

## Freedom From What? Environment and Population in W. Vogt and H.F. Osborn

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Submitted: October 3, 2023 – Accepted: January 5, 2024 – Published: April 18, 2024

### Abstract

This essay considers the environmental and political discourse of prominent American scientists William Vogt and Henry Fairfield Osborn, concerning their best-sellers *Road to Survival* (1948) and *Our Plundered Planet* (1948). It is argued that by re-articulating the place of ‘population’ in environmental thinking, they both advanced a specific theory of limits and possibilities of individual freedom. Their public position in the most pressing debates of the time resulted in a critique of modernization and development and a specific understanding of planning as a tool to ‘write’ a different ‘history of the future’ of Western civilization.

**Keywords:** Vogt; Osborn; Population; Environment; Freedom.

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The history of our future is already written.<sup>1</sup>

## 1 Introduction

In 1948, when William Vogt and Henry Fairfield Osborn published their soon-to-be environmental bestsellers *Road to Survival* and *Our Plundered Planet*, ‘population’ had already become a means to glimpse into the future of humanity. The study of human biology and physiology, combined with the development of statistical calculations able to transform empirical data into refined long-term projections, gave scientists and policy-makers powerful tools for legitimizing population theories, policies and trends. In parallel, natural science studies in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century had laid the foundations for leading the concept of ‘environment’ beyond the 19<sup>th</sup> century semantics, assigning it new contents dictated by the emerging ecological sciences.<sup>2</sup> The language of systematic exchanges between organisms and their surroundings and of mutual dependencies of living beings; the idea that to approach reality ‘ecologically,’ one must look at the overall conditions interacting with the object of enquiry. These key features of ecosystem studies made the environment the singular name for the many entanglements and connections of which the natural world is made. While demographers and social scientists framed ‘population’ in temporal terms—as it were its long-term trends and growth and decline rates that mattered—the concept of ‘environment’ was applied to the study of the chemical composition of soils, the breadth and complexity of food-chain equilibriums, and the ecological effects of the extraction of natural resources. The environment was primarily a matter of space and its capacity. The interplay of the concepts of environment and population, both framed in political terms by early Neo-Malthusian environmentalists, would leave neither one nor the other untouched.

This essay deals with Vogt and Osborn’s original contribution to the definition of ‘population’ as a crucial element for debates on the environment and its preservation. More specifically, it will be argued that they were both key in popularizing already-established scientific notions on the web of relations in which population and environment are understood, and led to a specific, normative theory of individual freedom from the combination of the spatial and temporal dimensions of these concepts. While population referred to the continuity or ruptures over time of reproductive behaviors of succeeding generations, framing it environmentally meant assigning alleged material limits to the multiplications of individuals in a finite Planet. In doing so, both Vogt and Osborn took a public stance on the most urgent political issues debated in the United States at the time—from the growing global population to national and international economic growth policies—proposing to assess them ‘ecologically.’ In fact, their specific position within the variegated Conservationist movement is representative of a broader strain of critique of modernization and global economic development, framed in environmental language. Specifically, they criticized the politics of growth and consumption introduced by President Henry Truman with his ‘Four Points’ program, as they considered it detrimental to the cause of ensuring national and international political stability. Prior to its subsequent formalization by prominent theorists such as Walt Rostow, modernization was thus targeted by environmentalists who proposed a different view of the actual needs of Post-WWII global order. The lasting success of their reasonings is demonstrated by their many historical reappraisals,<sup>3</sup> as they

1. William Vogt, *Road to Survival* (New York: William Sloane Associates, 1948), 287.
2. Key exponents of early 20<sup>th</sup> century developments of ecological studies, and important sources for Vogt’s and Osborn’s works, were Ernst Haeckel, Darwinist and inventor of the term ‘ecology;’ Raymond Pearl, eugenicist and prominent scholar in the biology of populations; Aldo Leopold, conservationist biologist and key exponent of the first wave of American conservationism; Arthur Tansley, ecologist and inventor of the term ‘ecosystem.’ On Vogt’s and Osborn’s theoretical premises see Pierre Desrochers, “The Post-War Intellectual Roots of the Population Bomb. Fairfield Osborn’s ‘Our Plundered Planet’ and William Vogt’s ‘Road to Survival’ in Retrospect,” *The Electronic Journal of Sustainable Development*, 1, 3 (2009), 37–61.
3. Many studies investigate the success of environmental reappraisals of Malthus’ population doctrines. See, at least, Thomas Robertson, *The Malthusian Moment. Global Population Growth and the Birth of American Environmentalism* (New Brunswick & London: Rutgers University Press, 2012); Perrin Selcer, *The Post-War Origins of the Global Environment* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), ch. 2; Robert Mayhew, “The Publication Bomb: the Birth of Modern Environmentalism and the Editing of Malthus’ *Essay*,” in *New Perspectives on Malthus*, ed. R. Mayhew (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 240–266; Fabien Locher, “Neo-Malthusian Environmentalism, World Fisheries Crisis, and the Global Commons, 1950s–1970s,” *The Historical Journal*, 63 (2020), 7–36. For a bibliographical overview of existing literature on the topic see Jacopo

set in motion a process of re-semanticization of established categories of political thinking—including freedom, civilization, limit and development—conveyed by the affirmation of the environment as both a field of scientific enquiry and a terrain for political intervention.

