

From “Tough Love” to “Street Fight”: Garret Hardin and Cordelia S. May’s Battle for Population Control and Eugenics at the Turn of the Millennium

*Do “Amor duro” à “Briga de rua”: a batalha
de Garret Hardin e Cordelia S. May pelo controle
populacional e a eugenia na virada do milênio*

Miroslava Chavez-Garcia*

ABSTRACT

This essay draws on epistolary documentation, conference proceedings, and U.S. government reports to analyze the correspondence of right-wing “conservative” activists Garrett Hardin and Cordelia S. May, focusing on their obsession with population control and eugenic principles as solutions to the growing ecological disasters of the 1960s through the early 2000s. These individuals engaged in negotiations and made decisions that helped shape public support for draconian population control policies and practices based on eugenics. These sources provide new insights into how a group of influential intellectuals, financiers, and self-proclaimed environmentalists worked to build a white, elite, heteronormative, and empowered smart society for the future, despite their inability

RESUMO

Este ensaio parte de documentação epistolar e de anais de conferências e relatórios do governo dos Estados Unidos no intuito de analisar as correspondências dos ativistas “conservadores” de direita Garrett Hardin e Cordelia S. May, centrado-se na obsessão de ambos pelo controle populacional e por princípios da eugenia como soluções para os crescentes desastres ecológicos da década de 1960 até o início dos anos 2000. Tais indivíduos encetaram negociações e tomaram decisões que ajudaram a moldar o apoio público, visando à aprovação de políticas e práticas draconianas de controle populacional baseadas na eugenia. Essas fontes fornecem novas perspectivas sobre como um grupo de intelectuais influentes, financiadores e autoproclamados ambientalistas trabalhou para construir uma sociedade branca, de elite, heteronormativa e capacitada do tipo in-

* University of California (UCSB), Santa Barbara, California, USA. chavezgarcia@ucsb.edu <<https://orcid.org/0009-0008-5245-2726>>

to keep population control on the national agenda.

Keywords: Population control; Eugenics; Environmentalism; Immigration; Xenophobia; Epistolary methodology.

teligente para o futuro, malgrado a sua incapacidade de manter o controle populacional na agenda nacional.

Palavras-chave: controle populacional; Eugenia; Ambientalismo; imigração; xenofobia; metodologia epistolar.

In 1986, Garrett Hardin, an influential ecologist and retired professor from the University of California, Santa Barbara, sent a letter to Cordelia S. May, a multi-millionaire heiress to the Mellon-Scaife family and a generous supporter of xenophobic causes, complaining about the public's waning interest in demographic growth. "We hear very little about the population angle now simply because it has become unfashionable to mention population", he wrote. "Marxists, liberals, and [Ronald] Reagan conservatives all agree in suppressing population discussions. Science will solve all problems! Growth is wonderful! Maldistribution is the enemy! The free-market system is the panacea... Take your pick." As a hardline supporter of population control, Hardin rejected those as the answers to the growing economic, environmental, and social degradations of the day, particularly those he saw as exacerbated by the 1980s sanctuary movement, the effort to provide refuge to Central Americans fleeing their war-torn countries. The problem: "[T]here are just too damned many people in El Salvador." (Hardin, 1986, AES, [n.d.]).

Despite waning interest in population control in the United States and regions referred to as the Third World, today the Global South, Hardin and May, along with an earlier cohort of like-minded social and political influencers of the early twentieth century, clung tenaciously to beliefs about the need to curb population growth, particularly among the "unfit": the poor, disabled, sexual "deviants", and people of color, among others. Positioning themselves alongside the likes of Frederick Osborn, Wickliffe Draper, and Margaret Sanger, nationally and internationally leading proponents of the "science of better breeding", or eugenics, they strategized on ways to continue spreading the message about propagating an idealized white, middle and upper class, cisgendered, and able-bodied "fit" society, whether through what Hardin called "tough love" or May claimed was a "street fight." Their personal correspondence, sustained for a thirty-year period from the early 1970s to the early 2000s, reveals their relentless critiques and outrage with scientists, social scientists, and environmentalists who disagreed with their ideas and proposals. Following in the footsteps of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth-century economist

Thomas Malthus, who predicted the inevitable spread of misery and want from an overextended population, Hardin and May proved to be equally extremist as more well-known xenophobic and white supremacist ideologues of their day, including John Tanton, dubbed the “mastermind” of immigration reform, Harry Weyher and John Trevor, Jr., president and treasurer, respectively, of the Pioneer Fund, established in 1937 by Wickliffe Draper to advance the “study of heredity and human differences in intelligence.” Hardin and May especially scorned the “liberals” who believed that infusing local communities or foreign nations with financial aid or restructuring social, political, and economic systems would slow population growth and improve the environment and standard of living. Instead, the two advocated for withholding aid as a tough but loving measure as well as engaging in public debates and, if necessary, brawls about how to best achieve population-environment balance, particularly for the United States (Kulish; McIntire, 2019; Mildenburger, 2019).

