

The Economic Eugenicism of John Maynard Keynes

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Scholars of John Maynard Keynes's life and contributions to economics have tended to approach his involvement in the early twentieth-century eugenics movement by either (1) historicizing it as a regrettable political curiosity with only minor connections to his larger system of economic thought or (2) positing an evolutionary turn in Keynes's thinking that led him to abandon his earlier neo-Malthusian principles in the late 1920s. In this article, we reexamine the role that eugenicist beliefs played in the formation of Keynesian macroeconomic theory, particularly as it concerned the problem of unemployment. Turning to a historical analysis of Keynes's writings and accompanying archival material, we present evidence of a continuity of eugenicist themes that links his early work on population control to his embrace of state-organized economic design at the mature phase of his career. Taken in sum, eugenics adds a complicated moral dimension to the genesis of Keynesian thought, though one that we also note is highly consistent with the technocratic inclinations of progressive era policymaking.

Introduction

On February 14, 1946, two months before his death, John Maynard Keynes offered his endorsement of “the most important, significant and, I would add, genuine branch of sociology which exists, namely eugenics.”¹ His remarks occurred at an award dinner of the British Eugenics Society (BES), where Keynes had recently served as vice president for seven years. The occasion was the presentation of a medal to Sir Alexander Carr-Saunders, director of the London School of Economics and a prominent eugenicist in his own right.

Keynes's enthusiasm for the future of eugenics was mistaken. Already faltering in 1946, the study of this peculiar "science" of planned heredity succumbed to ethical repudiation by later scholars. Yet Keynes's interest was far from unique. In the early twentieth century, enthusiasm for eugenics swept up a generation of academics—often those of a progressive political bent. Thomas C. Leonard has recently documented the grip of eugenic thinking upon American economists at the time, with figures such as Richard T. Ely, John R. Commons, Simon Patten, and Irving Fisher coming under scrutiny. As Leonard notes, hereditary planning was a natural extension of their "outsized confidence in their own wisdom and objectivity" and a feature of their affinity for technocratic, scientifically driven policy. Lawrence A. White echoes, noting that eugenics was a conscious feature of the claimed "scientific" assault on laissez-faire in the early part of the century. A combination of the eugenics movement's horrific twentieth-century outgrowths and academia's subsequent repudiation of the field has nonetheless made modern economists and others "reluctant to look too closely at their respective disciplines' formative-years enthusiasm for now discredited notions."² Keynes's reputation has directly benefitted from this reticence.

Keynes's involvement with eugenics is acknowledged by his primary biographers, though seldom explored in detail. The most common interpretation approaches it as a youthful flirtation, originating in his acknowledged intellectual debts to Thomas Malthus. In this telling, mature Keynes abandoned his early eugenic interests, or at least politely set them aside near the end of his life. Both elements are present in the brief assessment from Robert Skidelsky's three-volume biography. In Skidelsky's Keynes, eugenics becomes "a policy of which he approved as a young man, but which now struck him as grossly insensitive" in the wake of the Nazis and as something he allegedly repudiated in 1943 by his resignation from the Malthusian League.³ Curiously, Skidelsky makes no mention of the 1946 remark and seldom raises the eugenics issue outside a contrast with its more virulent practitioners.⁴

John Toye's book-length examination of Keynes's work on population theory brought two of his most eugenicist writing samples to the attention of scholars after their omission from Keynes's *Collected Writings*. Toye's historical groundwork is an invaluable starting point for examination of the role that eugenics played in Keynes's economic thought. Yet it does not answer that question so much as trace Keynes's closely related and evolving theories of demography and its effects.⁵ Though he tends to numerous details Skidelsky neglected, Toye offers a similar conclusion. He sees eugenics as a component of Keynes's early life anxieties over Malthusian population traps but not his later and more famous economic works. Using a deeply esoteric interpretation of selected texts, Toye suggests

that Keynes underwent a “recantation” of eugenic beliefs around 1930 as he confronted empirical evidence of stabilizing population rates in Great Britain.

We argue for a different interpretation, paralleling Leonard’s findings in the American economics profession: Keynes saw both the population’s size and hereditary composition as fundamentally prerequisite features of his macroeconomic system at its maturity. Both needed to be planned scientifically, and both persisted in his system after the alleged recantation. While Keynes modified assessments of the population issue in response to shifting demographic patterns, ultimately his eugenics were intended to rein in not only the famous Malthusian population devil but also maintain a so-called desirable population stock once its numbers stabilized. Though emphasized at different points of his career, both concerns were related to his social philosophy and beliefs about labor markets.

Strikingly, the pretense that one could know the optimum stock and quality of human population distinguished Keynes from Malthus. Whereas Malthus used later editions of his *Essay on the Principle of Population* to refine an institutional analysis of individuals’ incentives given demographic conditions, Keynes infused Malthusian doctrine with the tools of central planning. He was cognizant of his own addendum, writing in 1927 that his preferred policies “admit the utility of ... deliberate checks on conception about the use of which Malthus himself never committed himself.”⁶

By treating eugenics as a feature of Keynes’s economics, we link his early population writings with the shift of attention to other dimensions of Malthus’ preceding the *General Theory* and, in particular, his own BES Galton Lecture in 1937, including its assertion that the original population devil had been tamed. This link further resolves the affinity Keynes maintained for the eugenics movement in his final years. Like many American contemporaries, Keynes pursued eugenicist principles from an overconfidence in scientific design and a belief that population was a distinctly economic phenomenon. The economic disposition of his eugenicism was particularly pronounced around questions of labor, influencing his beliefs about unemployment and—at times—veering toward an aggressively negative and government-administered eugenics program that endorsed hereditary modifications to the composition of the workforce after numerical stability had been achieved.

