing intellectual tradition focussed on the institutional or structural level rather than the individual agent. However, the problem with such approaches is that they tend to underestimate the role of individual choices in social structural reproduction and reduce consumer preferences and life-style choices to ideological effects of capitalism or consumerism. From this perspective, much of what people regard as choice is an illusion since the pervasiveness and power of the prevailing ideology manipulates behaviour to serve the interests of the system or of the powerful elites who benefit from it. This is an attractive approach since it focuses on power and the structural constraints upon individual behaviour. However, such arguments also generate some consternation regarding individual responsibility for consumption choices and are in danger of regarding agents as structural dopes unable to reflect upon and change their actions. This is related to a much wider discussion in the social sciences regarding the relationship between structure and agency, a full discussion of which is well beyond the space available here. However, it is clear that while there are social structural constraints upon consumption choices, and ideologies such as consumerism play their role, environmental discourses which challenge the status quo are widespread and, in many cases, individuals are capable of reflecting upon their choices and exercising agency. Nudging might play a role in assisting the breaking of habitual choices with high environmental impacts. Indeed, the fact that the ideas about autonomy and self-determination are valued in western discourses is reflected in Blackford's noting of the ethical qualms expressed about behaviour manipulation via measures such as nudges – especially when operating at the level of practical consciousness.

Food security is perhaps the oldest population growth concern and is inescapably political in nature. When Thomas Malthus wrote *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (1998 [1798]) he was responding to William Godwin's and the Marquis de Condorcet's writings on the "perfectibility of society". Malthus argued that, since population grew geometrically while agricultural production could only grow arithmetically, in a society without inequality the population would grow at an unprecedented rate and quickly outstrip food production. Thus, Malthus argued even in a society where "benevolence had established her reign in all hearts", food scarcity would eventually result in "violence, oppression, falsehood, misery, every hateful vice, and every form of distress, which degrade and sadden the present state of society, ...generated... by laws inherent in the nature of man" (p.60). Where Godwin (1793) had reasoned that human nature could be transcended and the urge to procreate diminished by the development of the intellect, Malthus insisted that, inevitably, human nature and the limits of the natural world would prevail, leading to immiseration as demand outstripped food supply.

Malthus' argument that there were natural impediments, both in the natural environment and in human nature, which thwarted the eradication of want was rejected by left-leaning progressive and socialist thinkers. Perhaps most powerfully in the writings of Marx and Engels, it was argued that there is nothing "natural" about poverty and scarcity, that they are a product of exploitative social systems and can be solved through system change, technical progress and equitable distribution. Indeed, as we have seen, the food supply has not been determined by fixed natural laws of linear growth but has been continuously expanded well beyond the needs of the population by technological means – although the environmental sustainability of this expansion is highly questionable.

In the late 60s environmental arguments featuring population growth captured the public imagination with books such as Paul and Anne Ehrlich's *Population Bomb* (1968) and The Club of Rome's *Limits to Growth* (Meadows et al., 1972) becoming best sellers. While the accuracy of the "Neo-Malthusian" epithet they attracted is debatable, their general thrust was interpreted as such and although initially embraced by the environmental movement, the idea of tackling population growth as a means of averting ecological crisis came under increasing criticism. In particular, environmental activists on the left were uncomfortable with the political tone of population control discourses from the early 20th century and later the abuses of human rights in India and China.

A significant split emerged in the environmental movement around the issue of human numbers, with eco-socialist thinkers such as Murray Bookchin (1987) rejecting arguments in favour of population control from Deep Ecologists and groups such as Earth First! who, it was argued, espoused an eco-fascist and anti-human ideology. Bookchin traced the misanthropy of Deep Ecology to its division between biocentric (ecocentric, nature centred) and anthropocentric (human centred) thinking. For Deep Ecologists biocentrism or ecocentrism is a recognition of the equality between all living things. Such a position gives equal status to species as diverse as whales and the smallpox virus – the latter of which might be regarded as an endangered species. More importantly, Bookchin insisted, Deep Ecological thinking sees modern human society as having become separated from nature and believes that famine and disease should be left unchecked to reduce human "overpopulation".

Like many others who have followed, Bookchin laid the cause of the ecological crisis squarely at the feet of modern industrial capitalism. Population growth, he argued was a consequence of imperialism and capitalism:

> Smash up a stable precapitalist culture and throw its people off the land into city slums, and due ironically to demoralization, population may soar rather than decline. As Gandhi told the British, imperialism left India's wretched poor and homeless with little more in life than the immediate gratification provided by sex and an understandably numbed sense of personal, much less social, responsibility. Reduce women to mere reproductive factories, and population rates will explode. (p.15)

However, despite Bookchin's criticisms of Deep Ecology being largely well grounded, while accusing the movement of misunderstanding demography, he himself reproduces common demographic misunderstandings and gives a specious account of population growth, stabilisation and decline. While he correctly asserts that population stabilisation and falling fertility are associated with development, education and the empowerment of women, his suggestion that population growth in the industrial age has been the result of increases in fertility is wide of the mark. In fact, as far as can be determined, fertility rates remained largely unchanged and decreases in mortality, due to improved

nutrition, better personal hygiene, public health measures and advances in medicine, are the cause of population growth (Kirk, 1996).