Hardin and May’s rampant white supremacist, classist, xenophobic, and anti-immigrant rhetoric and actions were sustained by their beliefs in eugenics, aimed at improving what they referred to as white genetic stock. Developed in late-nineteenth-century England by Francis Galton, a statistician and the founder of the biometrics movement, eugenics, or “well born”, referred to the “science which deals with all influences that improve the inborn qualities of a race” and coaxes them to the “utmost advantage”. Eugenics borrowed from emerging theories in biology, including Neo-Lamarckism, which argued that the environment could alter human heredity, and the increasingly popular Mendelian theory, which posited that human traits were passed directly from parents to offspring. Mendelian beliefs, in turn, dovetailed with Galton’s research on talented men, leading him and his followers to argue that certain traits were innate and not acquired. By the 1920s, Galton’s research into eugenics as the science of better breeding was accepted around the world, rising into a scientific movement in nearly three dozen countries (Stern, 2016, pp. 11-16, 87-90; Adams; Allen; Weiss, 2005, pp. 233-62; Levine; Bashford, 2010).

For Hardin and May, as well as many of their predecessors like Draper, controlling and containing the reproduction of the “best kind” of people was only possible by making birth control, abortion, and sterilization more widely available and acceptable. To that end, Hardin and May spent many years working with individuals and organizations, such as Patricia Maginnis and the Society for Humane Abortion and the Association to Repeal Abortion Laws (ARAL), to legalize abortion and help those who wanted them to go to Mexico and Japan for the procedure. To improve the quality of the population, Hardin

and May also advocated providing abortion access to the poor. “Forcing poor women to bear children they do not want (while richer women can avoid doing so),” Hardin said, “results in the poor outbreeding the rich. If poverty is even in part genetically caused (as it surely must be), such class discrimination... must have a dysgenic effect.” Facilitating access, he claimed, “would markedly improve the genetic trends of our time” (Hardin, 1969). While Hardin and May rarely ventured to talk publicly about their commitment to a eugenic society, they discussed it consistently and privately in their correspondence, often lamenting its opposition.

Closely examining and analyzing Hardin and May’s thirty-year-long epistolary relationship indicates that they were deeply invested in population control and eugenics to ensure the future of planet Earth for the most intelligent and deserving kind. Indeed, nearly one-third of the 120 available letters they exchanged focused explicitly and specifically on the need for population control – a cause they never abandoned. The remaining notes centered on the environment and immigration (Chavez-Garcia, 2023), as well as the individuals – both friends and foes – who challenged their beliefs. Much to Hardin and May’s dismay, interest in government programs aimed at reducing population peaked in the early 1970s and waned precipitously in the 1980s and 1990s, coinciding with the public’s growing and insatiable appetite for immigration restriction from Mexico specifically and the Global South generally. For many, the announcement of the decline in the U.S. fertility rate to replacement levels in 1972 signaled the beginning of the end of the fervor behind population control. The public’s lack of interest was palpable, too, with the 1980 release of U.S. President Jimmy Carter’s Global 2000 – a massive report with mountains of evidence supporting the need to control expansion – and the little attention it received (Ackerman, 1988; Parenti, 2012; Wilmouth; Ball, 1992; Council on Environmental Quality, 1980).

Until recently, few scholars have examined and analyzed the intersections of population control, eugenics, environmentalism, and immigration, as well as xenophobia, white supremacy, and ableism, and how these entangled beliefs and practices became mainstream in the late twentieth century in the United States. However, a significant cohort has produced scholarship exploring how science, race, and gender-based ideologies work to exclude, criminalize, and threaten the lives of poor people, people of color, immigrants, and the disabled in the United States. Critical legal scholars, in particular, have studied the effects of racism, nativism, and white supremacy in the law, demonstrating the systemic and insidious regulation, containment, and murder of non-white

bodies. Political scientists, demographers, and sociologists have also delved deeply into the links among population control, reproductive rights locally and globally, and migration, showing how imperialist and neo-colonialist designs have attempted to disempower poor whites, immigrants, and Third World women. Historians and historians of science have also spent time unearthing the evolution of eugenics and genetics, revealing the deep-rooted strands of science- and race-based thinking in health and mental health care, education, and criminal justice, among other fields (Hartmann, 1995; 1997; 2017; Connelly, 2010; Merchant, 2021; Normandin; Valles, 2015; Gutiérrez, 2008).

Few, however, have used personal correspondence in their analyses behind the ideas and ideologies, as well as the motivations for the development of harsh and often punitive population control and eugenic measures enacted in the United States and beyond. Personal letters, I argue, with their first-person perspective, provide a window into the “back room” dealings that helped shape public support and garner financial backing to pass draconian, eugenics-based population control policies and practices. With insight into these private meetings and discussions, the notes provide fresh perspectives on how a group of influential intellectuals, financiers, and self-proclaimed environmentalists worked to build a white, upper class, heteronormative, and ableist society of the intelligent kind for future generations.

Using personal correspondence, news articles, conference proceedings, and government reports, this essay examines and analyzes Garrett Hardin’s and Cordelia S. May’s fixation on population control as well as the eugenics principles that underpinned their ideas as the solution to the growing ecological disasters in the 1960s to the early 2000s. While both were long-time supporters of eugenics beliefs and practices, they understood the post-World War II public aversion to anything associated with the horrors of Nazi Germany and, thus, avoided the topic in public. Yet, in their correspondence, they expressed admiration and a missed opportunity for cultivating a science they believed promised to deliver progress and prosperity for humankind. To understand the evolution of their beliefs and practices across the mid-to-late twentieth century, the discussion begins with an overview of population control efforts at mid-century and in the post-World War II period, as well as campaigns of forced, non-consensual eugenic sterilization, and how they aligned with U.S. political and economic interests. Next, it focuses on Hardin’s and May’s main subjects of communication, namely, the inadequacy and failure of successive governments, organizations, and individuals to address the perils of unchecked demographic expansion and the disasters that awaited. To

gain control of runaway growth, they argued, eugenic approaches and solutions were urgently needed in medicine, education, and the broader society. Finally, it shows that, despite their inability to maintain population control on the national agenda, they never relented in their fight for a future where they saw themselves – white, middle- and upper-class, intelligent, able-bodied, heterosexuals – reflected.