Before publishing his bestseller, Vogt had trained as an ornithologist. Appointed Associate Director of the Science and Education Division of the Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs, and then also Chief of the Conservation Section of the Pan American Union, in 1942 his interests and activities had shifted from the reproductive dynamics of birds to those of human beings. As he himself would state in the introduction of *Road to Survival*, a long journey through South America attracted his attention toward the social costs of environmental depletion. In his words,

I am trying to paint an honest picture in colors that will convey an adequate image. If a patient is flushed with tuberculosis, no one will be benefited by pretending it is the high color of robust health.<sup>4</sup>

Osborn claimed to have very similar reasons for publishing his work; in fact, his intention was to unravel the causes and features of “man’s conflict with nature.”<sup>5</sup> Son of the homonymous eugenicist and “distinguished Aryan enthusiast,”<sup>6</sup> Osborn Jr. had studied biology and business, then continuing his career first as a member, and then as president of the New York Zoological Society. From that public position, his main scientific and political efforts focused on the dissemination of environmental-population issues.

Despite specific differences in their theoretical background and positioning<sup>7</sup>—which will be taken into account below—the masterpieces of both authors will be analyzed together here. The hypothesis underlying this interpretative choice is that Vogt and Osborn shared fundamental assumptions on both the purpose of writing popular books on the environmental crisis, and the means for achieving a wider awareness of the issue. In other words, they agreed that a radical change in the common understanding of the topic was of the utmost urgency, and that the way to accomplish this was to enlighten the social, political and economic effects of the population-environment interrelation. Notably, they also shared the belief that environmental depletion questioned established concepts of freedom and civilization as being protected and strengthened by expanding industrialization and the social changes it fostered. In both authors’ works, this led to a re-evaluation of the American past of escalating production and individual consumption from the perspective of the dismal future portrayed by analyses of population trends and the Earth’s carrying-capacity.

The first paragraph will take into account the theoretical pillars of Vogt’s and Osborn’s works to show how they innovated the conceptual structure of environmental conservationism. At the dawn of the Cold War, they disseminated the idea that the role of the U.S. on the international scene was not that of fostering growing capitalist production, but rather of helping to keep the world population and its ‘rising expectations’ in check. As will be argued in the second paragraph, in doing so they stated that freedom always comes with ‘costs’ and ‘limits.’ Approaching the environmental issue from the perspective of trends in human reproduction allowed them to scientifically measure these boundaries. Impending environmental and social disasters called for a definition of who can benefit from a ‘sustainable’ freedom, and at which conditions; from which dependencies people can or cannot be liberated; which claims or expectations are to be considered incompatible with given, limited

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Bonasera, “‘Green’ Malthus? A Bibliographical Itinerary between Neo-Malthusianism and Environmentalism,” *Storica-mente*, 18 (2022), 1–22.

4. Vogt, *Road to Survival*, xiv.

5. Henry Fairfield Osborn, *Our Plundered Planet* (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1948), vii.

6. A self-definition given by Osborn’s father, quoted in Donald Gibson, *Environmentalism: Power and Ideology* (New York: Nova Publisher, 2002), 38.

7. Evidence of the partially different reception of the two books, Osborn’s one being seen at the time as more compatible with president Harry Truman’s environmental policies, can be found in the review of the works by John Fisher, “Review of *Road to Survival* and *Our Plundered Planet*,” *The American Economic Review*, 3 (1949), 822–825. See also Eleanor Roosevelt, *My Day, January 16, 1948* (to be consulted at: <https://erpapers.columbian.gwu.edu/browse-my-day-columns>), where the author compliments Osborn after reading part of his manuscript.

possibilities to satisfy them. In the third paragraph, conclusions will be drawn on the way reconceptualizing freedom, population and environment allowed Vogt and Osborn to rethink the meaning, scope and founding features of ‘Western civilization’, thus also opening a space to envision a way out of the alleged global decay implicit in its history.

## 2 Population and Environment

As reported by Osborn, the scientific vocabulary of ecology in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century already defined “man as now becoming for the first time a *large-scale geological force*.”<sup>8</sup> This statement—which resonates in contemporary debates on the Anthropocene, its causes and effects<sup>9</sup>—may sound both like the proof of the great technological power reached by humanity, and as a frightening predicament about the effect of human actions on the Planet. Vogt and Osborn chose the second option. In their terms, underlining the scope and depth of human-induced changes in ecosystems was equal to triggering the alarm of a global threat to the very sources of life. The outcome of such rapid deterioration of the reproductive ability of resources could only be a state of war, made of local competitions for strategic materials and large-scale military conflicts that would end up exacerbating an already-unstable international scenario.<sup>10</sup> This global perspective was pivotal in transforming the American Conservationist movement—which had built its longstanding public success on the idea that protecting resources and natural beauties was key to the greatness of the U.S. and the progress of its economy<sup>11</sup>—in a political and ecological doctrine of Post-WWII international order. Between the 1940s and 1960s, public figures of the caliber of Vogt and Osborn themselves, but also Eleanor and Franck Delano Roosevelt, Aldo Leopold, Aldous Huxley and Rachel Carson, continued to frame their environmental discourses in a conservationist fashion;<sup>12</sup> in any case, this theoretical framework was deeply changed by references to the need not just to preserve exceptional areas, but also to raise awareness and promote policies that could be effective on a systemic, global level. What was at stake for Post-WWII environmentalism was not simply the protection of the ‘wilderness’ from the uncontrolled expansion of the “desert” of civilization, nor even the preservation of national resources for domestic economic reasons.<sup>13</sup> Paraphrasing Aldo Leopold’s famous statement on population growth, environmentalists thought conservationism had to aim to prevent societies from “dying of their own too-much.”<sup>14</sup> Significantly enough, Osborn saw the Western past as a long activity of “destroying the sources of men’s life,” which was causing a worldwide shortage of arable land compared with the “unprecedented” growing number of people: “another century like this,” Osborn went on, “and civilization will be facing its final

