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ARTICLE

Women's Suffrage, Political Economy, and the Transatlantic Birth Strike Movement, 1911–1920

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Abstract

The first two decades of the twentieth century saw the development of a meaningful transnational movement to employ birth strikes in the fight for women's rights. In an Anglo-American context, this movement was intimately tied to the women's suffrage campaign. It was led by a network of suffragists, Neo-Malthusians, and birth control campaigners who shared literary and personal ties which allowed their ideas to criss-cross the Atlantic between 1911 and 1920. Although the transatlantic birth strike was never implemented on a significant scale, explaining its almost total absence within existing historiography, this article uses a gendered intellectual history framework to piece together the ideas behind the movement which, the article argues, disrupt established understanding of Neo-Malthusianism and socialist-feminism within intellectual histories. Support for birth striking was predicated on faith in the power of working-class collective action, scrutiny of the economic exploitation of both productive and 'reproductive' workers, and a corresponding mistrust in the efficacy of state involvement with these issues. The birth strikers wove together strands from collectivist, individualist, socialist, and feminist thought, undermining traditional historiographical depictions of binaries between socialism and suffragism and collectivism and individualism in early twentieth-century political thought.

> A spectre haunts Europe – the spectre of the birth strike.[1]
>
> L. Quessel, 'Economics of the birth strike', 1917

On the eve of the Bolshevik Revolution, German journalist, Ludwig Quessel, warned of a 'spectre' haunting Europe so significant that it 'thrust' the traditional 'spectre of socialism' into 'the background'.[2] Quessel cautioned that

[1] Ludwig Quessel, 'Economics of the birth strike', in Eden Paul and Cedar Paul, eds., *Population and birth-control: a symposium* (New York, NY, 1917), p. 149.
[2] Ibid., p. 149.

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'birth strikes' – by which he meant 'deliberate' refusals to have children as an act of protest – were being carried out by workers across the world.[3] He predicted that this collective action would be so far-reaching and so powerful that it would cause 'capitalism' to 'succumb…once and for all'.[4] Although Quessel's claim that a mass of unnamed birth strikers would prove to be the most significant force in the early twentieth-century assault on capitalism was not borne out, he was no fantasist. Birth strikes as a means of redressing economic inequality were increasingly proposed and debated, if not actually enacted, by various radical groups in New York, London, Berlin, Paris, and Tokyo between the turn of the twentieth century and the 1920s.[5]

Meetings with birth strikes on the agenda could attract thousands of visitors during these decades and printed literature on the topic was read by tens of thousands.[6] A notable example, which may have directly influenced Quessel's predictions, is the pair of successive meetings on birth striking organized in Berlin in August 1913 by affiliates of the Social Democratic Party. Each of these were attended by over 5,000 people, with 'thousands' of other would-be attendees reportedly queuing outside the beer-hall doors.[7] Some of the most well-known radicals of the age weighed in on these discussions, with Russo-American anarchist, Emma Goldman, and American birth control pioneer, Margaret Sanger, advocating the tactic.[8] In Germany, where birth strike debates were especially numerous, revolutionary socialist, Rosa Luxemburg, passionately opposed the proposition.[9] Despite the high profile of some of the historical actors involved, the early twentieth-century birth strike movement has largely evaded scholarly interrogation. This lack of attention has especially applied to calls for birth striking in aid of female enfranchisement which predominantly existed in an Anglo-American context and which have remained almost entirely hidden from history.[10]

[3] Ibid., p. 150.

[4] Ibid., p. 152.

[5] Karen Offen, *Debating the woman question in the Third Republic, 1870–1920* (Cambridge, 2018), p. 255; Sujin Lee, 'Differing conceptions of "voluntary motherhood": Yamakawa Kikue's birth strike and Ishimoto Shizue's eugenic feminism', *US-Japan Women's Journal*, 52 (2017), pp. 3–22; Roderick Neuman, 'Working-class birth control in Wilhelmine Germany', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 20 (1978), pp. 408–28, at pp. 413–14.

[6] Alfred Bernstein, *Wie fördern wir den kulturellen Rückgang der Geburten?* (Berlin, 1913). English title 'How do we promote a culture of a declining birth rate?'. For details of the pamphlet's publication and sales, see D. Nelles, 'Anarchosyndikalismus und Sexualreformbewegung in der Weimarer Republik', written for the workshop *Free love and the labour movement at the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam* (6 Oct. 2000), p. 2.

[7] William J. Robinson, *Sexual problems of today* (New York, NY, 1921), p. 286.

[8] For Sanger's and Goldman's contributions, see the third section of this article.

[9] William J. Robinson, 'The birth strike', *International Socialist Review*, 14 (1914), pp. 404–6.

[10] Fleeting references to the British birth strike movement appear in Lucy Bland, *Banishing the beast: feminism, sex and morality* (London, 2001; orig. edn 1995), p. 247; and Ann Taylor Allen, *Feminism and motherhood in western Europe, 1890–1970* (Basingstoke, 2005), pp. 107–9. Slightly more extensive coverage of the American birth strike movement has come from Jill Richards, *The Fury Archives: female citizenship, human rights, and the international avant-gardes* (New York, NY, 2020), pp. 105–43. However, Richards does not explore birth striking as a suffrage tactic.

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In this article, I resurrect these birth strike debates to argue that the ideas of the women's suffrage movement transcended far beyond formal women's suffrage organizations and have important implications for intellectual historians of the wider transatlantic 'progressive moment'. The years between the 1870s and the beginning of the First World War have been characterized by the rise of statism and social democracy on both sides of the Atlantic, producing binary depictions of these decades as an 'age of collectivism' paving the way for the modern welfare state, and set in contrast to an earlier 'age of individualism'.[11] This dichotomous periodization has been critiqued since the mid-twentieth century, with the most influential challengers questioning whether collectivism and individualism ever functioned as neatly oppositional ideals in the works of supposedly 'representative' nineteenth-century thinkers, such as J. S. Mill.[12] However, an imagined contest between collectivism and individualism has also continued to 'haunt' historiography of the fin de siècle.[13] Building on existing critiques, this article argues that, while it may be meaningful to continue to understand the first decades of the twentieth century as part of an age of collectivism, this should not be characterized as a neat reaction against individualist thought. On the one hand, I demonstrate that collectivist ideas were so ubiquitous in the early twentieth-century Atlantic world that they encroached on some of progressivism's supposed countercultures. On the other hand, I argue that this encroachment often ultimately relied upon collectivist and individualist ideas being reconciled by a diverse group of independent thinkers. Previous historians of collectivism and individualism have pinned their analyses on early twentieth-century dictionary definitions of these terms, which described collectivism as a belief in concentrated state powers and prioritization of the common good over individual freedoms. Individualism was defined as opposition to these principles.[14] The testimonies of birth strike advocates demonstrate the limits of relying on these formal distinctions, illuminating a network of activists and writers who strongly prescribed that women should subjugate individual preferences to the needs of the collective when making reproductive decisions whilst also, to varying degrees, expressing scepticism of the role of the state in this process. Birth strike advocacy therefore highlights a strand of early

[11] A. V. Dicey, *Lectures on the relation between law and public opinion in England during the nineteenth century* (London, 1905).

[12] J. B. Brebner, 'Laissez-faire and state intervention in nineteenth-century Britain', *Journal of Economic History*, 8 (1948), pp. 59–73; Harold Perkin, 'Individualism versus collectivism in nineteenth-century Britain: a false antithesis', *Journal of British Studies*, 17 (1977), pp. 105–18; H. S. Jones, 'John Stuart Mill as moralist', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 53 (1992) pp. 287–308.