POPULATION CONTROL COMES OF AGE IN THE POST-WORLD WAR II ERA

By the time Garrett Hardin and Cordelia S. May developed a professional and, quickly, a personal relationship in the early 1970s, population control had been proposed, discussed, and debated in a variety of contexts for one hundred years in the United States and beyond. Since the mid-to-late 1800s, fears of “race suicide”, pandemics, and “the yellow peril” led to initial efforts to regulate migration worldwide, resulting in the passage of restrictive immigration laws, particularly in the United States. By the 1920s and 1930s, immigration restrictionists in governmental and non-governmental organizations provided the language and models for eugenicists who aimed to control and contain the spread within and without of “defectives”, individuals with inherited or biological diseases who threatened the national body politic. Both advocates of immigration restriction and eugenics, often overlapping, carried out their efforts with significant success, leading to the passage of compulsory sterilization laws in many states across the United States and Puerto Rico, as well as the enactment of restrictive immigration laws by the eve of World War II (Connelly, 2010).

For decades, in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, Margaret Sanger’s Planned Parenthood Federation of America, previously known as the American Birth Control League and a leading advocate of birth control, eugenics, and elitist views regarding the poor, turned its attention to the issue of overpopulation on a global scale. With the advent of new medicines and treatments for common childhood diseases worldwide, life expectancy to formerly colonized populations growth began to appear like a global crisis to former colonial powers, including the United States. To address the mounting worldwide crisis, Sanger and a consortium of family planning associations from the United States, England, India, Sweden, the Netherlands, West Germany, Hong Kong, and Singapore founded the International Planned Parenthood Federation

(IPPF) in 1952 at a conference in Bombay, India. Initially funded by the Brush Foundation of Cleveland, with Dorothy Brush, a member of the board of directors of the American Eugenics Society and one of IPPF’s most influential board members, the organization was carefully planned and received support from eugenics societies in Sweden, England, Holland, and India. In the United States, Hugh Moore, the founder of the Dixie Cup Corporation and a staunch advocate of population control and eugenics, established the philanthropic Hugh Moore Fund in 1954 to build private support for the cause. The Moore Fund’s financial resources and distribution of the pamphlet “The Population Bomb”, written in 1955 and the first work in the post-war era to describe the Earth as a “ticking time bomb”, which could lead to a population explosion in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, promoting war, global communism, and inevitably nuclear conflict, earned Moore a position at IPPF as vice chairman. By 1960, population growth and nuclear war had become so closely associated that Time magazine’s first issue of the decade was titled “That Population Explosion” (Merchant, 2021, p. 119; Weydner, 2018).

The perceived demographic explosion, driven by the rise of social science and demography, specifically in the United States and worldwide during the post-war period, prompted philanthropists and entrepreneurs – rather than government bureaucrats, who had not yet embraced it as a national issue due to concerns about coercive measures – to focus their mission on population control and family planning, whether that included stabilizing or reducing the future population. Family planning encompassed health education, birth control, and sterilization efforts and was seen as a liberal policy and practice that targeted individuals locally, rather than addressing structural inequality, uneven growth and development, and resource imbalances on a global scale. To advocate for family planning in the United States, Hugh Moore carried out a number of public campaigns, including full-page newspaper ads in *The Wall Street Journal*, signed by prominent supporters of population control, such as Cordelia S. May, urging government officials to become involved in initiatives to control and contain demographic growth before “millions starve[d]” (Hugh Moore Fund, 1966).

Moore’s efforts to promote the concept of population control gained increasing support from contemporaries, including John D. Rockefeller III, the grandson of the Standard Oil tycoon John D. Rockefeller and an active philanthropist. Assisted by Fred Osborn and Frank Notestein, leading eugenicists of the time, Rockefeller invited nearly three dozen prominent conservationists, demographers, and development experts to a secretive two-day conference in

Williamsburg, Virginia in 1951. Sponsored by the National Academy of Sciences, the conference reached a consensus on the need for family planning in the Global South, involving the legalization and dissemination of contraception (Merchant, 2021, p. 109). A year later, in 1952, Rockefeller founded the Population Council, a private organization focused on providing grants to individuals and institutions, including academics, colleges, and universities. Within a short span, both the Population Council and the United Nations Population Fund not only provided financial support for family planning but also for demographers and related social scientists, leading to what Betsy Hartmann referred to as “a powerful cult of population control” in academia and beyond (Hartmann, 1997). The messaging proved successful. Feeling the pressure, the White House approved a population program in 1965, with the U.S. Agency for International Development providing “contraceptives abroad and funding such private organizations as the Population Council, Planned Parenthood, and the Pathfinder Fund” (Merchant, 2021, p. 124). In that same year, at the twentieth anniversary of the United Nations in San Francisco, U.S. President Lyndon B. Johnson famously stated, “Let us act on the fact that less than five dollars invested in population control is worth a hundred dollars invested in economic growth” (U.S. Senate, 1967, p. 3).

