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Liberal Ends, Illiberal Means: National Security, 'Environmental Conflict' and the Making of the Cairo Consensus*

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The field of environmental security, and in particular Thomas Homer-Dixon's model of environmental conflict, were heavily influenced by neo-Malthusian degradation narratives, which disproportionately blame population pressures for generating poverty, environmental degradation, migration and political violence. In turn, the presence of these degradation narratives provided an avenue through which population actors and interests could intersect with the emerging environmental security agenda in the 1990s. As part of a political strategy to engage the foreign policy establishment in the 1994 UN Population Conference in Cairo, private population funders supported environmental conflict research and its dissemination at a variety of venues. There was a general willingness to deploy racially-charged demographic alarmism, particularly concerning population and migration, in the representation of Third World threats. The result was a kind of ideological schizophrenia within the population community as some actors used the politics of fear to generate support for the Cairo conference, while others appealed to a feminist agenda of women's empowerment and reproductive health. Some did both at the same time. This case illustrates the tension between liberal foreign policy goals and the illiberal means and ideologies deployed to achieve them, and the critical role played by private philanthropy. It is a cautionary tale with relevance today as certain population agencies are employing demographic explanations of terrorism to attract conservative support for international family planning assistance.

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Introduction

The 1994 United Nations International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo was widely heralded as a victory for women's reproductive rights over both coercive population control programmes and conservative religious fundamentalists that are opposed to contraception and abortion. While the ICPD's embrace of women's reproductive health and empowerment was a welcome and long overdue reform of population policy, the Plan of Action agreed on in Cairo essentially left intact deeply problematic neo-Malthusian understandings of population growth as a principal drain on social, economic and environmental resources. Today, as the fundamentalist backlash against Cairo intensifies, aided and abetted by the Bush administration in the United States, there is a tendency to remember only the positive aspects of Cairo and to forget the negative. In the process, important lessons of that complex historical moment are easily lost, lessons that have continuing relevance today.

This article looks at the role of neo-Malthusian ideas, actors and interests in the formation of the Cairo consensus, focusing on those associated with US foreign policy and, more specifically, the environmental conflict field.

In the mid-1990s the idea of environmental conflict enjoyed considerable popularity in US foreign policy circles. Its principal architect was Canadian political scientist Thomas Homer-Dixon. He argued that scarcities of renewable resources such as crop land, fresh water and forests, induced in large part by population pressure, contribute to migration and violent intrastate conflict in many parts of the developing world. This conflict in turn can potentially disrupt international security as states fragment or become more authoritarian:

> Fragmenting countries will be the source of large out-migrations, and they will be unable to effectively negotiate or implement international agreements on security, trade and environmental protection. Authoritarian regimes may be inclined to launch attacks against other countries to divert popular attention from internal stresses. The social impacts of environmental scarcity therefore deserve concerted attention from security scholars. (Homer-Dixon 1994: 40)

Homer-Dixon was first propelled into public view in 1993 when he co-authored an article on 'Environmental Change and Violent Conflict' in *Scientific American* (Homer-Dixon et al. 1993). A year later Robert Kaplan's (in)famous article 'The Coming Anarchy' (1994) popularised and sensationalised Homer-Dixon's ideas. Proclaiming the environment as the most important national security issue of the 21st century, Kaplan presented West Africa as a nightmare vision of things to come: a hopeless scene of overpopulation, squalor, environmental degradation and violence, where young men are post-modern barbarians and children with swollen bellies swarm like ants.

'The Coming Anarchy' seized the imagination of the liberal foreign policy establishment, including Vice-President Al Gore and President Bill Clinton. 'I was so gripped by many things that were in that article,' Clinton remarked in a speech on population, '. . . and by the more academic treatment of the same subject by Professor Homer-Dixon . . . . You have to say, if you look at the numbers, you must reduce the rate of population growth' (State Department 1994).

A number of factors converged to make environmental conflict an idea whose time had come (Dalby 2002). The end of the Cold War was forcing a redefinition of security and environmental problems, ranging from nuclear contamination to soil degradation, were added to the panoply of potential threats. Monitoring the environment also provided defence and intelligence agencies with a new rationale for the maintenance of expensive satellite and underwater surveillance systems (Deibert 1996).