[13] For quoted text, see Jose Harris, *Private lives, public spirit: a social history of Britain, 1870–1914* (Oxford, 1993), p. 11. See also William Howard Greenleaf, *The British political tradition: the rise of collectivism* (3 vols., London and New York, NY, 1983–7), I, pp. 27–8; Eric Daniels, 'A brief history of individualism in American thought', in Donelson Forsyth and Crystal Hoyt, eds., *For the greater good of all: perspectives on individualism, society and leadership* (New York, NY, 2011), pp. 75–6; and Charles McCann, *Order and control in American socio-economic thought: social scientists and progressive era reform* (New York, NY, 2012), pp. 1, 5.

[14] Greenleaf, *The British political tradition*, pp. 15–17, 20–3; Stefan Collini, *Liberalism and sociology: L. T. Hobhouse and political argument in England, 1880–1914* (Cambridge, 2009), p. 16.

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twentieth-century feminist thought which did not emphasize a language of 'choice,' but which encouraged women to view sexual and reproductive decisions as collective matters.

This world of birth striking correspondingly demonstrates the reach of economic ideas with socialist potential into surprising corners of British and American political thought. Well-known public disagreements between socialist and suffragette leaders, in which each deemed the others' movement a distraction, once produced a historiographical misconception that these two early twentieth-century campaigns had an overwhelmingly antagonistic relationship.[15] There is now an ongoing historiographical tradition – which has been invigorated over the past two years – that seeks to look beyond fraught relationships between socialist and suffragist leaders and to uncover diverse examples of class politics and women's suffragism being brought together.[16] This article picks up this mantel by further interrogating the complexity and reach of socialist-suffragism as an idea and, more specifically, by exploring how strikes manifested within suffragette thought during the period of 'great labour unrest' (1911–14).[17] While Emmeline Pankhurst has been remembered for her vocal critiques of the industrial action which broke out concurrently with her campaign, I demonstrate that suffragette foot soldiers repeatedly borrowed a language of strikes from the labour movement and reimagined those strikes through a gendered lens.[18]

Methodologically, this article is a transnational history of ideas. As the Anglo-American birth strike was never implemented on a meaningful scale, this article is not a history of political tactics but is instead concerned with the intellectual impulses which inspired interest in birth striking. Seeking to broaden who we include as subjects in intellectual history, I argue for the importance of unimplemented tactics as a potential subject matter in the history of ideas. Tactical debates enabled activists to engage in broader reflective discussions about the role of the state, class relations, and economic principles. In particular, this article considers the contributions of a dozen key activists who formed a loosely connected transatlantic network of independent intellectuals: the Drysdale family who founded the British Malthusian League; socialist-feminist, Stella Browne, who had British, Canadian, and American

[15] Martin Pugh, *The march of the women: a revisionist analysis of the campaign for women's suffrage, 1866–1914* (Oxford, 2002), pp. 171–233. This historiographical landscape has been discussed in Ellen Carol DuBois, *Woman suffrage and women's rights* (New York, NY, 1998), pp. 252–3; Laura Mayhall, 'Household and market in suffragette discourse, 1903–1914', *The European Legacy*, 6 (2001), pp. 189–99, at p. 190.

[16] Sandra Stanley Holton, 'Silk dresses and lavender kid gloves: the wayward career of Jessie Craigen, working suffragist', *Women's History Review*, 5 (1996), pp. 129–50; DuBois, *Woman suffrage and women's rights*, pp. 177–202, 252–75; Laura Schwartz, *Feminism and the servant problem: class and domestic labour in the women's suffrage movement* (Cambridge, 2019); Lyndsey Jenkins, 'Annie Kenney and the politics of class in the Women's Social and Political Union', *Twentieth Century British History*, 30 (2019), pp. 477–503.

[17] These dates refer to the British context but a similar period of labour unrest took place in the US from 1912 to 1916.

[18] Ralph Darlington, 'The pre-First World War British women's suffrage revolt and labour unrest: never the twain shall meet?', *Labor History*, 61 (2020), pp. 466–85, at pp. 470–1.

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links; the aforementioned American birth control pioneer, Margaret Sanger; members of the British suffrage faction, the Women's Freedom League, and members of the American Congressional Union for Woman Suffrage. These historical actors were familiar with (at least some of) each others' work. Some crossed oceans to meet in person and others were close collaborators. This article mines their views on birth striking – recorded in articles, essays, letters to each other, and the minutes of birth control and suffrage meetings – to reassess three key intellectual contexts. The first two sections are primarily concerned with British writers and activists. The sections explore the presence of birth strike debates within the British Neo-Malthusian and mainstream women's suffrage movements in turn, establishing that birth strike advocacy often involved a complex reconciliation of collectivist and individualist themes. The third section foregrounds American activists, analysing birth strike advocacy within the intersection between the suffrage and eugenic movements. Across these three sections, I construct a methodology rarely used within the transnational history of economic thought, in which the study of economic theory brings us to the bedroom doors of ordinary women.

I

The key activists in this article were responding to a transnational phenomenon of falling birth-rates in industrializing countries. This trend was the result of an increase in late marriages, attempted family planning within marriage, and professional or social opportunities beyond marriage for women, especially among the middle and upper classes.[19] Birth-rate decline provoked shock and concern in many public commentators worried about their nation's imperial ambitions or vulnerability to invasion. However, for members of the British Malthusian League, founded by the Drysdale family in 1877, these demographic changes were to be encouraged. The Drysdales and their followers were disciples of the late eighteenth-century political economist Thomas Malthus (1766–1834), sharing his analysis of the 'population question'. Malthus had theorized that periods of national economic prosperity inevitably led to unsustainable population increases and, ultimately, periods of poverty, famine, and 'misery'. Malthus's solution to this 'trap' was to encourage a culture of late marriages.[20] Neo-Malthusians alternatively employed Malthus's economic principles to promote the use of contraception.[21]

C. R. Drysdale helmed the British Malthusian League alongside his romantic partner, fellow physician and women's rights campaigner, Dr Alice Vickery. The pair never married. Their first son, Charles Vickery (C. V.) Drysdale, took over leadership of the League and its publication, *The Malthusian*, from 1907. He was aided by his wife, teacher, and suffragette,

[19] Joseph and Olive Banks, *Feminism and family planning in Victorian England* (Liverpool, 1964); J. David Hacker, 'Rethinking the "early" decline of marital fertility in the United States', *Demography*, 40 (2003), pp. 605–20.

[20] Thomas Malthus, *An essay on the principle of population*, III (6th edn, London, 1826), p. 6.

[21] Richard Soloway, *Birth control and the population question* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1982), pp. xii–xix.

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Bessie Drysdale.[22] The League lacked subscribers and had to be sustained via the Drysdale family funds but maintained a high public profile due to their controversial writings and numerous links with other reform movements across the globe.[23] The Drysdale family were the nucleus of the transnational activist networks examined in this article. While the Malthusian League shared campaigning spaces with Fabians and trade unionists, Neo-Malthusians advanced a theory of social change which was discordant with dominant progressive era thought in significant ways.[24] Social liberals and democratic socialists were united in advocating, at least limited, state-orchestrated economic redistribution to address poverty in overcrowded urban centres. In contrast, Neo-Malthusians believed that population control, not state-sponsored redistribution, was the fundamental answer to endemic poverty.