While approaches and solutions to the population problem seemed to converge in the post-World War II period, internal ideological divisions among scientists, social scientists, philanthropists, and family planning advocates escalated into rifts and eventually caverns. Internal differences among “modernizationists” (led by the Population Council, including Rockefeller) against the “neo-Malthusianists” or “bombers” (led by the Population Reference Bureau, including Garrett Hardin and Cordelia S. May) resulted in sharp disputes and internal conflicts. The modernizationists argued that population growth had hindered development in what was then referred to as the Third World, while the extremists believed that the world had already exceeded its capacity to sustain the current population and was heading for a catastrophe. Drawing on neo-Malthusianists such as Guy Irving Burch, William Vogt, and Fred Osborn, the latter group asserted that immediate and, if necessary, coercive measures were needed to save the planet for the “right kind” of people. The conflicts between what later became known as the “Population Establishment” – comprising the Population Council, the Ford Foundation, Planned Parenthood, and American demographers – and the bombers or neo-Malthusianists – including Moore, Draper, demographer Kingsley Davis, and biologist Paul R. Ehrlich – led the latter group to shift their focus away from

family planning and demography and toward the natural sciences to make their case (Merchant, 2021, p. 159).

Nowhere were the perils of unchecked growth more evident than in Paul R. Ehrlich's and Anne Ehrlich's blockbuster, *The Population Bomb*, which borrowed its title from the earlier pamphlet of the same name (Ehrlich, 1968). Published in 1968 with the support of the Sierra Club, the largest environmental organization in the United States, the book warned about the imminent, if not present, impact of an exploding population on the natural ecosystem. This explosion was predicted to lead to mass starvation, ultimately threatening to wipe out civilization. Initially, the book drew little attention beyond population advocates, but an invitation by the popular late-night talk show host Johnny Carson to “The Tonight Show” made Paul Ehrlich, who was credited alone for the work, a sensation. Over time, *The Population Bomb* sold millions of copies and influenced draconian population stabilization efforts. As Charles Mann writes, the book “incited a worldwide fear of overpopulation” and made dire predictions, “trigger[ing] a wave of repression around the world”, including human rights abuses, massive sterilization programs, and one-child national policies (Mann, 2018).

While population advocates, both moderate and neo-Malthusianists, had convinced the public and the government that a population bomb posed “[o]ne of the most serious challenges to human destiny”, as U.S. President Richard Nixon stated in 1969, the U.S. White House was unwilling to approve unpopular approaches to address the crisis, both domestically and internationally. In 1972, two years after Nixon appointed Rockefeller to chair the Commission on Population Growth, the committee issued several recommendations, including liberalizing abortion laws, providing public funding and health insurance for abortion services, limiting families to two children, and making sex education, contraceptives, and sterilization more accessible. Two years later, in 1974, Nixon's National Security Advisor, Henry Kissinger, released an even more ambitious call for global population control. In “NSSM 200”, the “National Security Study Memorandum”, Kissinger called for a reduction in worldwide population growth to prevent famine and the ensuing disruptions. Kissinger was concerned that the social and economic disruptions could impact U.S. political and strategic interests in the “largest and fastest growing developing countries”, including India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nigeria, Mexico, Indonesia, Brazil, the Philippines, Thailand, Egypt, Turkey, Ethiopia, and Colombia (U.S. State Department, 1974). Unwilling to accept such controversial mandates, especially given the backlash from conservative

groups and reports of declining birth rates to replacement levels in the United States, and preoccupied with his own political scandal as well, Nixon shelved the reports. This signaled a gradual disinterest in the media and the public regarding the perils of the population bomb. (Kissinger's report would not go unnoticed, however, as ten years later, President Gerald Ford revised it and made it official policy). Nixon's approach to population issues angered many, including Garrett Hardin and Cordelia S. May (Center for Research on Population..., 1969).

Despite the rejection of federally mandated family planning initiatives, many similar policies and practices were implemented, whether publicly or privately funded discreetly, in a eugenic and coercive manner across the United States in the 1960s and 1970s. These policies especially targeted poor women, poor women of color, and single mothers. Among those affected were Native American women who, both on and off reservations throughout the country, experienced ongoing efforts by the Indian Health Service (IHS) and Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), backed by the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, to carry out education programs aimed at convincing women to accept sterilization as a form of birth control. Within a few short years, Native women's rates of sterilization skyrocketed. As Brianna Theobald writes, "[s]cholars estimate that beginning in 1970, physicians sterilized between 25 and 42 percent of Native women of childbearing age over a six-year period" (Theobald, 2019, pp. 1, 159-60; Gurr, 2015; O'Sullivan, 2016). These procedures, she continues, were carried out "coercively and with genocidal intentions" and were part of a broader agenda to control and contain the expanding domestic welfare state. The passage of the Federal Family Planning Act in 1972, which subsidized sterilizations for Medicaid and IHS patients, further increased the rates of sterilization among Native communities. In the Navajo Nation, the incidence of these procedures doubled between 1972 and 1978 (Theobald, 2019, pp. 148, 153).