While environmental conflict fit comfortably into the evolving field of environment and security, it interacted with other policy concerns as well. With the end of Cold War clientism, a series of 'state failures' in the Third World, notably in Africa, posed new challenges to the US foreign policy establishment. In particular, the disastrous US intervention in Somalia highlighted the need for a more anticipatory strategy of preventive defence, addressing the roots of political conflict before it exploded into all-out civil war. Homer-Dixon's model of environmental conflict provided the kind of causal reasoning policy makers were looking for. By emphasising the role of migration in fomenting conflict, the model also meshed well with growing anti-immigrant sentiment in Washington, DC.

However, no understanding of the impact of the environmental conflict field would be complete without a consideration of the role of the ICPD. Not only did Homer-Dixon's model of environmental conflict draw heavily on neo-Malthusian assumptions about the relationship between population and the environment, but his work was also supported by private population-oriented foundations and promoted by senior government officials in preparations for the ICPD.

This article is based primarily on Ph.D. research undertaken between 1998 and 2002, which included interviews with approximately 70 people in government and multilateral agencies, research and policy institutes, foundations, universities and non-governmental organizations in the US and Europe (Hartmann 2003).[1] I chose whom to interview on the basis of their known involvement and/or interest in population and environmental conflict concerns. In September 2002 Thomas Homer-Dixon generously allowed me to spend several days going through his extensive computer and print archives at the University of Toronto, which proved invaluable to understanding the evolution and impact of his three major projects. Geoffrey Dabelko, director of the Woodrow Wilson Center's Environmental Change and Security Project (ECSP), also helpfully opened the ECSP files to me in 1999.

The article is organised into three sections. The first takes a critical look at a key neo-Malthusian assumption in environmental conflict theory, what I call the 'degradation narrative'—the belief that population pressures and poverty precipitate environmental degradation, migration and violent conflict. The second section examines the actors and interests in the Clinton administration and private population lobby that promoted Homer-Dixon's work as part of a strategy to broaden national security and garner support for the ICPD. It focuses especially on the role of private foundations in the production of knowledge. The third section looks at the tensions this strategy generated between those willing to use demographic fears of the Third World in the pursuit of liberal foreign policy goals and feminists in the population field who thought it undermined the ICPD's agenda of women's empowerment and reproductive health. This tension still exists today as certain population agencies link demographic dynamics to terrorism in a strategic bid to sustain international family planning assistance in a hostile conservative political climate.

Peasant Destroyers

Over the last four decades population control has been a remarkably stable feature of US foreign policy towards the Third World. Fear of overpopulation has also shaped, and continues to shape, the world-view and environmental consciousness of many Americans. Indeed, neo-Malthusianism has an almost religious power in the United States. It may lack a church, but it has numerous well-funded institutional organs, both private and public, to practise and spread the faith not only domestically, but around the world. On a conceptual level, it has developed a canon that is strict enough to resist challenges, but malleable enough to adapt to new constituencies and issues. It has also generated negative images, tropes and narratives—a reservoir of core stereotypes—which resonate deeply in the psyches of its believers.[2] If God is not on its side, Nature surely is. Eve is black, primitive and pregnant, and her reproduction is the Original Sin.

Of concern in this article is the particular role of neo-Malthusian 'degradation narratives'[3] in shaping Western views of the relationship between population, poverty and environmental degradation in the Third World. More recently, environmental conflict theorists such as Thomas Homer-Dixon have extended the causal chain to include migration and violent conflict. Vaclav Smil (1997: 108) humorously describes the resulting equation: 'eroding slopelands = environmental refugees = overcrowded cities = political instability = violence'.

The widespread belief that poor peasants are responsible for most land degradation in the Third World has roots in the colonial era when colonial administrators often blamed peasant agricultural practices and population pressure for soil erosion, deforestation and desertification. In areas of settler agriculture in eastern and southern Africa, for example, land expropriation policies 'demanded both the creation of a conceptualization of the African peasant as "backward" and "inefficient", and the privileging of environmental knowledge based on Western experience' (MacKenzie 1995: 102; see also Rocheleau et al. 1995).[4]

This image of not only a backward but a destructive peasantry carried over into post-World War II development thinking. The notion of a singular, ahistorical peasantry itself is part of a larger process which Escobar (1995: 53) terms 'discursive homogenization', in which the poor are constituted as universal subjects, with little regard for differences outside of certain vague client categories such as malnourished, small farmers and landless labourers. Meanwhile, 'discourses of hunger and rural development mediate and organize the constitution of the peasantry as producers or as elements to be displaced in the order of things' (ibid.: 107). Within large development agencies like the World Bank, degradation narratives came to serve as a rationale for problematic agricultural modernisation programmes and population control interventions (Williams 1995).