Intellectual historians have subsequently interpreted co-operation between the Malthusian League and other social reform groups as the product of pragmatism. In the most detailed study on the relationship between Neo-Malthusianism and socialism to date, Richard Soloway claimed that Neo-Malthusians looked to socialist activists as 'logical co-partners' in promoting working-class education but, beyond this, saw state socialism as a 'menace'.[25] Soloway strongly interpreted these disagreements as part of wider tensions between collectivist and individualist worldviews at the turn of the twentieth century.[26] He maintained that C. R. Drysdale advocated 'self-help' and 'individualistic resolutions to the nation's problems', in turn vehemently opposing 'collectivist solutions to individual problems'.[27] Upholding traditional characterizations of fin de siècle intellectual culture, Soloway claimed that both Drysdale men were 'at odds with' the 'prevailing trends of late-Victorian and Edwardian social thought', rendering them more reflective of an earlier 'age of economic liberalism and self-help'.[28] Claire Debenham more recently replicated this depiction of Neo-Malthusianism as an anti-socialist, self-help movement, claiming that Neo-Malthusians attracted 'hostility from some parts of the labour movement' because they were seen to imply that 'the poor were responsible for their own misery'. She added that the Drysdales were, in turn, 'virulently anti-socialist'.[28] Gareth Stedman Jones has demonstrated the longer tradition of socialist opposition to Malthusian thought, dating back to the mid-nineteenth century, maintaining that Marx

[22] Miriam Benn, *The predicaments of love* (London, 1992).

[23] Angus McLaren, 'Reproduction and revolution: Paul Robin and neo-Malthusianism in France', in Brian Dolan, ed., *Malthus, medicine and morality: Malthusianism after 1798* (Atlanta, GA, 2000), p. 167.

[24] The discordant relationship between nineteenth-century Malthusianism and social reform movements was well explored in the *Historical Journal* issue on Malthusian moments. Gareth Stedman Jones, 'Malthus, nineteenth-century socialism and Marx', *Historical Journal*, 63 (2020), pp. 91–106; E. A. Wrigley and R. Smith, 'Malthus and the Poor Law', *Historical Journal*, 63 (2020), pp. 33–62.

[25] Soloway, *Birth control and the population question*, pp. 86–9.

[26] Ibid., p. 70

[27] Ibid., pp. 77, 80.

[28] Clare Debenham, *Birth control and the rights of woman: post-suffrage feminism in the early twentieth century* (London, 2014), pp. 110–11.

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and Engels critiqued Malthus for treating poverty as a 'crime' to be 'punished'.[29]

The advocation of birth striking by the Drysdales and some of their associates complicates this dominant narrative of socialist and Malthusian tensions, especially the characterization of Neo-Malthusianism as essentially a pro-self-help campaign, positioned in opposition to dominant progressive thought. Although the Drysdales opposed state interference, through birth striking they demonstrated sustained support for collectivist activism, as we shall see, and expressed allegiance with some aspects of a socialist analysis of economic exploitation. The Drysdale family's advocation of birth striking therefore indicates the power and dominance collectivist ideas enjoyed at the beginning of the twentieth century, even infiltrating the rhetoric of a self-identified 'laissez-faire' Malthusian. At the same time, this birth strike discourse also illustrates how collectivist and individualist ideas could be reconciled as part of this context, further undermining the idea that this 'age of collectivism' was neatly defined against earlier individualist impulses. Contrary to Soloway's claim that the Drysdales doubted 'that the ideological gap between individualism and collectivism could be bridged', their birth strike advocacy indicates a sustained interest in closing that exact gap.[30]

The Drysdales were inspired in their birth strike activism by various international socialist influences. Their first engagement with the idea of a politicized birth strike can be linked to a socialist utopian novel from across the Atlantic, *The strike of a sex* by American novelist, George Noyes Miller. The novel was first published in 1890, two years before French feminist, Marie Huot, gave the public lecture sometimes dubbed the instigator of European birth strike debates.[31] *The strike of a sex* depicted the women of a fictional small American town striking from sex, procreation, and domestic duties until they were granted a series of social, political, and economic reforms. Combining socialist, feminist, and Malthusian inspirations, the women of the novel were described by Miller as drawing from both 'Malthus' *Essay on population*' and the example of the London dock strike of 1889.[32] Although the events explored by Miller were fictional, a similar collectivist vision of population control was later advocated by the leaders of the Malthusian movement itself in Britain. This was not a coincidence. The British Malthusian League facilitated the publication of *The strike of a sex* in England in 1891.[33] In 1894, Miller made a trip to London, although it is unclear whether or not he met with any British Neo-Malthusians in person.[34] Regardless, *The strike of a sex* continued to be referenced within the pages of *The Malthusian* over the course of two decades and the younger generation of Drysdales combined Malthusian

[29] Stedman Jones, 'Malthus, nineteenth-century socialism and Marx', p. 101.

[30] Soloway, *Birth control and the population question*, p. 85.

[31] Offen, *Debating the woman question*, p. 255.

[32] George Noyes Miller, *The strike of a sex* (London, 1891), pp. 16, 40.

[33] W. H. Reynolds, 'The strike of a sex', *The Malthusian* (Feb. 1891), p. 10, and untitled editorial, *The Malthusian* (Sept. 1906), p. 71.

[34] George Noyes Miller, *After the sex struck or Zugassent's discovery* (Boston, MA, 1895).

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and socialist ideas in ways which echoed Miller when advocating their own birth strikes.[35]

Mirroring trends within the German socialist birth strike movement, C. V. Drysdale's most serious interest in birth striking manifested in the years immediately prior to the First World War and was maintained during the war years. Drysdale's reports on the wider global birth strike movement within *The Malthusian* are especially illuminating for understanding how he imagined birth strikes functioning: he saw them as operating similarly to industrial strikes, being based on a communal agreement and lasting for a prescribed period of time. Drysdale predicted that a mass birth strike lasting just one or two years would likely achieve its demands.[36] Diverging from the traditional Malthusian interest in individual family planning, Drysdale conjured the image of a mass movement of women subjugating their individual preferences and refusing to have children for shared political ends. Borrowing from the language of the labour movement, Drysdale praised the writings of a German socialist doctor who proposed that female workers could protest being viewed as 'factory food' via 'a general birth strike'.[37]

Drysdale differed from his German counterparts, however, in that he emphasized the potential for using birth striking to achieve female enfranchisement as well as economic reform. Writing in 1911 for the feminist avant-garde journal, *The Freewoman*, which had a relatively small readership but notorious reputation, Drysdale made a strong case for the birth strike movement. He predicted that suffragists might find quick success if they would 'calmly refuse to be mothers until the State recognised them as citizens'.[38] Demonstrating empathy for working-class concerns, he expressed hope that, if won via this tactic, women's suffrage would simultaneously 'bring about an improvement of economic conditions', 'strike at the root of poverty', and 'raise wages'.'[39] Drysdale emphasized his interest in economic justice in another treatise on birth striking for the Men's League for Women's Suffrage in 1914. He maintained that 'the working classes are eagerly anxious for a new message of hope on the economic side' and accused liberal suffragist leaders of 'treachery' for neglecting these issues.[40] Drysdale's solution, once again, was collective action. He suggested using birth strikes as a means of ushering in enfranchisement while also directly affecting the relationship between workers and employers.[41] Reappropriating markedly socialist language through a gendered lens, he asserted that just as working 'men base their claim to citizenship upon their production of wealth', women could correspondingly 'base their claim' for citizenship on 'the production of the future

[35] Untitled editorial, *The Malthusian* (Sept. 1906), p. 71.