Keynes and Population Eugenics

The association between economic and population planning is embodied in a historical discourse predating Malthus and carried by Keynes into the twentieth century. Population was a heritage of the classical economists, including Malthus,

Ricardo, Marx, Mill, and Jevons. These thinkers primarily contemplated “Terms of Trade.” Assuming constant or decreasing returns to land and increasing returns to industry, they worried that the relative price of food to industrial goods would inexorably rise. Thereby, with Terms of Trade, or relative prices, rising in the agricultural sector, the cost of subsistence would naturally “check” the human population.⁷

Terms of Trade was the first globally relevant matter of political economy theorized, pushing Mill and Marshall to imagine a fully globalized economy in population equilibrium. Because Keynes’s education and career steered him toward international political economy, his flair for statecraft naturally turned his attention to population.⁸ For example, in a 1912 lecture at Cambridge, he expressed sympathy with cosmopolitanism amid the Malthusian “struggle for the survival of races and classes.”⁹

Keynes’s teacher, Alfred Marshall, actively interested him in Malthusian debates. Marshall optimistically believed that emigration from overpopulated areas would ameliorate Malthusian checks and “benefit the world” by “this extension of the English race.”¹⁰ Keynes actively backed Marshall in an ongoing public debate with Karl Pearson, Professor of Eugenics at London University, over Nature vs. Nurture and the role of each in determining genetic quality. Marshall and Keynes took the nurture position.¹¹ Marshall’s population principles asserted English aristocratic superiority, reasoning about the “quality of the inhabitants of the world” to conclude that even if Earth be overpopulated, better never to reduce the “high quality” English. It made no sense to curtail the number of those who are “a long way above the average of the world.”¹²

Despite these radical positions, Toye writes that Keynes was “much more of a neo-Malthusian and a Social Darwinist than Marshall ever was.”¹³ Keynes spoke with sophistication by referring to early growth and fertility statistics. He dealt with counterarguments to Malthus as they were appearing; such as how increased income reduced population growth.¹⁴ He used his knowledge to explicitly adapt theories of Malthusian checks toward negative eugenics, arguing in 1912 that “[t]he particular difficulties therefore which Malthus foresaw no longer face us. In civilized countries the automatic increase in population does *not* put a perpetual barrier against the permanent improvement of the working class.” Although increased income lowered population growth, it made population growth biased toward persons of less-fit heredity in Keynes’s mind: “There is a marked process of selection at work in favor of the elements that we regard as least good [because] the poorest and least intelligent part of the population ... reproduces itself most rapidly.”¹⁵

Although he did not fear “standing shoulder-to-shoulder” over population, Keynes believed that population growth could impact a nation’s economy because only the upper classes would reduce their fertility in response to improving economic conditions. To him, this “new problem [was] hardly less serious.” Whereas Malthus argued that prosperity always increased population because of innate instincts, Keynes feared a scenario where lower-class births would outpace the genetically fit, reducing the average “quality” of the society and thus the “average level of prosperity.” He closed one lecture by saying that the old Malthusian check on overpopulation may still return after a “moment of turning.”¹⁶

Keynes was sidetracked by war finance between 1912 when he wrote his “Population” lecture and his next major neo-Malthusian publication, *Economic Consequences of the Peace*. After his official duties at the Paris Peace Conference ended with a nervous breakdown he rapidly composed *Economic Consequences* as a “violent and ruthless truth-telling” therapy on the war settlement.¹⁷ *Economic Consequences* was one of Keynes’s most important works because it launched him to global fame. The book resonated with the international public for its denunciations of national leaders and their imposition of an onerous reparations regime on the losing powers to finance the victors’ massive remaining war debts. The book also adapted Keynes’s theories of population to geopolitical considerations. In chapter 2, he argued that the period from 1870 to 1900 was characterized by population sustainability, with Europe as a whole achieving autarky in food production. According to Toye, the numbers showed him that 1900 was a turning point where the Malthusian “devil” of population-induced food price pressures may escape from its chains. The evidence was admittedly meager data about the rising price of American wheat.¹⁸

The Great War had disrupted Europe’s division of labor, transportation, and international commerce. Europe was poorer and Keynes expected the “Malthusian devil” to reappear in its wake. These beliefs were deeply woven into his attitudes about the Victorian Era. In contrast to that “progress” and “improvement of the race,” he expressed the sentiment that population was “cutting the cake,” and thereby contributing to “overwork,” “over-crowding,” and “under-feeding”—in other words, resource scarcity of many varieties.¹⁹

Keynes feared postwar capital would recover more slowly than population, causing the standard of living to fall. As he put it, “The war has disclosed the possibility of consumption to all and the vanity of abstinence to many. Thus the bluff is discovered; the laboring classes may be no longer willing to forego so largely.”²⁰ He returned to this theme with increasing alarm, noting that “distress may overturn the remnants of organization, and submerge civilization itself.” His solution was proactive design, although with only vaguely alluded policy

specifics: “This is the danger against which all our resources and courage and idealism must now co-operate.”²¹

Neo-Malthusianism and Eugenics

Keynes’s interests in population quickly developed an overt political character after *Economic Consequences* as he publicly joined the British campaign to liberalize birth control statutes. Birth control was a large and multifaceted movement devoted to removing laws against contraception as well as restrictions on the publication of related medical literature. Though they did not always align, the birth control movement included many eugenic planners—particularly those targeting contraception and sterilization programs at working-class communities. Keynes’s reputation brought him into the company of leading family planning campaigners, including the United States’ Margaret Sanger and Britain’s Marie Stopes. His impressions upon Sanger were particularly strong, and many years later she recalled with fondness his mastery of the “problems of money, population, and economics.”²²