Degradation narratives have persisted despite important challenges from within the development field. In 1987 Blaikie and Brookfield's book *Land Degradation and Society* offered a systematic analysis of the causes of land degradation across regions and time periods, challenging the common hypothesis that population pressure on resources was chiefly to blame. Instead, the authors called for a regional political ecology approach that would address the complexity and specificity of land use practices, focusing in particular on the social and economic constraints faced by 'land managers'. (See the appendix to this article for a further critique of the degradation narrative.)

While critical literature such as this had an impact on the development field, it had little influence on the emerging concept of sustainable development in the late 1980s. The roots of sustainable development were not in development theory, but rather in Northern environmentalism with its quite limited understanding of Third World political economy and ecology (Adams 1995). Liberal sustainable development advocates were more willing to acknowledge the role of social and economic disparities, such as unequal land distribution in the creation of rural poverty, so on first inspection their analyses appeared more sympathetic to the poor. As their argument proceeded, however, these inequalities would fade from view. The poor made themselves even poorer by having too many children, setting in motion a vicious downward spiral of increasing poverty and environmental degradation (Harrison 1992).

In the mid-1980s sustainable development incorporated the vague notion of 'environmental refugees' into its lexicon, expanding the degradation narrative in the process. The displacement and movement of marginalised people form the main link between the degradation narrative and (in)security concerns: their migration to other rural areas incites ethnic tensions; their young unemployed sons gravitate to political extremism in already overcrowded cities; and when they cross international borders, they threaten national social and cultural cohesion.[5]

Our Common Future, the influential 1987 report of the UN World Commission on Environment and Development (commonly known as the 'Brundtland Report'), elevated the degradation narrative to the status of received wisdom and drew a close connection to violence. The report identified poverty as a major cause of environmental degradation:

> Those who are poor and hungry will often destroy their immediate environment in order to survive. They will cut down forests; their livestock will overgraze grasslands; they will overuse marginal land; and in growing numbers they will crowd into congested cities. (WCED 1987: 28)

Although the report distinguishes nuclear war as the gravest danger to the environment and security, it identifies environmental stress as an important source of conflict, noting in particular the destabilising effects of 'environmental refugees'. It advocates the use of the most sophisticated surveillance technology to establish an early warning system to monitor indicators of environmental risk and conflict, such as 'soil erosion, growth in regional migration, and uses of commons that are approaching the thresholds of sustainability' (ibid.: 302). In this sense, it presages more recent developments in environmental surveillance and securitisation (Hartmann 2003).

Concerns about environmentally-induced conflict accelerated with the end of the Cold War and came to dominate the rethinking of security that occurred in the early 1990s. 'Of the new sources of conflict, the combination of environmental and demographic pressures have received the most attention,' states a Rockefeller Brothers Fund review of the North American literature on the new security thinking (Florini and Simmons 1998: 20). Homer-Dixon in turn was the leading theorist of the emerging environmental conflict field.

Homer-Dixon claims that he is not a neo-Malthusian in the sense that he does not accept that 'finite natural resources place strict limits on the growth of human population and consumption'. He has pointed out how technological and institutional change can boost productivity and induce environmental improvements (Homer-Dixon 1999: 28). Despite these disclaimers, population growth is the single largest causal factor of environmental scarcity in both his project's model and case studies, and his concept of 'ecological marginalisation' is essentially a recasting of the degradation narrative (Homer-Dixon and Blitt 1998).[6] He blames population growth disproportionately for environmental degradation, poverty, migration and ultimately political instability. Around the planet, he claims,

> population growth and unequal access to good land force huge numbers of rural people onto marginal lands. There, they cause environmental damage and become chronically poor. Eventually, they may be the source of persistent upheaval, or they may migrate yet again, helping to stimulate ethnic conflicts or urban unrest elsewhere. (Homer-Dixon 1999: 155)

Timura (2001) argues that environmental conflict is a boundary object whose vagueness has allowed a wide variety of actors and institutions, including military and intelligence agencies, to appropriate it to serve their own interests. One could also argue that the degradation narrative served as a sort of boundary object within a boundary object, and that its prominence in Homer-Dixon's work, as well as the way his model gave it a new respectability and legitimacy, attracted the attention and support of population actors and interests. This is the subject of the following section.