8. Osborn, *Our Plundered Planet*, 29.

9. The classic definition of the ‘Anthropocene’ as the epoch marked by the geological footprint left by humans on Earth was provided by Paul Crutzen, Eugene Stoermer, “The ‘Anthropocene,’” *Global Change Newsletter*, 41 (2000), 17.

10. See Edmund Russell, *War and Nature: Fighting Humans and Insects with Chemicals from World War I to Silent Spring* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

11. On American Conservationism see Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), 84–200. As noted in Frank Uekötter, “Introduction,” in *The Turning Points of Environmental History*, ed. F. Uekötter (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010), the dialectic between wilderness and civilization was not the only crucial topic of conservationist thought. In fact, as demonstrated by the position assumed by prominent conservationists such as John Muir in the Hetch Hetchy debate at the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century, conservationism could also be used to reframe the conditions for ‘true’ civilization and progress, one built on ecological assumptions. See Robert Righter, *The Battle Over Hetch Hetchy: America’s Most Controversial Dam and the Birth of Modern Environmentalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 12 ss.

12. See Joachim Radkau, *The Age of Ecology* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014); Dario Fazzi, “Eleanor Roosevelt and the Nature: Bridging Conservationism with Environmentalism,” in *Eleanor Roosevelt’s Views on Diplomacy and Democracy*, eds. D. Fazzi and A. Luscombe (London: Palgrave, 2020), 193–210.

13. The expression is taken from a classic work in American conservationism by Henry David Thoreau, *Walden or Life in the Woods* (1854), in *The Works of Henry Thoreau* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1906), 280; see Antonello La Vergata, Roberto Bondi, *Natura* (Bologna: il Mulino, 2014), 194.

14. Aldo Leopold, *Thinking Like a Mountain*, to be consulted at: <https://www.ecotoneinc.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/aldo-leopold-tlam.pdf>.

crisis.”<sup>15</sup> Similarly, Vogt noticed that “we must accept change, and adjust our lives to it, if we are to survive” at all.<sup>16</sup> Both authors adopted a utilitarian approach to nature that was not unprecedented within conservationist thinking; yet the global dimension in which they framed and justified it was a theoretical and political novelty.

Labeled as Neo-Malthusians for the way they placed the accent on overpopulation as the main ecological threat of the time,<sup>17</sup> both authors made the environment the vector of a sense of global urgency guided by a catastrophic representation of the future. When Malthus had written his classic *Essay on the Principle of Population* over a century earlier, he had expressed neither open interest for environmental depletion *per se*, nor he could have relied on detailed statistics to corroborate his thesis on population growth. What mattered to him was to show how trends in population meant that “no possible form of society could prevent the almost constant action of misery upon a great part of mankind.”<sup>18</sup> Since then, references to ‘population’ as a key variable in political and social order had multiplied, and the concept had developed in relation to changing ideas about welfare policies, food availability, sustainability and ecological equilibrium. Thus, while Malthus had made recourse to ‘natural laws’ to justify the unavoidability of poverty, social and sexual hierarchies and scarcity of resources, Neo-Malthusians adapted that vocabulary to the main political and environmental challenges of their time.<sup>19</sup> Notably, by ‘painting an honest picture’ of the world situation—as Vogt stated—environmentalists concerned with population trends aimed to produce solutions to excessive breeding, as this was seen as the main cause of both the impoverishment of entire populations and the catastrophic deterioration of fundamental natural resources. Just like Malthus, by focusing on the need to govern population trends they never intended to argue that poverty and social inequalities could be overcome. So, to label them as ‘Neo-Malthusians’ does not mean that their contribution can be anachronistically reduced to what Malthus had already stated; rather, it enhances the political content of their original and explicit take on Malthusian vocabulary.

To make ‘population’ apt to this theoretical and political task, its common understanding needed to be updated using new scientific tools and discoveries in natural sciences: theories of the relation of population and the environment had to consider both concepts as comprehensible only if grasped in a global dimension. In Vogt’s terms,

Before the great age of exploration at the end of the fifteenth century, the relationship [between human populations and the supply of natural resources] was a simple matter. Man lived in a series of isolated cells. What was done in Britain had little influence on what was done in China [...] Now we live in one world in an ecological—an environmental—sense.<sup>20</sup>

This meant that the environment could now refer to any level of life-organization: from local ones to the entire world. Planetary environment was seen as gathering together all the strings of all the environments humans could conceive and scientifically represent.<sup>21</sup> It was not just a *habitat* where humans and other living beings reproduced themselves; the environment was the outcome of an extremely complex series of interrelations, exchanges, affections and dependencies that humans needed firstly to understand, and then to adapt to. Ecology, in this new theoretical dimension, was conceived as the science of the complex interrelation of natural dynamics, which could be projected on the social and political realm. Consequently, speaking of the ‘world environment’ became a way

15. Osborn, *Our Plundered Planet*, 37.

16. Vogt, *Road to Survival*, xiii.

17. See Thomas Robertson, “Total War and the Total Environment: Fairfield Osborn, William Vogt, and the Birth of Global Ecology,” *Environmental History*, 17 (2012), 336–364.