One of the problems with reductionist arguments regarding capitalism and ecological degradation is that they fail to acknowledge that social systems of all kinds have environmental impacts and that the size and power of the system is a critical factor in its environmental sustainability. Moreover, capitalism and imperialism cannot be reduced to a single ideology and the existence of a multitude of other discourses, such as humanitarianism, produce unintended consequences which exacerbate structural inequalities. Thus, despite the exploitative nature of global capitalism and imperialism, due to the factors listed above, mortality rates across the world have declined – especially infant mortality – which, in the absence of access to modern contraception, has led to population growth. The question of intervention into fertility outcomes becomes all the more fraught for the modern left since liberal notions of autonomy have been absorbed without much reflection upon the implications for sustainability within finite bounds. Writers such as Diana Coole (2018) and Julian Roche (2020) have tackled the question of reproductive autonomy arguing that the prevention of the degradation of the natural environment is a condition of possibility for all other forms of autonomy. From such a perspective, autonomy is not reducible to the individual but must be seen in the collective material context.

Bookchin provides a powerful critique of what I have referred to as "eco-fundamentalism" (Samways, 1996) and in particular the muddled and dualistic conceptions of nature and human nature inherent in such a position. The idea of "human exceptionalism" is frequently seen as interchangeable with that of "anthropocentrism", which for many is seen as the root-cause of the environmental crisis. Bookchin provides good reasons for a version of the human exceptionalist argument which recognises culture as human "second nature" avoiding any hard cut-off point between humans and other species whilst rejecting narrow anthropocentrism. This is an important argument since, as Bookchin points out:

> ... what is particularly unique about human societies is that they can be radically changed by their members – and in ways that can be made to benefit the natural world as well as the human species. (1987, p.8)

It is the self-conscious reflection upon our behaviour and our ability to change it that is at the centre of political action – including that required to avert ecological catastrophe. For Bookchin and others it is social hierarchy in all its forms that is problematic, but in particular the effect of the destructive forces of capitalism and imperialism on social relations and on the environment.

However, while Bookchin's pro-human and, I would argue, ecologically enlightened anthropocentric argument, is to be welcomed, in common with other environmental perspectives from the left, its focus on reprehensible, oppressive and politically offensive instances and arguments concerned with population control blind it to human numbers as part of anthropogenic environmental change. Such a position is analogous to the claims of those who instance the oppressive regimes of the Soviet Union, China or North Korea as demonstrations of why collectivism, socialism or communism is fundamentally flawed and morally objectionable – an argument which presumably Bookchin would have rejected. Yet this is precisely what Bookchin and others on the left do when they equate all forms of population concern with discredited and abhorrent population discoures.

In his commentary piece published in this issue, Chris Tucker explores how the dark history of these population control discourses was instrumental in the removal of concern about population growth from the so called "Cairo Consensus" which has informed UN policy on reproductive health over the last 30 years. These are the same discourses which Bookchin and left-leaning environmentalists also cite in their rejection of concerns around population growth. Tucker shows how the close association of the idea of population control with eugenics and human rights abuses has resulted in discussion of population growth becoming taboo - despite its widely acknowledged environmentally unsustainability. Tucker argues that the taboo around population control has led those embedded in the Cairo Consensus to be unwilling to reopen discussion about the adverse effects of population growth. Indeed, a faith in the sanguine view, typical of figures such as the late Hans Rosling, that population growth would sort itself out, coupled with a lack of acknowledgment of the contribution of human population size to the transgression of planetary boundaries, has further discouraged debate. Moreover, especially in relation to greenhouse gas emissions, many have pointed out the inverse relationship between fertility rates and environmental impact, with the correct implication that tackling the climate emergency must be focussed on

rich-world consumption rather than population growth. However, Tucker notes that while this is true, in the longer-term, as they develop, the environmental impact of high fertility countries will also grow.

Tucker argues that despite its silence on population growth, the Cairo Consensus contains much of what is required, in the form of greater female empowerment, reproductive rights, and the welfare of women and girls, to bend the projected population curve toward a sustainable level. He advocates an aspiration of achieving a total fertility rate, through equitable, just and empowering means, of 1.5 by 2030 in order to move toward a sustainable population by the end of the century, thereby averting enormous human suffering. To this end, Tucker proposes not only revisiting the Cairo Consensus, but also the introduction of an eighteenth Sustainable Development Goal concerned with population, and the creation of a United Nations Framework Convention on Population Growth.

While Malthus argued that Godwin's and de Condorcet's utopian societies would degenerate due to features of external nature and human nature, the majority of contemporary concern about population growth is actually motivated by the opposite sentiment. At one level, those, like Tucker, who are concerned with the consequences of population growth agree with Malthus that external nature is a critical limiting factor. However, modern population concern departs from the accepted reading of Malthus, typified in Marx's (1954 [1890]) critique, where the resulting misery of the poor consequent of population growth is inevitable and natural. For Marx, it was not abstract laws of nature which produced an immiserated "surplus population" but the capitalist mode of production:

> The labouring population therefore produces, along with the accumulation of capital produced by it, the means by which it itself is made relatively superfluous, is turned into a relative surplus population; and it does this to an always increasing extent. This is a law of population peculiar to the capitalist mode of production. (Marx 1954 [1890] p.591).