Population, Philanthropy and Foreign Policy

Strategic Philanthropy and 'Ideological Conversion'

In the United States private foundations form a major link in the chain joining corporate, academic, public policy and government interests. In certain fields, such as population, they have served as key catalysts in the creation of both an academic discipline and a public policy response. Dowie (2001) divides the history of American foundations in the last century into three main periods: the first, prior to World War II, focused on the advancement of formal knowledge, especially in the hard sciences; the second, post-World War II, involved the foundations more directly in the formation of public policy in what is sometimes called 'strategic philanthropy' (Lagemann 1989, 1999); and the third, starting in the 1960s, saw the foundations take a more proactive role in promoting their visions of social justice. These divides, of course, are somewhat arbitrary and certain patterns are common to all three.

In the second period growing philanthropic interest in public policy reflected profound changes in the political environment in the US. In the wake of both the New Deal and World War II, public policy making became a much more intentional and calculated effort across a wide variety of institutions, both at home and abroad (Prewitt 2001). In the case of population, private funding was initially focused on building an academic demographic establishment closely linked to policy making. Historians of US demography have noted how, as a result, the field often sacrificed scholarly rigour to the needs of its paymasters, ultimately playing the role of 'handmaiden in family planning programs' (Demeny 1988: 10).[7]

In the 1950s the Rockefeller and Ford Foundations became actively involved in promoting population control as an integral part of US foreign policy. Their most enduring legacy was the successful creation of an international academic and policy elite invested in fertility reduction as a national development strategy. One does not have to be a conspiracy theorist to recognise the way this network of experts was intentionally created. Foundation money spawned the establishment of population centres at major US universities; these existed in a semi-autonomous relationship with more traditional academic departments such as sociology. Foreign students were brought to the centres where they were persuaded of the urgent need to reduce birth rates in a process the Caldwells refer to as 'ideological conversion' (Caldwell and Caldwell 1986: 140).

While the centres' independent stature within the university permitted demographers to blend academic and applied research, their relative isolation reduced the possibility of contact with other scholars and intellectual developments in the social sciences. For example, most demographers were not exposed to critiques of modernisation theory in the late 1960s and 1970s (Greenhalgh 1996). There is an interesting parallel here with the relative isolation of many security scholars in the US, Homer-Dixon among them, from current debates in the development field.

Foundations also sponsored a number of reports on population, which were distributed free of charge to policy makers. Often written in subdued scholarly language, they nevertheless conveyed a sense of crisis about population growth (Sharpless 1997). Such reports were not sufficient, however, to build the kind of broad popular consensus necessary to sustain massive and long-term US investment in population control in the Third World. According to Wilmoth and Ball (1992), that depended on the coverage of population issues by popular magazines, newspapers and other forms of media. Their study of the population debate in American popular magazines from 1946 to 1990 highlights the remarkable rise in articles about the 'threatening' aspects of population growth, which peaked in the mid-1960s. Framing the issue in environmental terms proved the most effective in terms of building a popular consensus for population control. In a sort of informal feedback loop, demographers at the foundation-funded population centres served as important sources for these neo-Malthusian articles (Caldwell and Caldwell 1986).

The close linkages between private foundations, academic population centres, policy makers and the popular press helped reinforce and spread neo-Malthusian ideas throughout the body politic until ultimately population control became an important tool of US foreign policy. By 1967 the US Agency for International Development (USAID) was providing $35 million annually in international population assistance (Donaldson 1990). However, even with increased government support of population control, private foundations remained active in the field.

Forging the Cairo Consensus

In the 1980s resistance to US population policies began to mount from two separate but powerful quarters. The first was the anti-abortion movement that found favour in the Reagan administration. At the 1984 UN Population Conference in Mexico City, the administration announced the implementation of the first 'gag rule', the denial of US funds to any private organisation that performed or even just counselled women about abortion. Meanwhile, a growing transnational alliance of feminist reproductive rights and health activists began to organise against coercive population control policies, calling instead for reproductive health programmes that respected women's needs for safe, voluntary birth control and abortion services (Corrêa 1994; Hartmann 1995).

Concerned about the growing strength of anti-abortion forces and facing feminist pressure from both outside and within, many population agencies made the strategic decision to ally with transnational women's health activists in advance of the 1994 ICPD in Cairo (Hodgson and Cotts Watkins 1997). The result is what is called the 'Cairo consensus'. This consensus maintains that rapid population growth is still a major cause of poverty and environmental degradation, but that women's empowerment and reproductive health programmes are the solution to high birth rates, instead of the top-down, target-driven and often coercive population programmes of the past.[8] Private philanthropic funding was instrumental in forging this consensus in conjunction with the US State Department, especially the office of Under-Secretary of State for Global Affairs, Timothy Wirth.