[36] *Daily Herald*, reprinted in 'Jottings from the press', *The Malthusian* (Apr. 1914), p. 32.

[37] Editorial, 'Another welcome sign of progress', *The Malthusian* (Mar. 1918), p. 19.

[38] C. V. Drysdale, 'The freewoman and the birth rate II', *The Freewoman* (21 Dec. 1911), p. 89.

[39] Ibid., p. 89.

[40] C. V. Drysdale, 'The neglected side of the women's emancipation movement', *The Men's League for Women's Suffrage Monthly Paper* (July 1914), p. 250.

[41] Ibid., p. 251.

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supply of producers'.[42] Here, Drysdale's analysis bore a striking resemblance to Marx's concept of 'reproductive labour'.[43] It is important to note that Drysdale did not, by any means, deride the entire enterprise of profit-making. Yet by advocating a form of collective action which would force factory owners to increase wages, he *was* implicitly accepting that the financial compensation labourers received under existing conditions did not reflect the real 'value' of their labour. Mild critiques of poverty wages were present within Malthus's own writings, especially within later editions of his *Essay on population.*[44] However, by suggesting that low wages should be challenged through mass political protest, rather than via a gradual evolution in the reduction of the supply of workers, Drysdale indicated a much more normative understanding of the relationship between workers and capital-owners than his predecessor had done.

It is certainly the case, as previous historians of Neo-Malthusianism have emphasized, that C.V. Drysdale was strongly derisive of socialist support for state-sponsored economic redistribution. In contrast to his father, who was willing to entertain some redistributive policies, the younger Drysdale actively described himself as a 'Laissez-Faire Malthusian' and heavily defended the 'old liberal' support for limited government.[45] He opposed measures such as free school meals, subsidized healthcare, and state pensions out of a purist Malthusian belief that they would only encourage procreation on unsustainable levels. While Drysdale may have, therefore, objected to the common early twentieth-century socialist *solution* of state-administered economic redistribution, through his interest in birth striking he nevertheless intellectually aligned himself with some socialist *analysis* of economic power dynamics. Ultimately, Drysdale claimed to want to address economic inequality but thought that collectives of workers had to negotiate directly with the capitalist class, rather than with the state, to render their pursuit of economic justice effective in the long term.

It therefore seems that C. V. Drysdale did not just share campaigning spaces with socialists but shared support for some theories of political economy with them as well. Drysdale's interest in women's suffrage encouraged him to maintain this complex approach to collectivist ideas, which in turn challenges the depiction of the British women's suffrage movement as a hostile environment for socialist thought. Drysdale sought to separate out state-sponsored political rewards from state-sponsored financial rewards, with the state recognizing motherhood via female enfranchisement and bosses simultaneously remunerating workers with increased wages. He suggested that both of these moves towards political and economic equality could be achieved via a 'strike'. Traditional characterizations of early twentieth-century social thought depict a conflict between those who believed that social problems were the responsibility of the state and those who believed they were the responsibility of the

[42] Ibid., p. 250.
[43] Karl Marx, *Capital: volume one* (London, 1867), ch. 6.
[44] Malthus, *Essay on population*, p. 28.
[45] Soloway, *Birth control and the population question*, p. 77.

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individual.[46] Drysdale's support for birth striking presents a third option: a belief that social problems were the responsibility of collectives of individuals. These collectives, Drysdale implied, could control industry without, themselves, being controlled by the state. Sydney Webb, the influential Fabian, observed in 1908 that 'the opening of the twentieth century finds us all to the dismay of the old fashioned individualist, "thinking in communities"'.[47] Yet Drysdale's interest in birth striking suggests that some writers associated with 'old fashioned' individualism were prepared to 'think in communities' as well. Birth strike advocation therefore complicates the reading of Neo-Malthusianism as at odds with the collectivist mood of the day.[48] Drysdale's writings suggest that while he was heavily sceptical of the efficacy of expanded state powers, he nevertheless professed to be interested in working-class self-*emancipation* at least as much as self-*help*. It is of course still possible that Drysdale's personal motivation for advocating birth striking was primarily part of his pragmatic coalition building. However, his writings nevertheless indicate that he lived through an age where he could not avoid engaging with collectivist thought. Drysdale's birth strike advocacy demonstrates the possibility of cogently reconciling individualist suspicions of state interference with some of the collectivist impulses of progressive politics.

II

The theories of economic exploitation which underpinned many calls for birth strikes suggest that early twentieth-century socialist-feminists were more appraised of women's economic exploitation at home than is often maintained within histories of feminist thought. Socialist leaders of the Second International (1889–1916) have repeatedly been remembered for their relegation of women's rights issues.[49] Although it is now well known that an active international socialist-suffragist movement did concurrently try to establish links between socialism and feminism, predominantly in continental Europe and the United States, key dimensions of these feminists' attempts at reconciliation have been deprioritized within historiography. For example, socialist-suffragism is currently thought to have been most focused on women's access to traditionally masculine forms of waged labour and inclusion within wider working-class identity.[50] Ellen Carol Dubois has characterized socialist-

[46] Dicey, *Lectures on the relation between law and public opinion*, pp. 260, 273–5; Daniels, 'A brief history of individualism', p. 78.

[47] S. Webb, 'Twentieth century politics', in *The basis and policy of socialism* (London, 1908), p. 78. Quoted in Sandra Den Otter, '"Thinking in communities": late nineteenth-century liberals, idealists and the retrieval of community', *Parliamentary History*, 16 (1997), pp. 67–84.

[48] Soloway, *Birth control and the population question*, pp. 79, 85; Debenham, *Birth control and the rights of woman*, pp. 110–11.

[49] Barbara Taylor, *Eve and the new Jerusalem: socialism and feminism in the nineteenth century* (London, 1983), p. 1; DuBois, *Woman suffrage and women's rights*, pp. 259–61.

[50] DuBois, *Woman suffrage and women's rights*, p. 261; Mari Jo Buhle, *Women and American socialism, 1870–1920* (Urbana, IL, 1981), ch. 2; June Hannam and Karen Hunt, *Socialist women: Britain, 1880s–1920s* (London, 2002), p. 67.

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suffragism as resting 'on the recognition that the increasingly public character of women's labor had to be matched with an equally public political role'.[51] Likewise, as David Howell and Ben Jackson have suggested, when early twentieth-century socialist groups did concern themselves with women's unpaid labour at home, these debates often lost their feminist bite, focusing on reducing poverty without incorporating a corresponding gender analysis.[52] This intellectual landscape is thought to have significantly changed later in the twentieth century with increasing socialist-feminist scrutiny of women's unpaid labour at home and the development of robust comparisons between 'productive' and 'reproductive' labour which remain widely attributed to the Marxist-feminists of the 1970s and 1980s.[53] However, records on birth striking from lesser-known affiliates of the socialist-suffrage movement highlight an early twentieth-century feminist attempt to apply a socialist economic analysis to the work women performed at home. Alongside Neo-Malthusians, these suffrage campaigners closely tied their economic analysis to claims for citizenship via an ideology which combined support for collective action among working women with a more individualist suspicion of the effectiveness of state intervention.