A significant yet overlooked development in Keynes’s population interests took place in July 1922 at the Fifth International and Neo-Malthusian Birth Control Conference in London. He copresided over the conference by chairing its economic and statistical section. Speaking to the press at the time, Keynes proclaimed that “the late war ... has placed birth control before all nations as the most important economic question.”²³ One observer recorded his attempt to define overpopulation in economic terms: “A country or locality, he said, is overpopulated, as soon as the addition of one person causes a diminution of its well-being. If you would be better off in home or city or county with fewer people you are suffering from over-population.”²⁴ Keynes echoed these sentiments in a resolution he drafted for the conference. He praised birth control for enabling laborers “first to live decently and maintain and increase their efficiency on their present wages, and secondly, to increase wages by restricting the supply of fresh labor” on account of an “absence of undue competition.” The unanimously adopted statement indicated a preference for a population of “intelligent, efficient and willing people” to take the place of “unlimited supplies of cheap, inefficient, discontented labor.”²⁵

Similar statements of a distinctly economic character appear throughout Keynes’s writings from this period. One repeated theme is his attribution of population problems to the *laissez-faire* of nature, essentially positioning eugenic-infused policies as a correction to what he saw as a form of market failure. Keynes pointed to this intervention in a 1922 newspaper article, describing birth control

as “the endeavor by civilized man to assume conscious control in his own hands away from the blind instinct of mere predominant survival.”²⁶ Similar sentiments are seen in a public letter Keynes sent to Sanger for an October 1923 birth control conference in Chicago. To him, public attention on immigration signaled that population was becoming a problem. Americans would soon need to consider the “ideal population of their country” and the “quality of those who are bred up.” In true technocratic fashion, the letter heralded that taking “conscious control” of population “will be a great moment in the progress of civilization.”²⁷ “[I]f the young men entering on their working life continue to exceed in number the old men completing theirs,” Keynes wrote in another letter to the *Times* of London in 1923, “sooner or later knowledge, saving, industry, and skill may be outpaced, and the standard of life decline.” This suggested that “the problem of unemployment is already, in part, a problem of population.”²⁸

As the decade progressed, Keynes’s eugenic interests became a recurring feature of his more familiar campaign against the economics of *laissez-faire*. His writings and lectures from this period explicitly connected the two in mounting a case for more active state involvement in economic affairs. In a 1923 article for the *New Republic*, he noted that population control entailed a “proposal to modify the *laissez-faire* [*sic*] of Nature, and to bring the workings of a fundamental instinct under social control.” Aware of the “distaste” some would find in this observation, he contended it was the unavoidable “problem for our generation.”²⁹

Although calling himself a neo-Malthusian, Keynes’s break from Malthus and Marshall became increasingly apparent in his embrace of policy tools to address population concerns. Noting “interlock with economic issues,” he adapted the language of fiscal policy to population. “Birth Control touches on one side the liberties of women,” he wrote in 1925, “and on the other side the duty of the State to concern itself with the size of the population just as much as with the size of the army or the amount of the Budget.”³⁰ By the mid-1920s the prudence and emigration incentives Malthus prescribed were far outside Keynes’s paradigm.³¹

Another revealing example came in 1925 when Keynes traveled to Moscow as part of an international academic delegation to the Russian Academy of Sciences. He presented two formal lectures, both touching on population amidst other economic problems. In the more general of the two talks, he mentioned “matters, left hitherto to individuals or to chance, which must become in future the subject of deliberate State policy and centralized State control.” Among these were “the size and quality of the population.”³² The more specific lecture offered an astounding thesis to explain the economic woes of the Soviet Union. All but turning a tin ear to the Soviets’ destructive foray into centralized industrialization, Keynes suggested an entirely different cause: overpopulation. “The

War and the Revolution reduced the population,” he noted almost nonchalantly. This observation created an unsettling contrast, as he expressed great alarm in the failure of these events to arrest accelerating birth rates. “There is no greater danger than this to the economic future of Russia. There is no more important object of deliberate state policy than to secure a balanced budget of population.”³³

In Moscow, in most unguarded form, Keynes expressly joined population control to his economic planning theories. Even more, he proposed this example of the link between population and unemployment in an utterly bizarre commentary on an unfolding travesty of economic planning run amok. He remarked later that the Russia lecture was poorly received: “I should have remembered that Marx, criticizing Malthus, had held that over-population was purely the product of a capitalist society and could not occur under Socialism.”³⁴

Keynes often deployed guarded language when discussing specific policies, opting instead for vague references to the population’s “quality.” This wording nonetheless conveyed explicitly negative eugenic objectives, perhaps most evident in a June 1926 appearance at the University of Berlin. This lecture, which formed the basis for his influential essay “The End of Laissez-Faire,” called for a “national policy about what size of population . . . is expedient.” Such questions, he predicted, would soon direct attention “to the innate quality as well as to the mere numbers of its future members.” The tract repeated his central themes of determining a social optimum for population, whether increasing or decreasing, and imposing it through a finely tuned national policy.³⁵ The event spawned traction in German-language press, though comparatively little attention in the English-speaking world and—curiously—nearly complete neglect by Keynes’s biographers and historical interpreters.

From the German press coverage, many observers apparently received Keynes’s nod to negative eugenics as a primary feature of his argument. Most saw it as his attempt to address labor markets. In Germany, where a festering interwar unemployment crisis had given rise to anticapitalist movements both Left and Right, this bridge between population and economics stirred intense debate. One widely disseminated critique from a socialist-aligned paper linked Keynes’s prescription to an attempt to rescue capitalism from the Malthusian trap. “The regulation of the population, the control of births through the English professor’s imperial state, is the modernization of the study of the popish Malthus,” it noted, projecting that capitalism will soon “lose its lordship” to the problems of unemployment and hunger.³⁶

Almost by happenstance, University of Vienna economist Ludwig von Mises attended Keynes’s Berlin lecture. He penned a short but scathing response in a German-language journal a few months after the event. Mises attacked Keynes’s

underlying confidence in allegedly “scientific” social design. Such debates, he noted, were not new in Germany and their political fruits were similarly known. He discussed how Keynes’s “survival of the races” mentality fed public choice problems facing immigrant labor, in which workers in a local area want to keep out new entrants to the labor market. Mises implied that the negative side effects of reduced labor mobility give rise to problems that look like “overpopulation.”³⁷ What Keynes proposed to manage by national policy and “scientific” design had the propensity for an alarming human toll. “Certainly there were found among [Keynes’s] listeners some, who in the last few years were driven out of the land in which they had worked and lived”—the people of an “overpopulated Middle Europe” who could not migrate to “more thinly settled lands” due to immigration restrictions. As Mises continued, “the world today is sick precisely because,” for some time, it had been bearing the fruits of the repudiation of *laissez-faire*. These witnessed ills were not “accidental companions” but “necessary results” of Keynes’s argument.³⁸