One of the most important foundations involved in building the Cairo consensus was the Pew Charitable Trusts, a relative newcomer to the population scene. Pew, whose wealth derives from the Sun Oil Company, came to the population issue primarily through its interest in the environment. By the early 1990s it had become the largest environmental donor in the US as well as one of the most proactive. In a classic example of Dowie's third phase of proactive philanthropy, Pew set out to reshape the agenda of the American environmental movement; its tame lobbying strategy, muted criticism of corporate practices, and sometimes domineering style drew the ire of many activists in the field (Dowie 2001; Greene 1994; Tokar 1997). An important component of Pew's proactivity was the funding of public relations and media campaigns (Bailey 1994).

Expanding its mandate, Pew began to look more closely at foreign policy issues related to the environment. In 1993 the foundation established the Pew Global Stewardship Initiative (PGSI) to address population and consumption issues in preparation for the ICPD. The PGSI was a collaborative effort with the Aspen Institute, a high-powered policy think-tank based in Colorado, but with offices in Washington, DC. Susan Sechler was hired to be its director. Sechler is known as a dynamic philanthropic and policy entrepreneur. During the PGSI project her base at the Aspen Institute in Washington, DC, gave her a fair degree of independence, though it led to an uneasy relationship with the Pew leadership in Philadelphia (Hartmann 2003).

The creation of the PGSI was part of a larger liberal strategy of 'stewardship' that Sechler and others in the foreign policy arena were pursuing at the time. According to this reasoning, the US has a triple responsibility as the world's premier superpower. It must not only maintain its military and economic strength, but exercise stewardship through foreign aid, NGOs and the private sector to address potentially destabilising problems in the Third World, such as resource scarcities and widening gaps between rich and poor. While acknowledging that Cold War strategies of containment 'sometimes' were at variance with social stewardship objectives, advocates believed that those contradictions no longer existed in the post-Cold War period (Mazur and Sechler 1998: 20).

Stewardship is a win–win approach, in which free market capitalism, democracy and US hegemony are instrumental to human development and environmental improvement. It is based on a sense of the superiority of American values and the belief that they are the universal aspirations of mankind (Gore 1993: 270). While such American universalism may be preferable to 'conservation isolationism', it has a dark side, too. 'For such universalism to take root,' Stoett (1999: 19) notes, 'the image of a frightening outside world must first be created.' Or, as Sechler herself told me, 'People will get more aid if they are perceived to be dangerous than if they are pitied' (personal interview, 13 November 2000).

The PGSI's July 1993 White Paper laid out four major project objectives: (*a*) 'to build a stronger conceptual base for global stewardship and its expression in enlightened population and consumption policies'; (*b*) 'to forge consensus among diverse constituencies' working on these issues, as well as to attract new ones; (*c*) 'to inform and improve relevant US and multilateral policies and programs'; and (*d*) 'to increase public understanding of, and commitment to act on, population and consumption challenges' (PGSI 1993a: i). These goals would be accomplished by collaboration with institutions and individuals from three major constituencies: environmentalists, religious communities, and international affairs and foreign policy specialists.

In regard to the latter, Pew hoped to broaden the concept of national security in ways that invoked Homer-Dixon. The White Paper stated:

> The Initiative will endeavor to assist foreign policy specialists in framing the related concerns of population, environment and sustainable development, and in identifying areas where demographic trends threaten regional or international stability. The goal is to elevate these concerns in US foreign policy formulation, international agreements and the work of multilateral institutions. (ibid.: 13)

To develop the conceptual base for this endeavour, the PGSI would offer support for applied research on the linkages between population, environment and security.

While its applied research strategy was more academic in tone, the PGSI also aimed to influence the media and popular opinion. It hired three top American polling and opinion research firms, representing both Democratic and Republican interests, to do focus group research on attitudes toward population growth and the environment among different constituencies. Interestingly, the researchers found that most people did not have strong neo-Malthusian attitudes; they recommended adding 'an emotional component' and 'targeted visual devices' such as pictures of traffic jams and degraded landscapes to population messages in order to create the necessary alarm (ibid. 1993b: 73–74).

The PGSI also hired the Future Strategies, Inc. a consulting firm to make recommendations on how to build a campaign on population and sustainable development in Washington policy circles (ibid. 1994a). Although it is unclear whether the PGSI followed all the consultants' advice, the report provides a fascinating window on the reasoning behind the strategic use of demographic alarmism. The Future Strategies report highlights the need for a 'grand strategy' to increase international family planning and women's health assistance. The strategy would entail promoting this assistance as critical to environmental protection as well as to the alleviation of the causes of violent conflict (ibid.: 4–5). An information database on population and the environment would be an important advocacy tool since 'though the link between excessive population and environmental destruction would seem obvious, there is. . . little in the way of scientific evidence to draw exact correlations' (ibid.: 11). The report rues the fact that despite PGSI funding, US environmental groups remain 'behind the political curve' on developing programmes linking population and environmental degradation (ibid.: 2).