Birth strikes were frequently debated among the activists of one of the leading British suffrage groups, the Women's Freedom League (WFL). The group was founded in 1907 by socialist dissidents from the Women's Social and Political Union who wanted to retain links with the Independent Labour Party. The WFL maintained a socialist leadership but attracted a relatively broad church of activists interested in combining the campaign for suffrage with wider visions of women's social and economic freedom.[54] Bessie Drysdale was an active member and was imprisoned in Holloway in 1907 alongside the group's president, Charlotte Despard, a vocal socialist and Fenian.[55] The WFL considered birth striking on multiple occasions, from at least 1911 onwards; a discursive development which Bessie and C. V. Drysdale personally encouraged. An article in *The Malthusian* reports that C. V. Drysdale gave a talk to the WFL on birth striking in aid of enfranchisement in February 1914.[56] At the WFL's annual conference the following month, one fatigued member claimed that birth strike propositions were 'always coming up' at WFL meetings.[57]

[51] DuBois, *Woman suffrage and women's rights*, p. 261. See also Meredith Tax, *The rising of the women: feminist solidarity and class conflict, 1880–1917* (New York, NY, 1980), pp. 247–9.

[52] David Howell, *MacDonald's party: Labour identities and crisis, 1922–1931* (Oxford, 2002), pp. 356–69; Ben Jackson, *Equality and the British left: a study in progressive political thought, 1900–1964* (Manchester, 2007), pp. 70–2.

[53] Lise Vogel, *Marxism and the oppression of women: towards a unitary theory* (Rutgers, NJ, 1983); K. Weeks, *The problem with work: feminism, Marxism, antiwork politics and postwork imaginaries* (Durham, NC, 2011), pp. 113–50.

[54] C. Eustance, 'Meanings of militancy: the ideas and practice of political resistance in the Women's Freedom League, 1907–1914', in M. Joannou and J. Purvis, eds., *The women's suffrage movement: new feminist perspectives* (Manchester, 1998), pp. 51–64.

[55] 'The imprisonment of women suffragists', *The Malthusian* (Mar. 1907), p. 22.

[56] 'Reports of meetings', *The Malthusian* (Mar. 1914), p. 21.

[57] Women's Freedom League: minutes of their ninth annual conference, 1914. The Women's Library, London School of Economics (LSE), Add. MS 2WFL/2/07, p. 70.

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To this unnamed member's likely chagrin, the 1914 conference hosted a further lively and detailed debate on birth striking which provides insight into how the group politicized women's economic exploitation at home. Nina Boyle, the head of the organization's 'Militant department', proposed that a 'threat' be made to the prime minister 'that should women's suffrage be denied beyond a certain date, a campaign to assist working women to limit the birth rate be commenced'.[58] In response, WFL delegate Margaret Huntsman professed to have 'no doubt' that 'if we put' the suggested birth strike 'to the working classes, many will be very glad indeed to know what the majority of women do not know at present'. She continued: 'I have tried it a little in my own district, and I am amazed how eagerly' working-class women 'take to the knowledge and are ready to limit their families'.[59] While many prominent British socialists deemed the birth control movement a worrying diversion from revolutionary endeavours, WFL testimony emphasizes the extent to which ordinary working-class women did not necessarily share this perspective.[60] It is important to note that the WFL records do not amplify the voices of ordinary working-class women directly but they do provide an indication of the potential reach of socialist-suffragist ideas beyond the centre of the organized suffrage or socialist movements.

The experiences of the working-class women referred to in the WFL minutes, in turn, point to regulation of fertility as a transnational 'contact zone' in the early twentieth century. While the working-class women whom the WFL leadership were engaging with may have been at odds with the socialist leaders of their national movement, it is possible to trace an indirect line of influence between these women and internationally renowned socialist birth control pioneers in the US and Germany. Insights from socialist theorists across the world were injected into the debates of the WFL in London via the Drysdales who were highly aware of wider global birth strike debates via their transnational literary community.[61] If Huntsman's claims from the conference are to be believed, the WFL's birth strike advocations prompted ordinary working-class women in Britain to consider making changes to the most intimate realms of their lives. This source therefore suggests a cohort of ordinary people who, possibly unknown to them, lived transboundary lives.

The WFL minutes provide more direct evidence of the political and economic views of the organization's committee members themselves, indicating interest in theories of political economy predicated on the work women performed at home. Miss Murray, the representative for the WFL's Scottish Scattered District, agreed with Huntsman that birth striking was a tactic which could instil fear of economic decline in members of parliament. Taking an example from across the Atlantic, she claimed that it was common knowledge that the American economy would have collapsed a decade

[58] Ibid., p. 61.

[59] Ibid., pp. 62–3.

[60] Soloway, *Birth control and the population question*, pp. 84–5.

[61] *Daily Herald* as reprinted in 'Jottings from the press', *The Malthusian* (Apr. 1914), p. 32; editorial, 'Another welcome sign of progress', *The Malthusian* (Mar. 1918).

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previously 'if it were not for her alien immigration'. She asked, 'What would be said of Mr Asquith if, in this country, he allowed the limitation of child-birth?' Murray concluded that she thought birth striking was, therefore, 'an excellent' idea.[62] The birth strike motion was, however, ultimately voted down due to worries regarding its practical application.[63]

The 1914 conference fused the birth strike debates with a parallel discussion on state-sponsored economic remuneration for wives and mothers, further indicating the WFL's willingness to platform diverse ideas with socialist-feminist potential. At the start of the first morning session, Nina Boyle, who proposed the birth strike motion, also critiqued 'the injustice of married women having no legal claim' to a 'proportion of their husband's wages'.[64] Fellow birth strike enthusiast, Mrs Huntsman, concurred: 'we are continually talking about women representing the house; but it is the only service in this country which is considered worth nothing at all'.[65] The WFL's local representative for Gravesend opined on this topic at some length:

> Mothers ought to be recognised by the State; they perform a national service...Personally I am a mother myself, and I think I ought to be recognised as such if I give up a profession or trade in order to take up the duties or responsibilities of motherhood...My grievance is that the best profession is not recognised as a profession at all by the State.[66]

Gravesend's proposal bore a resemblance to the 'endowment of motherhood' movement which began seeking remuneration for mothers in the 1910s and gained momentum during the period of post-war and post-suffrage feminism in the 1920s. As Laura Schwartz has noted, these campaigns created possibilities for a socialist-feminist interpretation of economic exploitation. Schwartz wrote that 'in many ways, the demand for endowment of motherhood was the closest that "first wave" feminism came to insisting that domestic labour be treated on an equal basis with "productive" work'.[67] Analysing the WFL's interest in endowment alongside their interest in birth striking points to new connections between female enfranchisement and socialist-feminist endeavours to collapse the distinction between productive and reproductive labour.

Campaigners for the endowment of motherhood did not always elucidate on how they might persuade the state to remunerate women at home. An intervention from WFL member Miss Murray provides us with a potential answer to this question via her support for birth striking. Murray asserted that the 'great point' of implementing a 'strike' of childbearing to achieve the vote would be 'that nobody knows how much we [women] do'. Implicitly, therefore, if the

[62] LSE, Add. MS 2WFL/2/07, p. 66.
[63] Ibid., pp. 70–1.
[64] Ibid., p. 9.
[65] Ibid., p. 22.
[66] Ibid., pp. 22–3.
[67] Schwartz, *Feminism and the servant problem*, p. 133.