18. Thomas Robert Malthus, *Essay on the Principle of Population* [1798] (Oxford: Oxford World’s Classics, 2008), 15.

19. See Robert Mayhew, *Debating Malthus. A Documentary Reader on Population, Resources, and the Environment* (Washington: The University of Washington Press, 2022), 1–10.

20. Vogt, *Road to Survival*, 14.

21. See Paul Ward, Libby Robin Sverker Sörlin, *The Environment. A History of the Idea*, (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2018), 15 ss.



to “realize the essential unity of mankind;”<sup>22</sup> i.e., to acknowledge that no partial solutions could be adopted, notwithstanding existing cultural, national and social differences among the populations of the world. On one hand, the concept of population, understood in its quantitative transformations, acted as a vector of temporalization of the environment, as it placed the issue of the future depletion of environmental resources at the center. On the other hand, the concept of environment retroacted on that of population, spatializing it: for each member of the world population, the specific external conditions in which he or she lived, counted.

Through an ecological account of the disruptive effects of excessive population, Vogt and Osborn wrote a counter-history of Western civilization and the alleged unbearable effects of its potential universalization.<sup>23</sup> In Vogt’s terms, the “Malthusian trap” was thus to be appreciated as an “ecological trap;” consequently, everyone had to engage in the “heavy task” of “regaining ecological freedom for our civilization,” first and foremost by understanding that “unless population control is included, other means to save the world are certain to fail.”<sup>24</sup> Both authors agreed that the political truth of the environment-population relationship consisted in the fact that modern, capitalistic freedom was either delusional or destructive, at least when not coupled with an ecological understanding of its effects. In other words, after renewing conservationist thinking based on a Neo-Malthusian reappraisal of ‘population’ as a key environmental factor, they applied this new theoretical lens to theories of modernization, industrialization and global planning. Not only were these processes environmentally unsustainable—as putting them into practice was already resulting in increased consumptions of limited resources—but also on a strictly political level. Those doctrines and policies had to be refused because they conveyed the promise of a new, ‘unbearable’ kind of freedom; i.e., “freedom from want.”

### 3 Freedom, Development, Planning

Urban-industrial development is essential, but, if grave risks to living conditions and health are to be avoided, sole reliance cannot be placed on such development to produce a sufficiently rapid reduction of the birth rate in congested agrarian areas. These risks can be minimized only if the small family ideal can be implanted directly in the rural population. [...] Limitation of fertility has the greatest relevance to plans for economic development. [...] Appropriate, efficient and cheap contraceptives are needed to hasten the decline in birth rate.<sup>25</sup>

Together with the Rockefeller Foundation, the Carnegie Corporation and the U.S. State Department, the Milbank Memorial Fund—editor of Franck Notestein’s 1948 essay—was part of an influential network of institutions and philanthropic foundations that, since the 1930s, had been promoting development and demographic stability around the world.<sup>26</sup> From his prominent seat of Director of the United Nations Population Division, for years Notestein had focused his attention on how to prevent rapid population growth from countering the beneficial effects of global development programs. So, for him the ‘small family ideal’ was to be considered the true good that industrial and ‘developed’ countries should export. In fact, having small families was deemed crucial to catalyze the modernization of far-away countries, especially those where increased poverty could trigger a Communist revolution. Thus, it was only by implementing that mature outcome of ‘urban-industrial development’ in a ‘rural society’ that the latter’s evolutionary path towards the former could actually be set

22. Osborn, *Our Plundered Planet*, 34.

23. See Giorgio Nebbia, “L’ecologismo americano. I temi fondamentali,” in *Il capitalismo americano e i suoi critici*, ed. P. Poggio (Milano: Jaca Book, 2013), 443–471.

24. Vogt, *Road to Survival*, 284, 264.

25. Frank Notestein, “The Reduction of Human Fertility as an Aid to Programs of Economic Development in Densely Settled Agrarian Regions,” in *Modernization Programs in Relation to Human Resources and Population Problems*, eds. F. Boudreau and C. Kiser (New York: Milbank Memorial Fund, 1950), 89–102, 97–98.

26. See Michael Latham, *The Right Kind of Revolution. Modernization, Development, and U.S. Foreign Policy from the Cold War to the Present* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2011), 99; Gilbert Rist, *The History of Development. From Western Origins to Global Faith* (London & New York: Zed Books, 2002), ch. 2.

in motion. Far from being the ‘natural’ effect of the relationship with its environment, population *optimum* was a requisite to be artificially achieved in order to synchronize ‘under-developed’ societies with the fully established needs of the expanding capitalist market. Embracing technology—in this specific case, birth control—was considered instrumental to accelerating a decline in birth rates that would have otherwise hampered development plans. Notably, modernization theorists like Notestein did not see the promotion of economic development as opposing the need to control population dynamics in post-colonial countries;<sup>27</sup> rather, they saw the latter as a precondition of the former. In order to let capital investments and capitalistic growth stimuli produce their effects, traditional values and social obligations to have a large number of children had to be overcome, first and foremost by blaming the poor for their own condition.