Similar efforts at population control were carried out among Puerto Rican women, beginning in the 1930s and 1940s intensifying in the post-war period. Since the early twentieth century, following the Spanish-American War in 1898, Puerto Rico was subjected to U.S. neo-colonial rule, including attempts to control its demographics. With the emergence of new birth control technologies in the 1940s and 1950s, poor women with children were subjected to experimental hormones as well as operations for sterilization without full disclosure of the long-term effects of ingesting high levels of estrogen or undergoing tubal ligation. Many of these procedures were performed at birth

control clinics established by Dr. Clarence Gamble, the wealthy heir of Proctor & Gamble fame. Gamble was an American eugenicist and an ally of Margaret Sanger. He launched his program only after finding an affordable, low-cost contraceptive that could be given to poor women with large families. To do so, Gamble had pushed the IPPF for approval of experimental medication for use in developing countries. When the IPPF resisted his approach, Gamble established the Pathfinder Fund, allowing him to carry out his vision for controlling population growth in Latin American countries. In Puerto Rico specifically, the delivery of birth control pills and sterilization campaigns were carried out and encouraged not only by local doctors and nurses but also by Spanish-speaking women, who were trained to consult and persuade mostly poor, rural Puerto Rican women about limiting their fertility (López, 2008; Schell, 2010; López, 2014; Weydner, 2018).

Impoverished Spanish-speaking women of Mexican origin on the mainland also experienced coercive sterilization throughout the early twentieth century and most famously in the 1960s and 1970s. The exact number of women who were forcibly sterilized remains unknown, but in 1969, ten Mexican immigrant and Mexican American women sued Los Angeles County/USC Memorial Hospital, alleging that they were coerced into signing waivers for sterilization without their consent. Women of Mexican descent were no strangers to coercive practices. In the early twentieth century, women of Mexican origin in California faced sterilization in disproportionate numbers across the state, continuing into the mid-to-late twentieth century. Identified as mentally defective and prolific breeders, Mexican and Mexican American women, of various ages, bore the brunt of efforts to contain the “menace of the feebleminded” with the goal of protecting the larger society (Lira; Stern, 2014; Gutiérrez; Fuentes, 2009). Poor, working-class African American women also faced racialized and medicalized eugenic sterilization practices since the early 1900s, with victims as young as nine years old. Often called the “Mississippi appendectomy” due to its ubiquitous use in the U.S. South, Black females of all ages were unscrupulously subjected to these procedures for decades across the United States, particularly in North Carolina and Virginia (Roberts, 1997; Threadcraft, 2016).

Family planning was not only focused on poor women of color in the United States and its former colony but also on impoverished people worldwide. In the 1960s and 1970s, Southeast Asians faced coercive government-run birth control and sterilization programs. Using payments in currency or goods to participate, Indian officials, with the support of international aid

programs from the United States and other countries, promoted sterilization as a means to limit reproduction and improve economic conditions. These rushed efforts were both risky and poorly planned, resulting in thousands of procedures within weeks and months, leading to many deaths (Hodges, 2008). In contrast, neither sterilization nor abortion, which remained unlawful in Mexico until 2007, were implemented on a massive scale in the 1960s and 1970s, given the influence and power of the Catholic Church in civil government. However, the control of the quantity and quality of the population was not new in Mexico. In post-revolutionary Mexico, scientific researchers used science and eugenics to shape what they called “rational racial mixing”, or “*mestizaje*”, leading to the development of a superior national family, “*la gran familia*” (Sánchez-Rivera, 2021). In the post-war period, birth control pills, though discouraged, became available through U.S.-backed clinics, including International Planned Parenthood. While efforts to establish Planned Parenthood in Mexico were mildly successful, oral contraception did see remarkable gains, contributing to the decrease in family size in the 1970s and 1980s. As a last resort, Mexican women with means had the option of seeking illegal abortions in Mexico, particularly in northern Mexico, where many doctors performed the procedure in proximity to the U.S.-Mexican border for access by foreign nationals, particularly Americans (Stepan, 1991; Singer, 2022).

In China, in contrast to Mexico, government officials were concerned about the need to slow population growth and implement population stabilization measures, leading to the enactment of national legislation on limiting reproduction. Influenced by Ehrlich’s *The Population Bomb*, Chinese officials passed a draconian one-child policy in the early 1970s. While the immediate result of the Chinese policy was a gradual reduction in the population, the long-term effect was the death of countless baby girls and a skewed sex ratio. More recently, since the 1990s, social, economic, and cultural transformations have accelerated China’s declining birth rate, leading government officials to reverse course sharply by implementing a new three-child policy as recently as 2021 (Zhao; Zhang, 2021).

THE RELENTLESS CAMPAIGN FOR POPULATION CONTROL

An in-depth examination of Garrett Hardin’s and Cordelia S. May’s thirty-year epistolary relationship indicates that they spent much ink critiquing harshly individuals and institutions that were unwilling to make population control a central component of their mission. They especially scorned sworn

environmentalists whom they believed had aligned with their cause. Such was May’s complaint in 1981, during a trip to the International Botanical Congress in Sydney, Australia, where she had hoped to network with those of similar minds. As she told Hardin, however, she was sorely disappointed. She expressed her dismay at the change in stance of Peter Raven, a botanist from the United States, who had lectured at the congress. May had “admired him as one of the rare scientists from another discipline who seemed to have a clear picture of the population menace”, she informed Hardin, and had planned to meet him after his talk, “even hoping to recommend him as a director of E.F. [The Environmental Fund, May’s private organization] or, at least, an advisor.” “God knows”, she continued, “not one of his colleagues [in the Botanical Congress] had shown the slightest concern on our field trip about human growth rates as related to vanishing species” (May, 1981a).