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vote were won as a concession to the birth strike movement, rather than by any other tactic, the state would be ineluctably conceding their reliance on women's labour as mothers. Suggesting she felt she was speaking on behalf of a wider cohort of women, Murray added: 'that feeling is in the air'.[68] Murray's interest in birth striking as a means of inspiring public recognition of women's work possibly suggests that she did not share the common Edwardian reformist assumption that the extension of the vote to a wider cohort of citizens would inevitably result in collectivist policies. It is plausible that Murray was sceptical that the state could be relied upon to recognize the unpaid work of its female citizens without the added threat of the birth strike to force this outcome. While there is no evidence of Murray opposing state intervention on ideological grounds, as the Drysdales did, birth striking proved attractive to those who questioned whether the state would readily serve as an effective ally in regulating the private sphere. C. V. Drysdale, unsurprisingly, expressed similar sentiments to Murray the same year in his article for the Men's League. He proposed that if enfranchisement were achieved as the specific result of a birth strike, it would 'do what nothing else can do' in 'securing' women a 'higher' social 'status'. Drysdale suggested that working-class suffragists listen to working men who claimed that the vote, by itself, had not empowered them to raise wages. To achieve a more transformative form of enfranchisement, Drysdale urged women to cease fighting 'the battle of their emancipation merely as imitators of men' and, instead, organize a birth strike, thereby embracing the 'powers which are inherent in them as women'.[69]

Drysdale and Murray reflected a wider trend in feminist rhetoric where, from the late nineteenth century, suffrage campaigners increasingly articulated their claims for citizenship in gendered terms. Diverging from straightforward arguments for equal rights, many suffrage campaigners claimed that women should be enfranchised because their experiences as mothers would allow them to have a nurturing effect on the public sphere. Suffrage historians have repeatedly interpreted this use of gendered language as a concession to establishment opinion and 'a move towards expediency'.[70] However, birth strike advocacy alternatively illustrates how and why some suffrage campaigners might have sincerely hoped that their enfranchisement would be delivered as a reward for the previously unrecognized social and economic value of mothering. Laura Mayhall has associated gendered arguments for enfranchisement with the liberal suffragist tradition, arguing that gendered rhetoric stemmed from a belief that votes for women would 'feminize democracy' and 'enable an already good system to become better'.[71] Looking to the testimony of birth strike advocates alternatively suggests that gendered arguments

[68] *The Vote* indicates there were two 'Miss Murrays' active in the organization at this time: Eunice Murray and Stella Murray, both writers. LSE, Add. MS 2WFL/2/07, p. 3.

[69] Drysdale, 'The neglected side of the women's emancipation movement', p. 250.

[70] Aileen Kraditor, *The ideas of the woman suffrage movement, 1890–1920* (New York, NY, 1981), pp. 44–6; Rebecca DeWolf, *Gendered citizenship: the original conflict over the Equal Rights Amendment, 1920–1963* (Lincoln, NB, 2021), pp. 44–7.

[71] Mayhall, 'Household and market in suffragette discourse', p. 190.

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for enfranchisement existed beyond the liberal suffragist tradition and could also stem from a contrasting fear that the extension of democratic rights would prove to be a necessary but, ultimately, insufficient tool in the fight for women's wider economic justice.

Birth strike propositions in aid of enfranchisement were not confined to the minutes of suffrage meetings but attracted attention from other parts of the labour movement. To note one example, an anonymous writer, using the nom de plume 'Sledgehammer', proposed a birth strike in the popular labour movement paper, *The Daily Herald*, in 1913. Sledgehammer suggested that suffrage supporters get 'a baby strike into their heads' to 'get a hunger strike out of them!'[72] They pithily described the philosophy behind the birth strike as: 'Votes for women or no men for votes!'[73] In their more serious analysis, Sledgehammer conveyed that the purpose of the proposed strike was economic as much as political, prescribing that working-class suffragettes 'refuse to continue the endless chains of humanity' until 'economic circumstances' were rendered more equal. They considered these women to be exploited at home in a classically socialist sense, describing working-class mothers as 'wage-slaves' in that they were the 'producers' of 'little wage-slaves'.[74] Although this article supports Schwartz's claim that the endowment of motherhood campaign was one of the furthest steps taken by 'first wave' feminists towards collapsing the distinction between 'productive' and 'reproductive' labour, I also suggest that the reach of this endeavour has been underestimated. As 'Sledgehammer' and the attendees of the WFL's 1914 conference collectively demonstrate, campaigns for motherhood endowment existed as part of a wider movement which sought recognition for women's economic contributions as mothers and which employed the language of productivity in doing so.

III

In the United States, consideration of birth striking was similarly maintained just prior to, and during, the First World War via transatlantic links between birth control campaigners. These networks shine a light on the dynamics of influence between the British and American suffrage campaigns. Transnational suffrage historians have debated whether the more radical elements of the US suffrage movement were directly imported by British suffragettes or whether the twentieth-century suffrage campaigns in both nations had been mutually weaned on a shared intellectual milieu of late nineteenth-century Anglo-American radicalism.[75] The transatlantic birth strike movement supports the latter picture of mutually influential activist and literary networks. Subverting a simple narrative of British influence on early twentieth-

[72] 'Sledgehammer', 'Progeny and militancy', *Daily Herald*, 17 July 1913, p. 1.

[73] Ibid., p. 1.

[74] Ibid., p. 1.

[75] Sarah Adickes, 'Sisters not demons: the influence of British suffragists on the American suffrage movement', *Women's History Review*, 11 (2002), pp. 675–90; Patricia Greenwood Harrison, *Connecting links: the British and American women's suffrage movements, 1900–1914* (Westport, CT, 2000), pp. xv–xvi.

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century US feminism, if either nation is to be credited with originating the idea of birth striking for female enfranchisement it would be the US with George Noyes Miller's *The strike of a sex.* Turning to differences between the two movements, in a US context eugenicists played a particularly prominent role in birth strike advocation. While the Drysdales moved in eugenic circles and expressed eugenic beliefs, they did not, for the most part, couch their birth strike arguments in these terms.[76] By far the clearest articulation of potential links between birth striking for enfranchisement and eugenic thought came from American activists or activists who spent significant time in the United States. This can perhaps be explained by the fact that eugenic legislation was more widespread in the US than in Britain in the early twentieth century, making the possible eugenic implications of birth striking harder to ignore for American activists.[77] Interrogating the records of US birth strike advocates, therefore, further emphasizes the picture of intellectual overlap between progressivism and its supposed counter-cultural ideologies.

The records of the 'Hearings before the Committee on Woman Suffrage' at the United States Senate in 1916 suggest that an interest in birth striking was present within the American suffrage movement, to the extent that it even reached the ears of US legislators. Several days into the hearing, Mrs A. J. George, an anti-suffragist and executive secretary with the National Committee *Opposed* to Woman Suffrage, claimed that a 'young woman' representing the American Congressional Union for Woman Suffrage had attended the hearing 'the other day' and 'advised women to go upon a birth strike until women are enfranchised'.[78] George also accused the wider American suffrage movement of advocating 'home strikes', by which she presumably meant a strike of childrearing and unpaid domestic work.[79]

As in Britain, interest in birth striking among American suffragists was seemingly founded upon concern with economic inequality, as is indicated by the testimony of the likely subject of George's accusation: Mrs Dorothy Mead. Representing the Congressional Union in Ohio, Mead had addressed the Senate committee one day prior to George. If Mead had, indeed, advocated birth striking, she seems to have been motivated by personal experiences of poverty in large families. Mead told the committee that in her rural Ohio community 'our little country churchyards are filled with the bodies of children under the age of five'.[80] Demonstrating a critique of the efficacy of state-orchestrated redistributive justice, she accused the committee of remaining unaware that mortality rates were highest among rural, rather than urban, children manifesting 'when the women of my vicinity appeal to the State board of health' and 'are told' the state has 'no statistics on the subject and have

[76] Jane Carey, 'The racial imperatives of sex: birth control and eugenics in Britain, the United States and Australia in the interwar years', *Women's History Review*, 21 (2012), pp. 733–52.