The Politics of Birth Control

Keynes’s attempts to bring population to the forefront of policy in his writings and lectures paralleled his own turn to political activism. In the early 1920s he became heavily involved with two of Britain’s politically engaged population control organizations, the Malthusian League and Marie Stopes’ Society for Constructive Birth Control and Racial Progress (CBC). Both groups espoused elements of eugenic thinking, though they often diverged in particular policies and—importantly—strategies to obtain them. Toye pieces together the capacities in which Keynes served these organizations, which included financial support, signing circular letters, and writing letters of protest to newspapers who refused to publish the organizations’ announcements.³⁹

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OFFICIAL ORGAN—
Birth Control News.

Figure 1

CBC letterhead, ca. 1923, Stopes Papers, UCSB

Keynes's involvement in both groups visibly declined toward the end of the decade.⁴⁰ For Toye, this shift is consistent with a posited decline in Keynes's eugenic interests. As a simpler explanation, we note that Keynes likely tired of the unexpectedly fractious politics of the birth control movement. Outspoken personalities such as Stopes and Malthusian League president C. V. Drysdale spent most of the 1920s posturing for strategic positions as the cause's primary spokesperson, often drawing their intellectual supporters into the fray and irritating them in the process. The Malthusian League also entered a period of extended dormancy in 1927 after declaring victory over Britain's anticontraception policies, leaving little more for Keynes to do on their part.⁴¹ Keynes openly admitted he was not "in touch with the internal politics of the various Population groups" in a 1929 letter to Margaret Sanger. "[O]f those in this country," he continued, "I feel most in sympathy with the group connected with the Eugenic Society."⁴²

In the end, Keynes had little use for the internecine political battles of birth control politics. He reacted similarly in 1943 after Drysdale attempted to reactive the Malthusian League for his own political forays. While Skidelsky interprets Keynes's resignation from the long-dormant organization as a sign of further recantation, it was actually solicited from him by the British Eugenics Society where Keynes was also serving as a vice president. As Keynes informed the

secretary of the BES, he “had no idea [the Malthusian League] was still in existence.” “The whole thing” was “complete fudge”—“a piece of note-paper in the possession of Mr. Drysdale and one or two friends.”⁴³ It would be a mistake to read an abandonment of eugenics into Keynes’s souring of its political associations. Despite his parting with Stopes and late-life irritation with Drysdale, Keynes never abandoned the more intellectually inclined BES. After being term limited as vice president in 1944, he joined its council of directors and remained in that position until his death.

Recantation or Modification?

Most of Keynes’s early eugenic writings are characterized by an emphasis on issues of quantity, paralleling expected population growth. Britain’s demographic patterns began to stabilize in the late 1920s though, and with them Keynes’s diagnosis evolved. It warrants mention that Keynes never chained his theory to expanding populations alone. Rather, as he noted in Berlin, a eugenic prescription could be applied “whether [a population] larger or smaller than at present or the same, is most expedient.”⁴⁴ He did adapt his focus though to the witnessed demographic stabilization of Britain. One noted turning point appeared in his 1930 essay “Economic Possibilities for our Grandchildren,” which derived from a March 1928 lecture in Winchester.⁴⁵

In “Economic Possibilities,” Keynes began by chastising the “economic pessimism” of the age that had produced a “wildly mistaken interpretation” of unfolding events, premised on belief in a general stagnation of economic progress and slowing improvements compared to the Victorian boom.⁴⁶ In many ways, the passage appears as an about-face on the pessimism Keynes exhibited a decade prior in *Economic Consequences*, including a dismal outlook on humanity’s ability to recover the extraordinary growth of the previous century. Now Keynes predicted a correction where “the standard of life in progressive countries one hundred years hence will be between four and eight times as high as it is to-day.” Noting an observed increase in the standards of living for Britain and the United States, he made a concession that appeared to break from his prior concern with quantity: “from now on we need not expect so great an increase of population.”⁴⁷

Did this new evidence induce Keynes to abandon his preoccupation of the previous decade, taming the Malthusian population devil? Toye believes so, deriving this conclusion between the lines by juxtaposition of Keynes’s 1930 optimism against the trepidation in *Economic Consequences*. With this shift, Toye contends that “Economic Possibilities” contains “a complete but unacknowledged recantation of neo-Malthusian views.”⁴⁸ The evidence of the posited recantation

is less than watertight though, and more likely the essay reflects Keynes's attempt to navigate a population that he now believed to be in scientifically planned equilibrium due to the triumph of birth control and its more vaguely alluded negative eugenic parallels.

Keynes's reckoning with Britain's stabilizing population actually predates "Economic Possibilities," and abuts his turn toward the "quality" of the population at the Berlin lecture. He first evinced awareness of a shift in birth rates in his 1927 review of H. G. Wells's novel *The World of William Clissold*, itself a deeply eugenicist foray into didactic fiction. Noting that "the average age of a rapidly increasing population is much less than that of a stationary population," Keynes predicted the emergence of "stable conditions" in Britain and the United States where the elderly and middle-aged populations would be, respectively, 100 percent and 50 percent "more numerous than in the recent past." Though some elements of this pattern inculcated cautious optimism, Keynes expressed apprehension at "the appalling problem of the able-bodied 'retired,'" persons who value "money and security more, and creation and construction less" as they age.⁴⁹