Raven’s presentation was excellent, she continued in her note, and “his slides very dramatic in pointing out the results of human predation, his figures [and] predictions correct so far as I know. He put the whole puzzle together – until the last piece.” “His culprit?” she asked rhetorically. “The developed countries’ economic structure. His remedy? Help for the backward nations until their impoverished no longer have to move into the ecologically fragile areas. Not one word about reducing their own growth rates.” Disappointed with what she called the need to throw money – foreign aid – at the situation, May concluded, “I had thought he would be such a valuable ally for E.F.” (May, 1981a). Hardin agreed with May’s assessment, adding that the Aussies had gone soft with whom they allowed to enter the country. Australia, he lamented, once had “an absolutely discriminating immigration policy” (Hardin, 1981).

Despite the setback, Hardin and May remained relentless in their cause to fight demographic growth, even critiquing the policies of recently established sovereign nations that failed to communicate the need for population control to their citizens. In their correspondence, Hardin and May particularly focused on India and its growing population. May declared to Hardin that if a country, like India, “no matter how backward, small, or recent”, wanted respect and recognition of its sovereignty and autonomy, “then its inherent responsibility (there’s the word!) is to control its population size, and failure to do so is purely willful.” She continued, “if, on the other hand, its leader cannot grasp the necessity for such control and its citizens find contraceptive devices too complicated to use (and don’t give me that business about ‘They’ll understand more with education and economic development.’ Even in the most wretched conditions, they understand the benefits of all life-preserving medi-

cines – and they [South Asians] adore getting shots; they’ll wait for hours in blistering sun just to have one!),” she continued, “[t]hen they cannot be regarded as ‘equals’ with the developed world. You can’t – with any logic – have it both ways” (May, 1988).

Along with critiquing sovereign governments and their leaders for their failure to address the perils of unchecked growth, they also targeted organizations, particularly those focused on the environment, that had proven unwilling or unable to make population control a central component of their mission. In 1980, in her capacity as the founder of The Environmental Fund, May attempted to join a national network of environmental groups, the Global Tomorrow Coalition (GTC), at one of its first meetings in Washington, D.C., to shift the agenda. Led by Don Lesh, GTC was formed in response to President Carter’s Global 2000, which warned that world population growth would have dramatic consequences on natural resources and the environment by 2000 if public policy failed to act. May knew it would not be easy to convince GTC of a population-focused mission. Anticipating a struggle, or perhaps a street fight, in the nation’s capital, May said to Hardin, “I look forward to seeing you at the great Conservation Confrontation” (May, 1980; Lesh, 1985).

May’s predictions were not unfounded, as she presented her case but was unable to convince the GTC leadership as well as the rank-and-file that population control was vital to their work. Despite May’s repeated exhortations, Lesh refused to amend the agenda or appoint May or TEF to a leading position in GTC. To Lesh, May’s brand of population policies, he said to her, “left TEF somewhat isolated... especially its strong emphasis on ‘lifeboat ethics’, referring to Hardin’s metaphor of the earth as a lifeboat with limited carrying capacity, requiring the need to make hard choices between those on the boat – deserving citizens – and those floating in the water, clinging to the boat – immigrants and the poor (Hardin, 1974). Instead of including TEF among the leadership, Lesh proposed having “dual Chairs of the Population Task Force”, a suggestion that angered May and turned her, she said to Hardin, the “shade of an eggplant”. If that happened, she argued, “bitterness would build up between the two.” “It is disheartening”, she told Hardin, “to think that all the arguments that we presented to the conservationists [sic] at the meeting at the City Tavern fell on still-deaf ears” (May, 1983).

Recalling decades of internal battles between moderates and neo-Malthusianists advocating for different paths to population control, May remained resolute. “I hate to think of us pulling out of GTC, but I’m damned if I will sit around and listen to all those dismally predictable platitudes that I

heard for 20 years at Planned Parenthood, Population Council, and Population Crisis Committee meetings”, she told Hardin. “I am not necessarily looking for a street fight, but I do feel that TEF must make clear what makes it distinctive and different from other groups.” We must, she said, “put it in writing... ‘We differ from P[lanned] P[arenthood] because we do not feel that clinical procedures have an effect on growth rates, etc.’ Birth control, as she and Hardin repeated, was not population control. Despite her pessimism, May held onto a glimmer of hope and a strategy for carrying out her agenda. “[I]f GTC swings around to our way of thinking and we do get a seat on the Steering Committee, we must make sure that our spokesperson hammers home our philosophy unrelentingly[.]”. Ideally, May suggested, they would take control of the agenda (May, 1983).