Americans will have to be convinced that 'unchecked population growth and destruction of the environment are key national security concerns of the 21st century' (ibid.: 31). So will specific constituencies, such as defence and intelligence policy makers and intellectuals, as well as Congressional actors, notably the Black Caucus who should be worried about the social chaos in Africa described by Robert Kaplan (ibid.: 20).

The report considers a variety of arguments to sway the public and policy makers, including concerns about migration. For example, 'one clear payoff is reducing the immigration pressure which will only increase if poverty and resource depletion go unchecked'. The report notes: 'These sorts of arguments can be made without reinforcing racist and isolationist strains in the American political culture' (ibid.: 33). Yet, further on, the authors write, 'Unfortunately, the specter of "environmental refugees" driven by scarcity of resources and flooding American borders may be necessary to build the public support necessary for required increases in funding for population and sustainable development' (ibid.: 35). Along with such arguments, it recommends using visual tools such as computerised mapping, which overlays information about 'population growth, resource depletion, overt conflict and refugee movements' (ibid.: 13), as well as adopting some of the campaign tools of the American Israel Political Action Committee (ibid.: 33).

The PGSI leadership was not blind to the contradictions inherent in using fear and alarmism to build support for liberal foreign policy goals, but its pragmatic pluralism overrode moral qualms. Looking back on the period, Susan Sechler told me that she was looking for ways of bringing people who could contribute to the project under the tent; she also wanted to include people who would be destructive if they remained on the outside. Although she does not believe in fear mongering per se, she thought it was better 'to voice fear and deal with it, deal with the unconscious, put the stuff out on the table . . . . If you don't think about the dark side, it will come out. You can't keep people from thinking about these things.' People are afraid of chaos, she noted, and though critical of Kaplan now, she said his writing was a 'wake-up call', and was at least preferable to talking about throw-weights (the weight of the payload of a missile) (personal interview, 13 November 2000).

Sechler was also interested in creating a more open foreign policy, where Americans' own aspirations for themselves and their children were linked to the aspirations of people in other countries. US foreign policy suffers from the belief that it can be done in secret, she remarked, that policy makers can 'just work with the leaders and treat the Third World as a ghetto where you help organize markets and police forces. . .the more people who can relate to the Third World and democracy (with a small 'd'), the more pressure on Congress and the Senate' (personal interview, 13 November 2000).

Sechler's broad-tent approach was reflected in many aspects of the PGSI's work and proved instrumental in shaping the Cairo consensus. Despite the caveats of feminist friends who warned of the Malthusian 'environmental juggernaut' (personal interview with Sechler, 13 November 2000), she funded the population work of mainstream environmental organisations in the hope that they would come around to a women's agenda. She was also the primary founder of the Woodrow Wilson Center's Environmental Change and Security Project (ECSP), which became the epicentre of the environmental security field, a venue where scholars and policy makers could interface directly with each other.

To involve the security community further, she brought Homer-Dixon into the tent, funding two out of three of his major projects. Initiated in 1994, Homer-Dixon's Environment, Population and Security (EPS) project received a PGSI grant of $300,000, which included $30,000 for Robert Kaplan as project consultant. That same year the Environmental Scarcities, State Capacity and Civil Violence Project received $200,000 from the PGSI, and Sechler was instrumental in leveraging the other $200,000 in funding from the Rockefeller Foundation Population Sciences Program. Rockefeller viewed the project as an outlier in its population portfolio, which was focused more directly on family planning research and policy (Hartmann 2003).

The EPS project, initially known as Fast Track, was the one most directly geared towards policy makers. According to the initial work plan, the project's aim was 'to produce a large volume of material as quickly as possible for use in current policy debates' (EPS 1994: 1). Indeed, 'the value to policy makers of the anticipated product' was one of the three criteria used to determine the focus of research efforts (ibid.: 3). Along with country and thematic case studies, a briefing book on environmental security issues for policy makers and members of the media was part of the work plan. Project publications were sent out to a list of over 1,000 policy makers, representatives of the media, scholars, etc.