The *Clissold* review provides a bridge between Keynes's lectures and "Economic Possibilities." He elaborated on the direct connection a few months later at a dinner event with Wells and Sanger in attendance. Held on the fiftieth anniversary of the celebrated Bradlaugh-Besant birth control trial of 1877, the dinner marked the achievement of contraceptive liberalization in Britain and a celebratory dissolution of the Malthusian League, excepting Drysdale's later revival attempts. Crediting the "powerful weapon of the preventive check" of birth control, Keynes shared his assessment that "the battle is now practically won—at least in this country." Within his lifetime, he predicted, the "population of this island will cease to increase and will probably diminish." While the League declared victory on this front, Keynes immediately alerted his audience to a new fear: "We are now faced with a greater problem, which will take centuries to solve. We have now to learn to use the weapon wisely and rightly. I believe that for the future the problem of population will emerge in the much greater problem of heredity and Eugenics."⁵⁰ Keynes framed the new challenge as one of man taking the "task and the duty of moulding his body and his soul to a pattern" away from nature and placing it under his own direction. A stricken line from the original draft stated the shift of focus more bluntly. With quantity now contained in Britain, "quality must become the preoccupation."⁵¹

"Economic Possibilities," it would appear, was not intended as a recantation of Keynes's earlier population theories but an assertion of their ability to tame the Malthusian devil with an intrusion on nature—on *laissez-faire*.⁵² With population stabilized, he turned next to coming "changes in other spheres," offering

fantastical predictions of an age when man is able to conquer and “rid ourselves of many of the pseudo-moral principles which have hag-ridden us for two hundred years.” The essay’s distant optimism of waxing profusely about an age when “the rest of us will no longer be under any obligation to applaud and encourage” the hoarders of wealth and certain “social customs and economic practices ... we now maintain at all costs” are discarded is in a sense its own call to execute a broad societal design.⁵³ Paralleling Wells’s *Clissold* in a sense, Keynes’s future society implied the achievement of the quality he so often spoke about.

Consistent with his longstanding beliefs, Keynes specifically qualified his hundred-year prediction with the caveat that it would hold “assuming no important increase in population.” He left no illusion that he meant to contain the Malthusian devil by human design, stating “our power to control population” is a precursor to “economic bliss,” as he put it.⁵⁴ Furthermore, the essay suggests that population planners should not be encumbered by political constraints so that experts may be “entrust[ed with] the direction of those matters which are properly the concern of science.” Technocratic pronouncement is both consistent with eugenics and quintessentially Keynesian in its own right. It echoes the idealistic society of properly intentioned planners he described in a 1944 letter to F. A. Hayek:

[W]hat we want is not no planning, or even less planning, indeed ... [we] almost certainly want more. But the planning should take place in a community in which as many people as possible, both leaders and followers, wholly share your moral position [from *The Road to Serfdom*]. Moderate planning will be safe if those carrying it out are rightly orientated in their own minds and hearts to the moral issue.⁵⁵

“Economic Possibilities” gives no reason to believe that this “power to control population” veered from the trajectory of the neo-Malthusian system that Keynes had promoted for decades.

The timing of Keynes’s other activities shortly before and after “Economic Possibilities” also works against the recantation argument. In 1929, he lent his name to an announcement for the World League for Sexual Reform’s London Congress. It featured him with notable figures such as Somerset Maugham and H. G. Wells, and announced an agenda replete with “scientific” planning of human sexuality and the principles of “race betterment by the application of the knowledge of eugenics.”⁵⁶ In 1931 Keynes assembled “Economic Possibilities,” the Berlin-derived “End of Laissez-Faire,” and another 1925 essay with overt eugenicist themes into *Essays in Persuasion*. These selections signaled continued support, as did Keynes’s ongoing interest in Malthusian theory.⁵⁷ To the extent

that one may detect a maturation in Keynes's population views after "Economic Possibilities," it is a shift in emphasis rather than principles.

In modifying his prognosis, Keynes increasingly saw himself as a continuation of the Malthusian tradition. He extolled the nineteenth-century birth control reformer Francis Place as a corrective to Malthus's own aversion to birth control, yet he still maintained that "Eugenics and ... the struggle for survival are latent in Malthus's essay."⁵⁸ Keynes deployed esoteric indulgences of his own to write eugenics into marginal notes on his copy of the first edition of Malthus's *Essay on the Principle of Population* that he often praised as a superior work to its revisions. He wrote "speaking of eugenics" adjacent to Malthus's obscure reference to the knight Sir Isaac Bickerstaff, a popular eighteenth-century satire on the Arthurian legend. The fictional Bickerstaff, described in a 1710 text as a man "low of stature, and of a very swarthy complexion, not unlike a Portuguese Jew," reportedly succeeded in lightening the skin of successive generations of offspring by selectively breeding them with the English.⁵⁹

In similarly cryptic fashion, Keynes strongly hinted at his own self-perceived similarities with Malthus in a 1933 biographical essay, stressing a Cambridge lineage and beleaguered reception in a world ill-disposed to the respective messages of each man. Keynes's students at Cambridge dubbed him "Jeremiah Malthus" on account of this recurring trait. Nor was the cultivated parallel lost on Joseph Schumpeter, who observed in his review of the biography: "But here [Malthus] seems to be getting rather more than full measure, some of it by way of a discussion of his anti-saving views, which reads like an *oratio pro domo* of his eminent biographer."⁶⁰ Keynes's shifting attentions likely reflected his own attempts to retrace Malthus's intellectual footsteps.

A final telling indicator of where population stood in Keynes's mature phase appears in his famous 1936 work, *The General Theory*. The book only touched lightly on the demographic issues that dominated his earlier writings. Keynes's attention famously shifted to the project of developing a functional theory of "effective demand," itself of Malthusian origin.⁶¹ He had little need to press his population arguments in light of Britain's stabilization. Still, he paused to note that a nation, while adopting his prescriptions, must also maintain "an equilibrium in the trend of population." With hints of the diagnosis found in his Soviet lectures of 1925, he similarly identified "the pressure of population and the competitive struggle for markets" as the primary economic causes of war.⁶² Keynes did not abandon his anxiety over the population devil so much as he came to see a pathway to its control. It lingered, and only successfully taming it opened the door for the famous Keynesian unemployment solutions.