To reverse course and spread their gospel of population control, May took it upon herself to circulate copies of Hardin’s writings, including “The Toughlove Solution”, appearing in *Newsweek Magazine* in 1981, among her influential friends. Arguing that foreign “[a]id [wa]s the opium of the masses”, Hardin’s essay noted that “[d]irect food aid to such a country [as Bangladesh] merely subsidizes further destructive population growth.” “Self-reliance”, he preached, “must be generated inside each nation, by the people themselves.” Despite May’s efforts to spread their views, few were moved. “I became discouraged”, May wrote in the same letter, “with the T.V. commentators, for I have yet to hear one of them refer to population when they discuss The Cancún conference”, the North-South Summit on Cooperation and Development held in Mexico that year. A historic meeting as the first of its kind in the Western Hemisphere, the focus was primarily on promoting global economic recovery for the region with little attention to the role of population stabilization (Connelly, 2010; Keilman, 2001; Riding, 1981; May, 1981b).

Notwithstanding the roadblocks, May continued advocating a hardline stance on population control and ensuring that TEF was at the forefront of communicating that message. When May’s goals went unrealized, she was quick to identify the problem, even when it came from within her own ranks, and to resolve it. After instructing TEF’s Executive Director, Rupert Cutler, who was hired in the 1980s, to sound the alarm of population growth whenever possible, she was sorely disappointed with his accomplishments. “In a recent mailing”, she said to Hardin in 1984, “Cutler included the talk he has prepared for the N.A. Wildlife meeting on March 27 [1984]. I find it regrettable that his only reference to human population is in the opening paragraph.” “Hell”, she exclaimed, “even Russ Train” – the former administrator of the

Environmental Protection Agency, from 1973 to 1977 – “does better than that in his annual report!” (May, 1984a). A founding member and, later, chair of the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) from 1978 to 1990, Train took a moderate stance on demographic expansion. Exasperated with Cutler’s approach, May sent him a tersely worded letter, reprimanding him for linking population and environmental issues. Those themes “have been ‘conferenced’ to death with little or no emergent beneficial result.” Instead, they ignite “a yawn”. “It saddens me that we cannot readily generate foundation support on the merits of our unique philosophical stand and our efforts to educate the public about the immense, little-publicized threat of overpopulation.” “TEF alone”, May reminded Cutler, “claims that population control is the only realistic route to environmental balance” (May, 1984b). Apparently, Cutler failed to meet her expectations, as he was relieved or fired promptly.

BATTLING FOR QUANTITY AND QUALITY CONTROL

To gain effective control of runaway growth, Hardin and May argued that an approach incorporating eugenics was urgently needed across a wide sector of society. For them, limiting the quantity while also enhancing the quality of people was central to their project. In thinking about the allocation of resources for the care of children with special needs, Hardin bluntly advocated for saving resources rather than wasting them on saving infants born prematurely, which might, in turn, result in prolonged and widespread economic and social hardships. “It seems to me that the unfavorable prognosis for preemies is an argument against making heroic efforts to keep premature children alive”, he told a doctor in 1975, “and an argument for certain sorts of late abortions when things do not seem to be going well.” “But I do not know the literature. Are there good data on what happens to the preemies that survive?” he asked. “Not only what happens to them in the first few months or years, but how do they pan out as adults?” To Hardin, the investment did not seem worth the effort. “I sometimes wonder if we are fooling ourselves in this branch of medicine” (Hardin, 1975).

May, like Hardin, was an avid supporter of eugenics even while she claimed little knowledge of its main principles. In a letter to Hardin, May wished Americans were less “squeamish” about eugenics and, instead, would consider it seriously and without the emotional baggage it carried, for its potential ability to solve social problems. “I cannot and do not claim any scientific knowledge about eugenics”, she told Hardin in 1985. “I do know that most

domestic animals have been bred to erase undesirable traits, with seemingly satisfactory results. Now, humans present an entirely different picture because they come with that inborn, age-old, unknown trait for love.” Love, she believed, complicated what seemed to her an obvious solution: stop having children. To illustrate her point, she continued:

Years ago, I went to a hairdresser who was an epileptic. When she produced a son and realized that she had transmitted the affliction to him, she decided to have no more children. I remember looking at her with boundless admiration because she was not a particularly sophisticated or intelligent woman, and her decision was made in the days before contraception was perfected and widely accepted. Don't we wish there were more like her today? The world in general, and Americans in particular, seem consistently squeamish about eugenics, and any intelligent discussion on the subject is almost always subverted by emotional references to [Adolf] Hitler (May, 1985).

Not only did emotions get in the way of achieving a eugenical society, May claimed, but so did social, moral, and legal dictates. In the same letter to Hardin, May communicated her bewilderment of not being able to pursue sound family planning. “Years ago”, she continued:

I served on the board of the largest ob-gyn hospital between N.Y. and Chicago. Incalculable numbers of parents came there and begged [double underline] that their mentally defective children (many of whom were in late teens or early 20s) be sterilized. Pathetic though they were and tragic as the situation was, we had to turn them down because: No sterilization may take place without the informed consent of the patient; it is impossible to fully inform a mentally defective patient.

Certainly, May and Hardin lamented the practice of withholding sterilizations from those they believed needed them in an effort to control and contain the reproduction of what, for decades, had been called the unfit.