This set of discourses and policies was one of the primary polemic targets of Neo-Malthusian environmentalism, as rigorously synthesized by both Vogt and Osborn.<sup>28</sup> While applying a similar normative framework to human reproduction—one that pointed to individual reproductive choices as responsible for existing low levels of well-being—they made recourse to the language of ‘freedom’ to stress that the expansive economic policies implemented by the U.S. government on the international scene were making it impossible to keep both world population and people’s rising expectations in check. Two almost identical statements made by Vogt and Osborn in their respective writings give a clear picture of how they conceived the new ecological understanding of the world’s limits affecting established ideas about freedom and development. Vogt stated:

Quite as important as the Four freedoms, which we have made a shibboleth, is a Fifth freedom—from excessive numbers of children. Far more than much of the world realizes, even the partial achievement of the first four is dependent upon this last.<sup>29</sup>

While Osborn remarked,

The time for generalizations, such as the third of the Four freedoms, is over. ‘Freedom from want’ is an illusory hope unless its pronouncement is coupled with a statement that clearly sets forth the present problem, so that all people everywhere may join in common endeavor to resolve it. The tide of the Earth’s population is rising, the reservoir of the Earth’s living resources is falling.<sup>30</sup>

In his State of the Union Address on January 6, 1941, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt had argued that the world order was founded on “four essential human freedoms:” freedom of speech, of religion, freedom from want and from fear. On this basis, he had justified America’s massive national mobilization in World War II, as it was the U.S.’s responsibility to defend those freedoms and foster their extension to the entire world. This speech soon became the object of many re-appropriations in the U.S. public sphere, from the most radical interpretations of “freedom from want” as a claim to level social inequality, to conservative interpretations that argued that Roosevelt’s “four freedoms” represented the ideology of the New Deal, rather than the true spirit of America.<sup>31</sup> Then, in 1948

27. On the relationship between development planning and the re-making of colonial order in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, see Sara Lorenzini, *Global Development. A Cold War History* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2019), 9 ss; Stephen Macekura, *Of Limits and Growth. The Rise of Global Sustainable Development in the Twentieth century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

28. See Frank Golley, “Human Population from an Ecological Perspective,” *Population and Resources in Western Intellectual Traditions*, eds. M.S. Teitelbaum and J. Winter (New York: The American Association for the Advancement of Science, 1989), 199–212.

29. Vogt, *Road to Survival*, 211.

30. Osborn, *Our Plundered Planet*, 201.

31. See Eric Foner, *The Story of American Freedom* (New York: Norton&Company, 1998), ch. X; Raffaella Baritono, *Eleanor Roosevelt. Una biografia politica* (Bologna: il Mulino, 2021), 376; Matteo Battistini, *Middle Class: An Intellectual History through Social Sciences. An American Fetish from Its Origins to Globalization* (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2022), 137. To assess the impact of the New Deal environmental policies is beyond the scope of this contribution. For a reconstruction of the management of natural resources and landscapes in the Post-War era see Neil Maher, *Nature’s New Deal. The Civilian Conservation Corps and the Roots of American Environmental Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), ch. 6.

those same freedoms were referred to in the preamble of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly, as they represented the “highest aspiration of the common people.”<sup>32</sup>

The idea that all the people of the world could one day be free from necessity and misery questioned classic understandings and languages of freedom within liberal and political-economic theories. In particular, the idea that individuals entered civil society to defend their lives from fear and insecurity had been a key feature of liberal political theory since John Locke’s *Two Treatises of Government* (1690). Thereafter, the American and French Revolutions, the first written Constitutions and the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* (1789) at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, had integrated freedom of speech and of religion as founding principles of liberalism on both sides of the Atlantic.<sup>33</sup> In parallel, political-economists had developed the language of individual freedom in order to present the capitalistic market as both the result of the free economic exchanges of individuals, and the only space where their freedom of enterprise could be expressed. By claiming that the protection of individual “freedom from want” was a specific duty of public administration, President Roosevelt intended to reassure people that this time the war would not end up in a second Great Depression. In other words, to legitimize his ‘new course’ in economic policymaking he sought to bring together, within the same semantics, forms of freedom that were traditionally considered mutually exclusive.<sup>34</sup> As Friedrich von Hayek would state as early as in 1944, in open polemic with liberal New Deal supporters, planning to secure wages and occupation—thus to pursue “freedom from want”—was a step taken along *The Road to Serfdom*; in fact, for him

political freedom is meaningless without economic freedom; [...] the freedom of our economic activity which, with the right of choice, inevitably also carries the risk and the responsibility of that right.<sup>35</sup>

In other words, freedom was to be conceived as proceeding in parallel with a risk of individual failure in achieving one’s economic goals, and rightly no State planning could replace competitiveness as the only principle of true market justice. “Freedom from want” could not be planned, as any individual failure to achieve it was part of “economic freedom.”