Marx saw population growth as a systemic outcome, favouring and reinforcing existing capitalist social relations and resolved by the eventual and inevitable change in the mode of production. The character of the communist society in which all contradictory relations of the capitalist mode of production would be

resolved was only hinted at by Marx. Moreover, there is little to show what he thought would happen to economic and population growth. Authors such as Saito (2017) have somewhat undermined the claim that Marx thought there were no natural constraints on the human enterprise, but apart from a few comments about the dispersal of the population between town and country Marx is quiet on the subject of population in communist society. Indeed, the only visions of life in communist society are utopian and bucolic (for example Marx 1972 [1846] p.33) and imply a low population density.

Present-day authors concerned with human population size may well advocate political transformation of the global socio-economic system, consisting of the establishment of an alternative economic system, the reduction of global inequality, and the empowerment of women. However, rather than the achievement of utopia, it is the avoidance of a dystopia that is the principle concern. Such writers generally maintain that human population size and growth will push already breached planetary boundaries beyond recovery resulting in suffering and misery which will afflict not only a large part of humanity but devastate the other species and ecosystems upon which we ultimately depend.

It is the examination of possible dystopian futures with which David Wadley's essay is concerned. In his book *The City of Grace* (2020), Wadley models an eco-tech city which rather than being utopian is anti-dystopian, a sustainable haven situated in a surrounding sea of dystopic neoliberal globalisation. In the paper presented here, Wadley considers, from the perspective of systems, complexity and chaos theories, this dystopic environment in terms of population and sustainability. Questioning accepted notions of rationality, he explores two possible failure modes connected by demographic factors: the first, capital-labour dynamics, is within the social sphere, while the second concerns the human-environment nexus. Somewhat echoing Marx's position regarding population, capitalist social relations and labour supply, Wadley argues that the continuing substitution of capital and management for labour could suppress the demand for labour in developed countries. At the same time, in less developed nations the global displacement of labour by technological innovation could result in devastating underemployment of the large labour forces produced by population growth. This first failure mode articulates with what Wadley identifies as a second dystopian contingency, unconstrained growth exceeding planetary boundaries. Employing

a systems approach to the IPAT equation, he argues that too much faith is placed in the development of environmental technical fixes, and that curbs on affluence, as well as the substitution of technology for labour, will produce social disquiet. Wadley concludes that to achieve long-term sustainability at good standards of welfare, population size must be tackled. Avoiding these two dystopian failure modes, he contends, requires an abandonment of the obsession with economic growth and a refocussing on labour and population issues to achieve sustainable and equitable real per capita wealth. However, given the pervasiveness of irrationality in human affairs, Wadley is not convinced that a dystopian future can be avoided.

In contrast, Doug Booth's follow-up to "Achieving a post-growth green economy" published in the last issue of the JP&S strikes a more optimistic note. In his previous paper Booth argued that the combination of a trend toward post-materialism and the establishment of a "Green New Deal" could offer considerable hope in tackling the environmental crisis. Here, Booth further explores what he calls the "post-material silent revolution" providing detailed empirical evidence showing that post-materialists: are less orientated to material consumption; are more likely to choose to live in denser, more energy efficient urban environments; have fewer children; and, through political action, support the environment. The analysis of the Wave 6 World Values Survey confirm that post-materialism is positively correlated to younger and more educated groups, who are likely to belong to voluntary organisations, work in the creative and independent sectors and be politically engaged. Post-materialism is also positively associated with higher social class membership.

Perhaps most significantly, Booth notes that post-materialism is intrinsically anti-capitalist in orientation and that taken to its logical conclusion leads to a dampening of demand growth for consumer goods, ultimately undermining the expansion of capitalism's global influence. It is also interesting to note that both middle-class post materialists and those in the very lowest socio-economic classes share common interests in the reformation of the economic system. For post-materialists this interest relates to their value objectives, while for those at the bottom of the socio-economic system greater economic security and a fairer share of material pie eclipses their support for the environment. However, Booth argues that the institution of a Green New Deal will create a convergence of the

interests of post-materialists and working-class materialists as the decarbonisation of the economy creates well-paid jobs and a sustainable global economy.

The papers in this issue of the JP&S have covered a wide range of issues relating to the "population-consumption-technology-environment nexus". From the granular level of nudging food choices, through to the macro-level of systems theory and dystopia, at one level or another all are concerned with population and sustainability from both a behavioural-agentic and a systemic-structural perspective. All demonstrate how population and sustainability issues require an approach which understands the relationship between our everyday practices and choices and wider structural systemic factors. Most importantly perhaps, all of the papers in this issue grapple with autonomy and power and show that attention must be simultaneously paid to both individual social practices and the social structures which both enable and constrain them.

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