Reading Keynes as Neo-Malthus

The lasting significance of Keynes's eugenicism to his economic thought is readily evident in his seldom-discussed 1937 Galton lecture, in which he offered extended commentary on emerging neo-Malthusian theories. Hosted by the BES, the lecture was a standing honor dating to 1914, usually bestowed on individuals who had made significant contributions to the study of evolution, heredity, and population. Previous honorees included Julian Huxley, F. C. S. Schiller, Ernest W. Barnes, Josiah Stamp, A. C. Pigou, Francis Darwin, and Alexander Carr-Saunders. Most had longstanding connections to the Society, though eugenics at the time encompassed diverse opinions. The honor came to Keynes at a time when his population writings were still a well-known feature of his reputation as an economist.

His lecture "Some Economic Consequences of a Declining Population" reflected England's ongoing demographic stabilization. His remarks were something of a postscript to the *General Theory*, consistent with the aforementioned "population equilibrium" precondition. Keynes actually stated that a decrease in population was one economic factor that he knew "more securely than [any other]." ⁶³ The economic consequences were potentially far-reaching. Keynes postulated that declining population implies falling demand for capital, as "business expectations being based much more on present than on prospective demand, an era of increasing population tends to promote optimism, since demand will in general tend to exceed, rather than fall short of, what was hoped for." In contrast, "in an era of declining population the opposite is true. Demand tends to be below what was expected, and a state of over-supply is less easily corrected." This implied that declining population guaranteed reduced capital accumulation without policy correction.

Toye depicts the 1937 lecture as a continuation of the posited recantation; however, this reading actually chafes with its text. Not only did Keynes still describe his ideas as neo-Malthusian in 1937, but his BES lecture suggests that he saw himself personally as something of a neo-Malthus, expositing that which he now considered to be two interlinked principles for times of population growth and times of demographic stabilization. When one devil was "chained up," the other "breaks loose." The names of the devils were population and unemployed resources.

Keynes's prescriptions were premised on guarding both devils. The second did not contradict or rescind the first, so much as it signaled its successful containment. This newfound state of population stability was by no means guaranteed. Population was a prerequisite, to be guarded even as his second Malthusian devil

of unemployment assumed preeminence. As Keynes explicitly stated, “I do not depart from the old Malthusian conclusion.” He simply sought to convey that, “if we are careless” after chaining up the first devil, it may “loose another still fiercer and more intractable.”⁶⁴

If Keynes had at all wavered from his prior positions, the BES did not notice. Sir Walter Layton, the editor of the *Economist* magazine and Keynes’s invited commenter, delivered a little-studied response in which he expanded on Keynes’s eugenic implications.⁶⁵ Accepting the argument, Layton asked that the Society turn its attention to the implications of stabilizing population on the racial stock. As he noted, “Scientific questions will have to be considered, such as preventing the propagation of the unfit.” In words that echo Keynes’s own earlier writings, Layton continued: “If we accept the proposition that quality not quantity is to be desired, the prospect of a declining population is not something to be feared.” Keynes’s thesis, he concluded, “is related to the essential principles of this Society.”⁶⁶

One remaining question concerns whether the taming of the Malthusian population devil had altered Keynes’s commitment to eugenic planning. He referenced a “certain shifting in my views” in a 1936 letter to Sanger, though not of the type that the recantation thesis posits. Observing that “we have now passed out of the phase of increasing population into that of declining population,” he suggested a shift in “emphasis on policy.” The new course he proposed entailed doing “much more with emphasis on eugenics and much less on restriction” of population growth.⁶⁷ It was the position he anticipated almost a decade earlier at the Malthusian League dinner.

The Galton Lecture of 1937 was Keynes’s last thoroughgoing foray into a topic that had occupied his attention and populated his writings since at least 1911.⁶⁸ He did not withdraw completely from the subject because the lecture marked his installation as an honorary vice president of the BES on a seven-year term, followed by his installation on the society’s governing council.⁶⁹

Not only did Keynes remain an active eugenicist until death, but he may have also increased his hope for the “discipline”—as shown in the 1946 opening address for Alexander Carr-Saunders’s Galton medal. He also restated his early view that “Darwin was first led to his theories by reading Malthus.”⁷⁰ Carr-Saunders’s address suggests he shared many of Keynes’s views on eugenics.⁷¹ He echoed the interpretation that eugenics was a branch of sociology, and therefore, “Only when we have an analysis of social structure and of the changes occurring in it, is our knowledge of genetics of use to us in relation to our broad interests.”⁷² Though the term *eugenics* was broad, placement among the social sciences on

the eve of his death was entirely consistent with the technocratic approach he took for his entire career.

Conclusion

Modern commentators might indulge elements of Keynes's eugenics on grounds that birth control commends a number of effects ranging from increased sexual enjoyment to women's economic empowerment. By highlighting and re-examining Keynes's population theories, we have not sought to diminish these accompanying causes. We only note that on the occasions where health and women's rights were mentioned by Keynes, the Malthusian devil and negative eugenics closely follow.⁷³

Born of British aristocracy, cunning, superbly educated, and intellectually relentless, John Maynard Keynes exerted an influence nearly unrivaled in the history of economics. However, the deeply troubling implications of his eugenic theories have been treated with polite neglect. Far from a compartmentalized side interest, eugenics deeply influenced some of his most enduring economic contributions. Eugenics precipitated one of Keynes's earliest counterarguments to *laissez-faire* and constituted a prerequisite equilibrium condition of its own sort for his macroeconomy, the absence of which would strip the entire Keynesian system of its functional ability to address unemployment and a host of other ills. What is shown to dominate his mind in these areas is an entirely broad belief in social engineering, expertise, and faith in political governance—including its extensions to the size and composition of society itself.