Homer-Dixon was a logical choice for the PGSI's strategy of targeting policy makers, for he had already arrived with a splash on the Washington scene. Kaplan's 'The Coming Anarchy' had brought him to the attention of top policy makers, including Al Gore (Pugliese 1994), who invited him for dinner in April 1994 and to do a briefing on China in August of the same year. Like Homer-Dixon's, Gore's environmentalism was heavily tinged with neo-Malthusianism (Gore 1993). So was the environmentalism of Under-Secretary of State for Global Affairs, Timothy Wirth, who, for example, blamed the massacres in Rwanda and political unrest in Haiti on demographic pressures (Wirth 1995).

Formerly a senator from Colorado and a close political colleague of Gore's, Wirth was appointed Under-Secretary of State for Global Affairs as part of the Clinton administration's reorganisation of the State Department. In the follow-up to the 1992 Earth Summit, Wirth had as many as 150 people working under him, although throughout his tenure he operated below the level of a senior policy maker (Hopgood 1998). Almost everyone I interviewed who had been in Washington, DC, during the period acknowledged that Wirth played a central role in organising US participation in the ICPD, particularly the NGO coalition. Although when he first joined the State Department he had little knowledge of women's health concerns, he was able 'to make the reproductive rights link' with population and environment issues.

Wirth was influenced by Kaplan and Homer-Dixon's work. His own beliefs were 'neck on neck' with Homer-Dixon's, whom he promoted in policy making circles around the ICPD. The affinity was not only ideological, but strategic. According to one of his close associates, one reason Wirth seized on the environment and security issue was because its appeal to the security community allowed him to involve them in promoting the ICPD. Whether it actually influenced policy was not as important as the way it got different players to the table to promote the Cairo consensus, including the CIA, which became part of an inter-agency working group. Environment and security was a tool to pique people's interest and get them to the right advocacy goal, such as women's rights (personal interview with Ellen Marshall, 10 June 1999).

The PGSI employed a similar strategy, using Homer-Dixon's EPS project to build bridges to the security community. It put together a high-level stewardship and security steering committee, which met to advise Homer-Dixon in the fall of 1994 (PGSI 1994b). Among its members were Eileen Claussen, senior director for global environmental affairs on the National Security Council (NSC), Kathleen McGinty, director of the White House Office on Environmental Quality, and Enid Schoettle, national intelligence officer for global and multilateral issues and a principal adviser to the director of the CIA.[9] That Homer-Dixon had access to such high-level officials suggests both PGSI's clout within the foreign policy establishment and the weight given to Homer-Dixon's project within PGSI.

While Homer-Dixon's model of environmental conflict helped bring the national security community into the ICPD coalition, it also elevated the degradation narrative into the high politics, or at least rhetoric, of national security. According to Dabelko and Simmons (1997), late in 1993, following a briefing by Homer-Dixon, the NSC Global Environmental Affairs Directorate and the office of the Deputy Under-Secretary of Defence for Environmental Security 'began to incorporate environment and conflict ideas into their work' (135). In 1994 and 1995 the administration's *National Security Strategy of Engagement and Enlargement*, which is considered an important blueprint for foreign and defence policy, stated boldly in the preface that 'large-scale environmental degradation, exacerbated by rapid population growth, threatens to undermine political stability in many countries and regions' (White House 1995: 47).

Certainly, from about 1994 through 1997, some mention of environmentally-induced conflict seems *de rigueur* in official speeches and reports on the environment, whether emanating from the administration, Department of State, intelligence community, or the Department of Defence. Even if he is not mentioned by name, Homer-Dixon's ideas, often couched in language very similar to his, are very much present. For example, in 1994 Eileen Claussen, recently appointed NSC Senior Director for Global Environmental Affairs, delivered a speech that drew heavily on Homer-Dixon's notion of environmental scarcity. 'Lack of access to productive agricultural lands combines with population growth to encourage migration to steep hillsides,' she stated. 'These hillsides are easily eroded, and after a few years fail to produce enough to support the migrants. The result is deepened poverty, which then helps to fuel violence'. Like Homer-Dixon, she went on to link resource scarcities to the insurgencies of the New People's Army in the Philippines and Sendero Luminoso in Peru (Claussen 1995: 40–41; Homer-Dixon 1999).