Neo-Malthusian environmentalism provides an original perspective on this diatribe, as Vogt and Osborn criticized both market liberalism *tout-court*, and the New Deal policies. By weighing all “four freedoms” against their environmental cost, thus introducing “freedom from excessive children” as the most urgent and important, they put forward the idea that “freedom from want” was environmentally unsustainable, especially considering that its international projection would push land exploitation beyond the Earth’s limits, thus accelerating the environmental crisis.

Americans of good will have advocated an American standard of living, or something approaching it, for the entire world. “Freedom from want” was the carrot held before the noses of less prosperous peoples, to enlist their support during the war. What a monstrous deception this was, of ourselves and them, should be clear to anyone who thinks in terms of the carrying capacities of the world’s lands.<sup>36</sup>

32. The complete text of the Declaration can be consulted at: <https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/2021/03/udhr.pdf>.

33. See Crawford Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962).

34. Kathleen Donohue, *Freedom from Want. American Liberalism & the Idea of the Consumer* (Baltimore & London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003) stresses the transformation in the conceptualization of the ‘consumer’ as the major factor that underlines this key historical moment in the history of the liberal idea of freedom, though failing to appreciate the role played by both classic political-economic theory and Neo-Malthusian environmentalists in shaping this conceptual passage. For an ‘environmental history’ of the concept of freedom, see Pierre Charbonnier, *Affluence and Freedom. An Environmental History of Political Ideas* (London: Polity Press, 2021), 172 ss.

35. Friedrich von Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom* (1944), (New York: Routledge, 2001), 104; see Maurizio Ricciardi, “La fine dell’ordine democratico. Il programma neoliberale e la fine dell’azione collettiva,” *Strategie dell’ordine: categorie, fratture, soggetti*, eds. R. Baritoneo e M. Ricciardi (Scienza & Politica, Quaderno 8, 2020), 283–304.

36. Vogt, *Road to Survival*, 44.



While recognizing the powerful ideological role played by the promise to extend American wealth and freedom to other countries during the war, Vogt intended to provide material reasons for reversing that course. As Osborn would similarly state: “the needs of teeming millions are being met at the expense of the future of the land,”<sup>37</sup> which meant that all human freedoms—especially “freedom from want”—could only prove “meaningless and futile until, through world-wide planning, we first protect what remains and then take steps, wherever possible, to start back.”<sup>38</sup> On one hand, the change of direction needed was so radical that nothing but active and world-scale planning promoted by the U.S. could hope to accomplish it; on the other hand, as development implied more and more consumption of fertile lands, it could not go hand in hand—as Notestein had advocated—with the political and environmental goal of keeping population and consumption in check. Without an equilibrium between production and depletion of resources, which was crucial to the reproduction of life on Earth, no kind of freedom could be nurtured nor enjoyed, as no freedom was destined to last. This meant that what was generally conceived as ‘freedom’ had to be reconsidered on the basis of a more precise understanding of its future enjoyability; i.e., of its “ecological cost.” Thus, “a sort of ecological birth-control” was needed as a first step towards a complete reversal of current “economic thinking.”<sup>39</sup> In particular, Vogt pointed to the “semantic confusion” that had brought Western thinkers—except for a short list of authors, the first for him unsurprisingly being Malthus—to “call *production*” what was actually a process of destruction of the very sources of life and wealth.<sup>40</sup> Notably, while understanding the world ecologically meant scientifically representing it as ‘one’—as Vogt argued—planning proper environmental policies necessarily implied having to stop relying on unbearable ‘generalizations’, and called for any State to recognize its specific situation, and act accordingly. In other words, planning was broadly understood as a way to produce coordinated actions in a differentiated picture, and not to standardize the conditions of peoples around the world.<sup>41</sup> Thus, on one hand ecology became the scientific discourse that, by representing the world as a unified system, could spur an environmentalist innovation of capitalist thought and action; on the other hand, planning was an instrumental tool of political and social governance for setting societies in motion towards the unique goal of preserving the world environment.

In renovating Malthus’s heritage through its ecological re-appraisal, Post-WWII Neo-Malthusian environmentalism also re-proposed its conceptual and political core. By representing the environment through its limited physical carrying-capacity, it turned the future reproduction of the population, its long-term trend, into an ever-present problem. Thus, the spatial limit became a useful theoretical tool for assigning a highly normative political function to a potentially destructive future. What could people be free from, or what they could aim to freely accomplish was not to be framed in strict market terms alone; an environmental evaluation of the actual consequences of freedom was instrumental in preserving it from its own excesses. Thus, Vogt and Osborn did not refuse the New Deal idea that international planning was needed to set pluralistic and pragmatic politics in motion;<sup>42</sup> in fact they emptied the semantics of planning of its expansive economic and legal content, so as to bend the possibility to enjoy increasing rights to their alleged natural and environmental, and not merely legal, conditions.

In its genetic moment, environmentalism was deeply shaped by this theoretical effort to put the

37. Osborn, *Our Plundered Planet*, 98–99.

38. Osborn, *Our Plundered Planet*, 38.

39. Vogt, *Road to Survival*, 33, 146. Robertson, “Total War and the Total Environment” takes into account the importance of Osborn’s late refusal of eugenic theories in shaping his commitment to the promotion of birth-control policies worldwide. Vogt, on the other hand, would never renounce the relationship between ‘natural selection’ processes through birth control and ecological preservation. On the long-lasting relationship between Neo-Malthusianism and the formation of eugenics, see Allan Chase, *The Legacy of Malthus. The Social Costs of the New Scientific Racism* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1977).