Notes

1. John Maynard Keynes and Alexander Carr-Saunders, “The Galton Lecture, 1946: Presentation of the Society’s Gold Medal,” *The Eugenics Review* 38, no. 1 (1946): 40, <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2986310/>.
2. Thomas C. Leonard, *Illiberal Reformers: Race, Eugenics, and American Economics in the Progressive Era* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 187, 190; Lawrence W. White, *The Clash of Economic Ideas: The Great Policy Debates and Experiments of the Last Hundred Years* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 24–25.
3. Robert Skidelsky, *John Maynard Keynes*, vol. 3: *Fighting for Freedom, 1937–1946* (New York: Viking Adult, 2001), 168.
4. Robert Skidelsky, *John Maynard Keynes*, vol. 1: *Hopes Betrayed, 1883–1920* (New York: Penguin Books, 1994), 23–26; Robert Skidelsky, *John Maynard Keynes*, vol. 2: *The Economist As Savior, 1920–1937* (New York: Penguin, 1994), 631–32.
5. John Toye, *Keynes on Population* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 10.
6. Ross B. Emmett, “Malthus with Institutions: A Comparative Analysis of Prudential Restraint,” *Social Science Research Network* (2013), http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2372211; John Maynard Keynes, “Malthus—In piam Memoriam,” July 26, 1927, John Maynard Keynes’s papers, King’s College, Cambridge (hereafter referenced as Keynes Papers) PS/3/113.
7. Toye, *Keynes on Population*, 16–23.
8. Davenport-Hines, *Universal Man*, 128–33.
9. JMK UA/6/9/24; Toye, *Keynes on Population*, 31.
10. Toye, *Keynes on Population*, 27.
11. Keynes Papers PP/45/316/4/162, 166, 169; Toye, *Keynes on Population*, 29.
12. Alfred Marshall, “The Pressure of Population,” in *Early Economic Writings, 1867–90* (New York: Springer, 1975), 390–93; Toye, *Keynes on Population*, 26.
13. Toye, *Keynes on Population*, 29.
14. Toye, *Keynes on Population*, 37–43.
15. Toye, *Keynes on Population*, 31.
16. Keynes Papers, UA/6/9/22–27; reprinted in Toye, *Keynes on Population*, 41–43; Keynes cited this position in an article by Lujo Brentano, claiming that “the North American Republic would, in view of the great fertility of the negro, become black in quite a short, predeterminable time” without European immigration. See Lujo

- Brentano, "The Doctrine of Malthus and the Increase of Population During the Last Decades," *The Economic Journal* (1910): 371–93.
17. Toye, *Keynes on Population*, 161.
 18. Toye, *Keynes on Population*, 162–63, table 2.
 19. John Maynard Keynes, *The Economic Consequences of the Peace* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Howe, 1920), 21.
 20. Keynes, *The Economic Consequences of the Peace*, 22.
 21. Keynes, *The Economic Consequences of the Peace*, 227.
 22. Margaret Sanger, *Autobiography* (Mileola, NY: Dover Publications, 2004), 355.
 23. "World War Breaks Down Antagonism to Birth Control," *El Paso Herald*, September 9, 1922.
 24. Annie G. Porritt, "The Sections at Work," *Birth Control Review* 6, no. 9 (September 1922): 172.
 25. Raymond Pierpoint, *Report of the Fifth International Neo-Malthusian and Birth Control Conference* (London: William Heinemann Medical Books Ltd., 1922), 95, https://ia600402.us.archive.org/9/items/reportoffifthint00inteuoft/reportoffifthint00inteuoft_bw.pdf.
 26. John Maynard Keynes, *Manchester Commercial Guardian*, August 22, 1922, quoted in Margaret Sanger, "Margaret Sanger to the Readers of The Review," *Birth Control Review* 6, no. 11 (November 1922): 217–18.
 27. "Greetings from Abroad," *Birth Control Review* 7, no. 12 (December 1923).
 28. John Maynard Keynes, "Finance and Investment, 1922–1923," in *The Collected Writings of John Maynard Keynes*, ed. Donald Moggridge, vol. 19 (London: Macmillan, 1971), 79.
 29. John Maynard Keynes, "Is Britain Overpopulated?" *The New Republic*, October 31, 1923.
 30. John Maynard Keynes, "Am I a Liberal?" reprinted in *Essays in Persuasion* (Edinburgh: R. & R. Clark, Ltd., 1931), 333. A nearly identical assessment was offered at a Cambridge lecture, where Keynes noted birth control "involved both the well-being of women and the duty of the State to concern itself with the size of the population, just as it did with the size of the army or the budget." See "Cambridge Liberals Discuss Economics," *Christian Science Monitor*, August 3, 1925. For the context of this lecture, including its adaptation of arguments from John R. Commons, see Charles J. Whalen, "John R. Commons and John Maynard Keynes on Economic