[77] Lucy Delap, *The feminist avant-garde: transatlantic encounters of the early twentieth century* (Cambridge, 2007), p. 159.

[78] 'Hearings before the Committee on Woman Suffrage' (Government Printing Office, 1916), p. 66.

[79] Ibid., p. 66.

[80] Ibid., p. 54

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never been interested' in it.[81] If Mead was the inspiration for George's accusation and had proposed a birth strike to the Senate she, like some members of the WFL, plausibly envisaged collective political action as a more effective path to economic justice than state intervention, once again illuminating the complex ways collectivist and individualist ideas could co-exist in the theories of birth strike activists. There is no material evidence of Mead proposing a birth strike on the occasion referenced by George. However, given the stigma of combining sex and suffrage in the United States, there is a significant chance these advocations were not widely publicized or recorded.

The most detailed and illuminating source on the imagined power of suffragist birth strikes came from a woman who did not uncomplicatedly champion the tactic. 'Women and birth control' by Stella Browne was published within the same 1917 edited collection which hosted Ludwig Quessel's article on the economics of the birth strike. Browne was a British–Canadian socialist, suffragist, and eugenicist who was active in the birth control movements of both Britain and the United States.[82] She was also close personal friends with the Drysdale family.[83] Browne's perspective on birth striking was, however, predicated on a contrasting approach to state intervention to that of C. V. Drysdale. Browne contemplated birth striking but concluded that she was sceptical of the tactic after wrestling with the question of how to balance her support for collectivist economics and her belief in individual sexual freedom. Although she was heavily in favour of significant state redistribution of wealth, Browne was concerned that achieving redistribution via birth striking would undermine her choice-based feminist convictions when it came to the domestic sphere, writing that 'the maternal relation' was 'peculiar and unique' because 'it is more deeply instinctive and more intensely personal than any other' social relation.[84] Despite her critiques of birth striking, Browne devoted significant attention to exploring the reasons why such a strike would be an effective way for women to enhance their social and economic status. She predicted that a birth strike could be used to achieve a series of economic and political rights including housing reform, state-funded education, a guaranteed right to food, and universal adult suffrage.[85]

Browne borrowed language directly from socialist theories of exploitation when outlining how birth striking might lead to these various reforms. She claimed that 'We are threatened with a more mercilessly systematic exploitation of both women's industry and their reproductive fertility than has ever before been attempted.'[86] Here, Browne provided further evidence of an early twentieth-century attempt to collapse distinctions between the exploitation of producers and the exploitation of 'reproducers', most commonly

[81] Ibid., p. 54.

[82] Lesley Hall, *The life and times of Stella Browne: feminist and free spirit* (London, 2011).

[83] Patricia Coates, *Margaret Sanger and the origin of the birth control movement, 1910–1930: the concept of women's sexual autonomy* (Lewiston, NY, 2008), p. 111.

[84] Stella Browne, 'Women and birth-control', in Paul and Paul, eds., *Population and birth-control*, p. 252.

[85] Ibid., pp. 248–51.

[86] Ibid., p. 247.

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attributed to 1980s Marxist feminism. In her biographical study, Sheila Rowbotham claimed that Browne 'did not pursue the connection between control over procreation and control over production'.[87] Yet exploring Browne's interest in birth striking in detail challenges this assumption. Developing her theme of exploitation, Browne critiqued the state for trying to lay claim to 'women's bodies as instruments of propagation'.[88] Browne's use of the word 'propagation' potentially betrays her well-recorded eugenicist beliefs, indicating a complex entanglement of political economic theories at work. In this context, 'propagation' – usually meaning the breeding of plants and animals – possibly implied allegiance with the idea that women be recognized for the economic value they provided, not just in raising children, but in selecting mates.

Traditionally, eugenics has been associated with the progressive era's far-right counter-cultural movement and cast as out of place among the era's socialist, socially liberal and feminist impulses. The supposedly oppositional relationship between eugenics and dominant progressive-era thought has been challenged by intellectual historians since the 1980s and many of the connections between feminist and eugenic projects are now well documented.[89] However, other feminist historians have resisted these challenges, continuing to 'defend' key feminist thinkers from accusations of eugenic tendencies and its modern association with fascism, racism, and class prejudice, implying that feminists and eugenicists were unlikely political bedfellows.[90] As Jane Carey has posited, 'the propensity to elide the eugenic motivations of prominent female birth controllers possibly reflects the fact that the implications are difficult to contemplate'.[91] The birth strike movement forces feminist historians to further confront and understand Anglo-American feminism's eugenic past. Stella Browne's exploration of birth striking presents an argument for female enfranchisement predicated on women's eugenic potential, indicating how eugenic ideas could be not just compatible with, but deeply coupled with early twentieth-century feminist thinking. To a certain extent, figures such as Browne underline the anachronism underpinning many attempts to obscure the relationship between feminism and eugenics. Heavily undermining the traditional idea that eugenics was contemporaneously considered incompatible with progressive era values, Browne described the Eugenics Education Society as containing 'many most open-minded and

[87] Sheila Rowbotham, *A new world for women: Stella Browne, socialist feminist* (London, 1977), p. 17.

[88] Browne, 'Women and birth-control', p. 256.

[89] Michael Freeden and Greta Jones debated the relationship between eugenics and progressivism across a series of articles: Freeden, 'Eugenics and progressive thought: a study in ideological affinity', *Historical Journal*, 22 (1979), pp. 645–71; Jones, 'Eugenics and social policy between the wars', *Historical Journal*, 25 (1982), pp. 717–28; Freeden, 'Eugenics and ideology', *Historical Journal*, 4 (1982), pp. 959–92.

[90] These debates are identified in Carey, 'The racial imperatives of sex'; and Shannon Walsh, *Eugenics and physical culture performance in the progressive era* (Providence, RI, 2020), pp. 8–9. See also Alexander Sanger, 'Eugenics, race, and Margaret Sanger revisited: reproductive freedom for all?', *Hypatia*, 22 (2007), pp. 210–17.

[91] Carey, 'The racial imperatives of sex', p. 735.

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truly progressive individuals'. Browne can be understood as part of a specific school of so-called 'moral eugenicists' who believed that potential parents should be selected for their moral character rather than their race or class group. She critiqued others in the Eugenics Education Society for supporting a form of eugenics 'inspired by class-bias' and derided the Society's 'peculiar use of the terms "fit" and "unfit"'.[92] It seems Browne was intrigued by birth striking (to the extent that she was) as a means of encouraging deeper thought about the social and economic impact of procreation in a way which might seem liberatory for the working classes and in contrast to the paternalistic attempts at social reform she detected within her eugenic circles. Nevertheless, Browne's admission that she was willing to campaign alongside advocates of class- and race-based eugenics forces feminist historians to further confront the fact that some feminist pioneers shared close intellectual and physical spaces with those attempting to strongly reinforce race and class hierarchies.