40. Vogt, *Road to Survival*, 146.

41. On the concept of ‘planning’ and its implications for the history of political thought, see Roberta Ferrari, “Plan-Based Thought. From the New Civilization to the Global System of Power,” *Scienza & Politica. Per una storia delle dottrine*, 32 (2020), 5–15; see also Dirk Van Laak, “Planning. History and Present of Anticipating the Future,” *History and Society*, 34 (2008), 305–326.

42. See Elizabeth Borgwardt, *A New Deal for the World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 285 ss.

environment and its shrinking ‘carrying-capacity’ at the center of the political and economic arena.<sup>43</sup> To re-assess it and make it a key variable in international calculations, Vogt and Osborn argued for the necessity to interpret the environment in light of its ecological relation to population growth dynamics. Only this perspective allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the actual implications of both policies and individual behaviors adopted under the banner of ‘development’ and ‘freedom.’ As its durability and governmental protection over time could not be realistically guaranteed, “freedom from want” was nothing more than a mere “deception.” While this did not count as a complete transformation—let alone a rejection—of the classic market features of the concept of freedom, it aimed to make the conceptual environment-population dyad the normative framework in which to define its limits and possibilities. In this perspective, it is possible to appreciate how in asserting the unsustainability of the promise of growth and well-being promoted by New Deal supporters, Vogt and Osborn were stating that a new path for ‘Western civilization’ was needed; one that, by respecting those material limits from which people could not be free, would also plan a plausible future free of catastrophe.

#### 4 The Civilization of Limits

Formulated through the language of the limited possibilities it left open for pursuing freedom and civilization, Vogt’s and Osborn’s environmentalism challenged the idea that affluence and economic development could be promised to the whole world, especially to nations that were either in the midst of their decolonization process, or had just reached autonomy. In their major works, both scientists avoided specifying the contents of birth reduction plans that governments around the world were called to implement. Still, concerns for the need to interfere with ‘natural’ population trends—as widespread as to be advanced, as seen, by both modernization theorists and their environmentalism critics—echoed in legislative schemes to encourage birth control, especially among black communities in the U.S, and among “Third World populations internationally.”<sup>44</sup> Defining population as an environmental and political issue thus served to justify limitations on women’s sexual self-determination according to social, racial and national differences.<sup>45</sup> In parallel, focusing on the ‘great numbers’ found a fertile terrain in the food shortages experienced by many economies around the world, and sealed by the first official documents released by the United Nations’ Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), in which to take root. From India, Pakistan and Ceylon, to Japan, the Soviet Union and most European countries, in the 1940s national governments struggled to put food, population and agriculture at the center of their political and economic planning.<sup>46</sup>

In this scenario, development and economic growth, together with the required social transformations they implied, replaced the previous imperial ideology that saw emancipation as the ultimate prize of centuries of colonial subjugation, becoming the pillar of a political discourse seeking to reproduce those dependencies on a new basis. In this perspective, the kind of environmentalism advanced by Vogt and Osborn cannot be seen as aiming at something radically alternative; rather, after redefining the limits of freedom in ecological terms, they aimed to place “Western civilization” and its “world-mission” on safer ground. Thus, assessing Vogt’s and Osborn’s works from the standpoint

43. On the political and economic core of Neo-Malthusian environmentalism, with key references to the role of the government of population both in modern liberalism and contemporary neo-liberalism, see Mitchell Dean, “The Malthus Effect: Population and the Liberal Government of Life,” *Economy and Society*, 1 (2015), 1–22; Luca Paltrinieri, “Biopolitics in the Twenty-First Century: The Malthus-Marx Debate and the Human Capital Issue,” in *Foucault and the Modern International. Silences and Legacies for the Study of World Politics*, eds. P. Bonditti, D. Bigo, F. Gros (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 255–274.

44. See Michelle Murphy, *Seizing the Means of Reproduction. Entanglements of Feminism, Health, and Technoscience* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2012), 1–24; David Roediger, *How Race Survived U.S. History. From Settlement and Slavery to the Eclipse of Post-Racialism* (London: Verso, 2008), ch. 6.

45. See Matthew Connelly, *Fatal Misconception. The Struggle to Control World Population* (Cambridge, MA: The Harvard University Press, 2008), 195 ss.

46. See Allison Bashford, *Global Population. History, Geopolitics, and Life on Earth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 267 ss.

of the political implications of the environment-population concept allows them to be both better contextualized and appreciated in their theoretical specificity. By contrasting theories and policies of modernization, they leveraged on a conservative interpretation of Western past in order to point to a different, possible future. The theoretical originality of Neo-Malthusian environmentalists rests on their political attempt to draw from the natural language of ecological sciences the conceptual tools needed to renovate traditional thinking on freedom, limit and civilization. Their conceptualization of the latter based on “limits” and on “regaining ecological freedom” delineated a path towards survival that would reward those international actors most capable of promoting sustainable reproductive policies. “The countries we have been most generously aiding,” Vogt stated, were the same that “by failure to control their reproductive rate, are most rapidly reducing their capacity for self-help.”<sup>47</sup> The problem, therefore, was to act in order to interrupt that chain of ‘irresponsible’ behaviors and external help, and foster an understanding of the fact that “no wealth” is possible “without limits,”<sup>48</sup> first and foremost without people’s ability to self-restrain from excessive breeding. “Man has it in his power to stop this havoc,” Osborn was sure; the question thus became “will he do it and will he do it in time?”<sup>49</sup>