- History and Policy: The 1920s and Today,” *Journal of Economic Issues* 42, no. 1 (2008): 225–42.
31. He specifically disparaged Marshall’s confidence in emigration, saying, “As a continuing policy, however, emigration is a ruinous expedient for an old country, as is obvious when one considers that, if the males are shipped abroad, a corresponding number of females must be sent also, and that the cost per head of rearing and educating a child up to working age is a heavy charge for which the country will get no return of productivity if the youth then emigrated.” Keynes, “Is Britain Overpopulated?”
 32. John Maynard Keynes, “2nd Lecture in Moscow,” September 15, 1925, Keynes Papers RV/1/30.
 33. John Maynard Keynes, “The Economic Position of England,” September 14, 1925, <http://www.hetwebsite.net/het/texts/keynes/keynes1925moscow.htm>.
 34. John Maynard Keynes, *Essays in Biography* (New York: Horizon Press, 1951), 128.
 35. Keynes, *Essays in Persuasion*, 319.
 36. “Selbstsozialisierung der kapitalistischen Wirtschaft,” *New Yorker Volkzeitung*, July 22, 1926; see also Hans Heymann, “Einzelwirtschaft oder Kollektivwirtschaft,” *Berliner Tageblatt*, August 13, 1926.
 37. Ludwig von Mises, “Das Ende des Laissez-Faire, Ideen zur Verbindung von Privat und Gemeinwirtschaft,” *Zeitschrift für die gesamte Staatswissenschaft* 82 (1927): 190–91. Translated by Joseph Stromberg, Ludwig von Mises Institute (2004).
 38. Mises, “Das Ende des Laissez-Faire.”
 39. Mises, “Das Ende des Laissez-Faire,” 184.
 40. Documents from the Marie Stopes Papers at the University of California, Santa Barbara confirm Keynes’s public affiliation with the CBC between 1921 and 1937, appearing on its letterhead as an honorary vice president of the organization. Keynes’s papers at Kings College, Cambridge suggest he was inactive with the group after about 1930, and resigned in 1939 after being pressed by Stopes to renew his position. See Toye, *Keynes on Population*, 186.
 41. The Malthusian League entered into an extended period of dormancy in 1927, concluding it had achieved the main objectives of its founding during the 1877 Bradlaugh-Besant birth control trial. Keynes chaired the League’s final celebratory dinner event on July 26, 1927, shortly before it suspended operations. Keynes Papers, PS/3/107.
 42. Keynes to Sanger, January 24, 1929, Sanger Papers, Library of Congress (hereafter referenced as Sanger Papers), Reel 124–221A.

43. Blacker to Keynes, January 20, 1944; Keynes to Blacker, January 25, 1944; Keynes to Drysdale, January 25, 1944, Keynes Papers, L/44/1–3.
44. Keynes, *Essays in Persuasion*, 319.
45. Keynes's notes suggest he delivered at least three versions of the talk between February and October 1928. Keynes Papers, PS/4/29.
46. See Keynes, *Essays in Persuasion*, 358–75.
47. Keynes, *Essays in Persuasion*, 358–75.
48. Toye, *Keynes on Population*, 190.
49. John Maynard Keynes, "One of Wells' Worlds," *The New Republic*, February 2, 1927.
50. Keynes Papers, PS/3/109–114.
51. Keynes Papers, PS/3/109–114.
52. Keynes's juxtaposition of planning against nature is both a feature of his earlier population writings and a characteristic of progressive-economic approaches to eugenics found in the United States at the same time.
53. Keynes, *Essays in Persuasion*, 358–75.
54. Keynes, *Essays in Persuasion*, 358–75.
55. Keynes to F. A. Hayek, June 28, 1944, in *Collected Writings*, vol. 26, 385–88.
56. "World League for Sexual Reform: A London Congress," *Manchester Guardian*, August 26, 1929.
57. In 1935, Keynes organized a commemoration of the centennial of Malthus' death at Cambridge. His invitation list contained an assortment of overtly eugenicist academics, including Carr-Saunders and several figures involved with the BES. Keynes Papers, SS/1/188.
58. Keynes Papers, PS/3/109–114.
59. Keynes Papers, SS/1/40; Richard Steele and Joseph Addison, *The Tatler: Or, Lucubrations of Isaac Bickerstaff; Esq.*, vol. 2 (Harrison and Company, 1785), 148.
60. Joseph A. Schumpeter, "Reviews: Essays in Biography by J. M. Keynes," *The Economic Journal* 43, no. 172 (December 1933): 652–57; Skidelsky similarly observes that Keynes's *Essays in Biography* "tells us a lot about how Keynes saw himself." See Robert Skidelsky, "Introduction," in John Maynard Keynes, *The Essential Keynes* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2015), iv. The quotation is in reference to Keynes's biography of Marshall rather than Malthus.

61. “He drew inspiration from ... Malthus.... From the autumn of 1931 to the summer of 1935, Keynes worked on a new book of theory, initially entitled ‘The Monetary Theory of Production.’” See Skidelsky, “Introduction,” in Keynes, *The Essential Keynes*, ii. The literature on this latter Malthusian influence upon the *General Theory* is both well-developed and beyond the scope of our present inquiry.
62. John Maynard Keynes, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest, and Money* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1936), 381.
63. John Maynard Keynes, “Some Economic Consequences of a Declining Population,” *Eugenics Review* 29, no 1 (1937): 13–17.
64. Keynes, “Some Economic Consequences,” 13–17.
65. Keynes to Blocker, October 13, 1936, Keynes Papers, PS/6/219.
66. “Speeches at the Galton Dinner,” *Eugenics Review* 29, no. 1 (1937): 34–35.
67. Keynes to Sanger, June 23, 1936, Sanger Papers, Reel 15–1119.
68. Toye concludes that “[Keynes] continued to write on population matters intermittently throughout his career, up to and including his Galton Lecture in 1937, after which illness and then wartime duties supervened.” Toye, *Keynes on Population*, 190.
69. “Annual Meeting and Elections,” *Eugenics Review* 36, no. 2 (1944): 58–59.
70. “Annual Meeting and Elections,” 40.
71. Keynes was likely conscious of their similar pathways to eugenic theory, despite having different academic backgrounds. Keynes’s unpublished opening remarks from the 1937 Galton dinner recounted his own youthful obsession with Francis Galton’s books. See Keynes Papers, PS/6/223. Carr-Saunders provided Keynes with an intellectual autobiography prior to the 1946 dinner to assist in the preparation of his remarks. Carr-Saunders documented a parallel intellectual course as a young man, first finding Malthus by way of Darwin in school and later being drawn to Galton as a young man. See Keynes Papers, P5/7/519.
72. “Annual Meeting and Elections,” *Eugenics Review* 36, no. 2 (1944): 41.
73. By our account, these are limited to brief mentions in the Moscow lecture, the *Christian Science Monitor* report, and the derivative essay “Am I a Liberal?” all from 1925. In each case Keynes immediately linked birth control to his economic interest in population management.