May as well as Hardin understood, however, that the public was not ready or willing to consider measures to protect the quality or quantity of the population, even though they agreed that it was “people’s ‘moral obligation’” to think about having children or not. (May, 1986). The conversation could be amplified, she said to Hardin, “if the media thought it warranted one of their ‘blitzes.’” “[T]hey could begin”, she suggested, “by highlighting genetically transmittable diseases like epilepsy or the tendency toward certain types of

cancer, thereby focusing attention on the subject of heredity before tackling a hot potato like intelligence... but we know they will not. No”, she continued, “ours is a society that sees keeping every heartbeat going, from babies with spinal bifida or Down’s (Downs’s?) Syndrome to the elderly in advanced senility, as the ultimate ‘good.’” We lack the courage, she implied, to deal with medical concerns strategically. She declared:

We are a nation of hand-wringers, preferring to agonize over and raise ever-increasing amounts of money to medicate these “tragedies” rather than obliterating them. And the rare voice that suggest that Man just possibly could be improved upon is quickly drowned out by the contrapuntal choirs that either evoke Hitler’s mischief or insist upon the divinity of the human soul.

Sadly, she suggested, emotional responses from the horrors of the Nazi genocide and from pro-life advocates, including the Catholic Church, prevented them from reviving and popularizing research into eugenics-based science.

Hardin agreed with May’s message of the challenges that emotion as well as eugenics played in discussions of population control and improving humankind. In advocating for planned demographic growth, Hardin argued in 1988, “emotional (or non-intellectual) issues [were] the principal motivators, with scientific understanding coming later.” (Hardin, 1988a). We should, he told her, appeal to people’s emotions, not their intellect, to be successful in their larger mission. Given the horrors of Nazi Germany that came to light in the 1940s and 1950s and their battles with pro-life, religious organizations and individuals, they understood the challenges they faced. “I think taking this [eugenics] up at this time would be premature.” Opposition, he said, would be “overpowering.” Instead, they would have to proceed indirectly with a two-pronged approach. First, Hardin said, they would need to consider “who gets pregnant and who doesn’t, discouraging teen-age pregnancies would, I believe, improve the quality of the generation produced.” And, second, he said, scale back efforts to reduce infant mortality, which, he believed, would “on the whole result, in a lower genetic quality.” “It’s not easy to know w[h]ere in the population ‘quality’ resides.” In other words, Hardin preferred that unborn babies with poor health outcomes receive minimal to no care, given the likelihood that they would come from lowly environmental and biological conditions. He believed the same about babies from unwed pregnant teenagers who,

he assumed, came from impoverished or degraded origins and had weak support systems.

A few months later, Hardin expounded further on his beliefs regarding human quality and evolution, as well as the dangers of encouraging “defectives to have children.” He argued that the result would be the development of a physically weak race.

When we save from death deaf and blind people, hemophiliacs, etc., to the extent that their defects are hereditary (which they always are in part, at least) we insure [sic] that evolution will take off in another direction. To put it bluntly, if we continue on our present tack, and couple that with encouragement to the defectives to have children, we will merely redirect evolution – toward the production of a race of people wholly dependent on medical support (Hardin, 1988b).

Hardin cautioned against pushing the “panic button”, given that they had more pressing issues at the moment. But, he warned against being fooled and “sweeping the problem under the rug”, saying that they had not “stopped evolution.”

CONCLUSION

By the 1990s and well into the early 2000s, before their deaths, Hardin and May continued to hold onto eugenics beliefs and neo-Malthusian theories about population and economic growth, even after the majority of stakeholders – the scientific community, philanthropic interests, and environmental organizations – questioned them at best and discounted them at worst. Those same interests, Hardin argued, were part of the challenge. Despite those setbacks, they clung to their ideas and ideologies about controlling and containing an idealized population, as popularized by their predecessors such as Frederick Osborn, Wickliffe Draper, and Margaret Sanger, well-known advocates of eugenics beliefs and practices. “Malthusian theory – which was basically right in 1798 and is just as right in 1995 – tells us that every increase in economic growth will be converted to a greater demand, either by higher economic standards, or by increased population size. We want – we desperately need – sages who see that the basic problem is to decrease economic growth and persuade us to like it [emphasis in the original].” Unfortunately, he told May, despite many claims, no one had done anything about it. “Think of the population institutions that cheerfully suppose they are doing something

about population problems: the World Bank, the Population Council, etc., etc., – and the publications that claim they are throwing light on these problems: Sierra, Audubon, Worldwatch, etc., etc. If they disappeared instantaneously tomorrow, would we notice the difference? No, he answered (Hardin, 1995).

Six years later, the calamities the world faced seemed even more gloomy, particularly to May. Congestion, overcrowding, and travel had become unbearable, making it difficult for May and Hardin to connect and exchange news and insights. “You say you are sorry our paths will not cross now”, Hardin said to May in 2001. “We are sorry, too. But the unfavorable changes that have taken place make travel more difficult for everyone (not merely for Jane [Hardin’s wife] and me). We hear tales of the arduous waits in airports[.]”. Yet, despite those challenges, Hardin remained cautiously upbeat about his circumstances. “And we still enjoy our life”, he told May. “We feel sorrier”, he said, “for the future of our grandchildren than for ourselves.” (Hardin, 2001). With those words, Hardin ended his epistolary relationship with May, for two years later, in 2003, he and his wife, Jane, long-time Hemlock Society members, took their own lives after Jane’s prolonged illness and Hardin’s declining health made life increasingly difficult. May followed suit. In 2005, she too took her own life after a reported battle with cancer.

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Article submitted on March 13, 2023.

Approved on September 11, 2023.