In the US context, birth strike theories began to reach a wider cohort of women in the last two years of the suffrage campaign, between 1918 and 1920. It was in these years that the high-profile birth control pioneer, Margaret Sanger, expanded upon her support for the movement. Sanger's political affiliations are widely debated by historians, with her known socialism and eugenic sympathies coming under scrutiny.[93] In her early activist days in New York, Sanger had joined the Socialist party. However, her public relationship with socialism became more strained after the First World War as she increasingly tried to form coalitions with a broad church of activists.[94] Sanger's birth strike propositions nevertheless illustrate that she continued to be influenced by the labour movement and was incensed by economic exploitation. In November 1918, she made reference to the same German treatise on birth striking which C. V. Drysdale had found encouraging. Sanger praised the German activists proposing a birth strike against economic conditions which rendered workers 'factory food'. Sanger and Drysdale were, by this point, close personal friends and had conferred on the subject of birth striking.[95] The Drysdale family were among the first people Sanger sought out when she was exiled in England in 1914 for violating federal obscenity legislation in the US. She began a romantic relationship with the Drysdales' close acquaintance, sexologist Havelock Ellis, and the friendship group, which also included Stella Browne, kept in regular contact as confidants and colleagues.[95]

In January 1920, Sanger once again proposed a birth strike, indicating her sustained interest in ideas with socialist potential. Less optimistically than Drysdale's hope of a one-year strike, Sanger suggested that a strike lasting 'five years' would unite women of varying economic circumstances.[96]

[92] Browne, 'Women and birth-control', p. 251.

[93] Carey, 'The racial imperatives of sex', p. 735; Ellen Chesler, *Woman of valor: Margaret Sanger and the birth control movement in America* (New York, NY, 1992).

[94] Chesler, *Woman of valor*, p. 16; and Coates, *Margaret Sanger*, pp. 53–4.

[95] Coates, *Margaret Sanger*, p. 111.

[96] M. Sanger, 'Large families and the steel strike', *Birth Control Review* (Jan. 1920), p. 11.

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Sanger's vision of a birth strike enduring for a prearranged length of time emphasizes the sense that she and Drysdale formed their birth strike theories in tandem. Collapsing distinctions between productive and reproductive work, in a language which also mirrored Drysdale's own, Sanger made direct reference to the steel strikes in Pennsylvania of the same year. She maintained that the worker 'exploitation' at the heart of these industrial strikes was intimately connected to the unchecked 'reproduction' of a 'future crop of wage slaves'.[97] Sanger asserted that capitalists were only able to exploit workers because 'the principle of limitation' at the heart of all industrial action had not yet been applied to the production of human life.

Sanger self-published these ideas in two articles in *The Birth Control Review*, a paper she also edited. This paper was mainly circulated among a minority of radical thinkers and its distribution was limited due to the enduring power of the Comstock Laws which prohibited sending contraceptive information via the US postal service. However, Sanger's friend and fellow radical, Emma Goldman, attempted to rally support for a birth strike verbally in New York City, with Sanger's encouragement.[98] This allowed birth strike propositions to reach wider audiences due to Goldman's connections to working-class immigrant communities and ability to translate calls for birth strikes into Yiddish.[99] Goldman wrote to Sanger that 'Not one of my lectures brings out such a crowd as the one on the birth strike.'[101] Goldman's dissemination of these ideas outside the organized women's movement indicates the reach of transnational socialist-suffragist thought beyond well-known individuals and organizations. On the streets of New York, as on the streets of London, ordinary women potentially considered changing their sexual habits because of gendered economic theories formed on the world stage.

Understanding the many transnational links which facilitated birth strike debates is significant given that transnational economic history has come under repeated criticisms for being overly masculine in both content and methodology. Susan Zimmermann has critiqued the subdiscipline for marginalizing the 'important theme' of 'women's unpaid labour'.[100] Other scholars have accused transnational economic history of broader androcentrism, claiming that, while women may have been included in microanalyses of workers, the study of the transnational spread of abstract economic ideas has continued to resist the inclusion of female historical subjects or engagement with gendered and feminist lenses of analysis.[101] Clare Midgley et al. suggest that

[97] Ibid., p. 11.

[98] Goldman to Sanger, 26 May 1914, *Emma Goldman Papers* (accessed online May 2020).

[99] 'Free love is moral says Emma Goldman', *Evening Public Ledger* (29 Apr. 1915), p. 3.

[100] Susan Zimmermann, 'The international labour organization, transnational women's networks, and the question of unpaid work in the interwar world', in Clare Midgley, Alison Twells, and Julie Carlier, eds., *Women in transnational history: connecting the local and the global* (Abingdon, 2016), p. 33.

[101] Saskia Sassen, 'Towards a feminist analytics of the global economy', in Sassen, ed., *Globalization and its discontents* (London and New York, NY, 1998), p. 82; Carla Freeman, 'Is local: global as feminine: masculine? Rethinking the gender of globalization', *Signs*, 26 (2001), pp. 1007–37.

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constructing a feminist transnational history might involve moving away from economic history to foreground social and cultural transnational ties.[102] Analysing birth strike discourse prompts a defence of transnational economic history, demonstrating one of many possibilities for constructing a transnational history of economic and feminist thought simultaneously.

IV

The years before and during the First World War produced meaningful interest in the idea of birth striking for women's rights. In the Anglo-American context specifically, these debates were intimately infused with demands for women's suffrage. Although the strikes were never implemented on a significant scale, studying the ideas behind birth strike advocation illuminates the unendingly complex relationship between collectivist and individualist thought in the early twentieth-century Atlantic world. Resurrecting the debates surrounding the strikes therefore illustrates the utility of incorporating unimplemented tactics into the history of ideas. Birth strike advocacy demonstrates that collectivist ideas were so ubiquitous that they entered the rhetoric of Neo-Malthusians and eugenicists, representatives of two of the progressive era's supposed counter-cultural ideologies. At the same time, birth strike debates provide an example of how early twentieth-century collectivist impulses could be married with an individualist suspicion of state intervention which was traditionally associated with an earlier age.

Interest in birth striking was cultivated via transatlantic activist networks centred around the Drysdale family, who led the British Malthusian League, and their literary and personal ties to both the British and American suffrage movements. C. V. Drysdale's sustained advocation of birth striking heavily complicates the prevailing interpretation of Neo-Malthusianism as simply an anti-collectivist, 'self-help' ideology. It suggests that, via his interest in women's suffragism, Drysdale developed a corresponding interest in socialist analyses of economic exploitation. Drysdale's journey to engagement with some socialist thought, in turn, further demonstrates how socialism and women's suffragism were capable of reconciliation, not just as activist movements, but also as ideas, challenging the traditional characterization of socialism and suffragism as antagonistic movements. The intellectual relationship between socialism and suffragism was also demonstrated by lesser-known members of the WFL and the broader fringes of suffrage activism who were drawn to birth striking because they sought recognition of women's economic exploitation at home. Some of these activists collapsed distinctions between productive and reproductive work in a manner usually associated with feminists of the mid- and late twentieth century, demonstrating the heterogeneity of socialist-suffragist thought. Writers such as Stella Browne and Margaret Sanger represented the presence of eugenicists within birth strike debates, with Browne indicating how eugenic beliefs could be rendered an integral part of

[102] Clare Midgley, Alison Twells, and Julie Carlier, 'Introduction', in *Women in transnational history*, p. 2.

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suffrage ideology. Via her campaigning relationship with Emma Goldman, Sanger's birth strike propositions were disseminated on the streets of New York in at least two languages. Goldman's accounts provide us with a glimpse of the unknown numbers of ordinary working-class women who may have rethought the most intimate sphere of their lives as a consequence.

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