The history of industrialism, urbanization and capitalistic economic growth was the arena where proof could be found of the urgent need to abandon

One of the strangest lacunae in human cultural development, the absence of understanding of man’s relationship with his physical environment. So anthropocentric has he been that, since he began to achieve what we call civilization, he has assumed that he lives in a sort of vacuum.<sup>50</sup>

For Vogt, this theoretical gap required to boost an understanding of humanity as both depending on the functioning of the global environment, and being in charge of taking care of it. This kind of awareness, which quickly crossed the theoretical boundaries of Neo-Malthusian thinking, also served to trigger a change in the configuration of the relationship between natural scientific knowledge and policy-making, the latter being over time more and more guided by the former towards what would then be defined as “proper action.”<sup>51</sup> As the set of scientific expertise and tools were most suited to the task of systematically understanding the relationship between population and environment, ecology also began to provide the vocabulary needed to reassess the place of nature and “wilderness” within civilization:

Civilization and the rising needs of increasing numbers of people are pressing hard upon the last remaining of wilderness [...] should not man perhaps, even for his own peace of mind, think of himself not as the consumer alone but as the protector? It is man’s earth now. One wonders what obligations may accompany this infinite possession.<sup>52</sup>

Rather than being opposed to nature, “Western civilization” was to be conceived as part of it: “wilderness,” in this sense, lost its traditional conservationist connotation as a remnant from what

47. Vogt, *Road to Survival*, 195.

48. Vogt, *Road to Survival*, 110.

49. Osborn, *Our Plundered Planet*, 30.

50. Vogt, *Road to Survival*, 47. Evidence of both the historical depth of the idea that environmentalism relies on becoming aware of the consequences of human action on nature, and the political implications of such a discourse, seem to contradict the hypothesis that the specificity of the Anthropocene consists in the awareness of the relationship between the history of humans and that of nature. On this assumption, see Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History: Four Theses,” *Critical Inquiry*, 35 (2009), 197–222.

51. On later developments of Neo-Malthusian environmentalism, with a focus on its role in shaping international policies, see Matthias Schmelzer, *The Hegemony of Growth. The OECD and the Making of the Economic Growth Paradigm* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Sabine Höhler, *Spaceship Earth in the Environmental Age, 1960-1990* (London: Routledge, 2016); Jacopo Bonasera, “Un-Common Nature. Neo-Malthusian Environmentalism Before 1972 UN Stockholm Conference,” *Annals of the Fondazione Luigi Einaudi*, LVII (2023), 7–26. For a focus on the role of climate governance in U.S. international politics, see Angela Santese, “Gli Stati Uniti, il clima e la sicurezza internazionale,” in *Democrazia, populismo e autoritarismo. Trasformazioni politiche in Asia, Africa, Europa centro-orientale e Americhe*, eds. C. Tornimbeni e P. Soave (Milano: FrancoAngeli, 2023), 52–65.

52. Osborn, *Our Plundered Planet*, 66.

civilization had conquered, and its worldwide protection became a prerequisite of the longevity of human societies. In the conclusive chapter of his *Road to Survival*, entitled “History of Our Future,” Vogt underlined the centrality of this relationship, discussing how its longstanding configuration had already affected the future of all human beings. “We must come to understand our past, our history, in terms of the soil and water and forests and grasses that have made it what it is,”<sup>53</sup> because this was the history of the environmental conditions that, once acknowledged, could reveal a future out of the decay implied by blindly pursuing growth, development and ‘freedom from want.’

This ecological perspective allowed Vogt and Osborn to consider nature and civilization as part of the same history, one in which the former was the reservoir of a “truly civilizing,” highly normative content which would direct politics. In this sense, the statement according to which the “history of our future is already written”<sup>54</sup> reveals a dual meaning: on one hand, it served to foreground the certainty of the destructive outcomes of economic expansion and international political influence pursued in particular by the United States—in perfect continuity, in Vogt’s and Osborn’s terms, with the history of Western civilization. On the other hand, solutions to be pursued in order to outline a safer future were also “already written,” as the only way to save “civilization” was to come to an ecological understanding of the need to make ‘freedom from want’ dependent on the successful control of the population, and plan accordingly. Weighting freedom against its ecological cost resulted in associating capitalistic prosperity to the preservation of the environment, thus establishing a conservative understanding of environmentalism to be integrated in wider discourses on the pillars of social and political order.

In this perspective, taking the Neo-Malthusian political core of early environmentalism into account can help shed light on the current ecological crisis and the governance of its differentiated effects on peoples around the world. It may offer a possibility to grasp the present configuration of the enduring conceptual relationship between population and environment. In other words, it is here that the genesis of persisting strategies to naturalize the environmental issue can be traced, neutralizing the political tension between the capitalistic preservation of the environment and people’s claims of freedom from that ‘already written’ future.

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53. Vogt, *Road to Survival*, 286.

54. *Infra*, note 1.