In 1996 the Director of Central Intelligence, John Deutch, linked satellite surveillance directly to the degradation narrative and the threat of environmentally-induced conflict:

> Environmental degradation, encroaching deserts, erosion and over-farming destroy vast tracts of arable land. This forces people from their homes and creates tensions between ethnic and political groups as competition for scarce resources increases. There is an essential connection between environmental degradation, population growth, and poverty that regional analysts must take into account.
>
> National reconnaissance systems that track the movement of tanks through the desert, can, at the same time, track the movement of the desert itself, see the sand closing in on formerly productive fields or hillsides laid bare by deforestation and erosion. Satellite systems allow us to quickly assess the magnitude and severity of damage. Adding this environmental dimension to alert policymakers to traditional political, economic, and military analysis enhances our ability to alert policymakers to potential instability, conflict or human disaster and to identify situations which may draw in American involvement. (DCI Speech 1996: 1)

Such concerns about the potential for environmental conflict were also an important factor behind Gore's move to establish the CIA's Environmental Center to serve as a focal point for environmental issues within the intelligence community.

The mid-1990s, then, were marked by a certain ideological confusion as women's rights, neo-Malthusianism, environmental conflict and dark Kaplanesque visions of the Third World were woven together into the fabric of liberal American stewardship. There was a certain method to the madness, however, as the PGSI's strategies reveal. Not everyone in the population field was sanguine about these developments. The next section considers internal divisions within the population community about whether to use the threat of environmental conflict as a rationale for supporting the Cairo reforms.

Do the Ends Justify the Means?

When I began my research, I assumed that because population funding was instrumental in the development and promotion of the environmental conflict field, population organisations were likely to jump on the proverbial bandwagon. I found, however, that the reality was more complex. While there were a number of public and private population agencies that purposefully tapped into environmental conflict discourse, other actors in the field were more wary, worrying that the national security angle might undermine the Cairo reforms and the coalition that brought them about.

As one representative of a prominent population NGO told me, at first environment and security looked like it was going to be a big deal, but it didn't have much sticking power because it was problematic. 'What alliances would we make if we used it?' the representative said. 'How would it affect our relationship with women's groups and environmental groups? If there are alliances to be made with conservative groups, what values does one place at risk? The population community does look for common ground with conservatives in Congress, but only if the core values of Cairo are not compromised.' Nevertheless, this same person was considering doing a publication on environment and security if it would be useful in getting policy makers to see the importance of family planning.

Indeed, a number of population agencies did use environmental conflict for this purpose. Population Action International featured Homer-Dixon's ideas in its 1997 publication *Why Population Matters*, designed to make the demographic case for family planning assistance (Engelman 1997). A 1999 issue of *Population Reports* on 'Why Family Planning Matters' published by the USAID-funded Population Information Program (1999) at Johns Hopkins

University, contains a section on resource conflicts that draws directly on Homer-Dixon.

The RAND Corporation's *Population Matters* series did a report in 2000 on *The Security Dynamics of Demographic Factors*, again drawing on Homer-Dixon's work, financed by the US Army and major population funders—the Hewlitt, Packard and Rockefeller foundations. This publication links the need for more US family planning assistance to governments 'that wish to take the direct approach of reducing their fertility rates outright' to the army's need for technologies such as unmanned aerial surveillance vehicles and better body armour to fight in overcrowded urban areas of the Third World (Nichiporuk 2000: 51–52). A full-page advertisement in the *New York Times* (2002: A15) by the Population Institute attributed resource depletion, environmental degradation and civil unrest (as well as hunger and grinding poverty) to poor women's unintended pregnancies.

The two population projects that tapped most heavily into environmental conflict ideas were the Population Reference Bureau's (PRB) joint project with the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington, DC, on *Population and National Interests* (CSIS 1996) and the Rockefeller Foundation's lobbying publication *High Stakes* (Rockefeller Foundation 1997). The PRB/CSIS publication presents family planning as preventive diplomacy to mitigate a whole host of threats posed by population pressure, including conflict caused by resource scarcity. It emphasises the connection between resource scarcity and migration, especially from Haiti,[10] and asserts that the US must regain control over its borders. The PGSI instigated the collaboration between the two agencies; the PRB was supposed to influence the CSIS, but the context remained very much a security one. This led to a certain amount of disenchantment on the part of the PRB.

One of the PRB participants, Alex de Sherbinin, told me it was difficult to get the security people involved to move beyond the concept of national interest to embrace development issues. The development people, meanwhile, were 'twisting and turning' to relate to the security people, but lost something in the process (phone interview with Alex de Sherbinin, 29 June 1998). He ended up writing a critical article challenging the conventional environmental conflict line on Haiti (de Sherbinin 1996).

The controversy surrounding the Rockefeller Foundation's *High Stakes* report reveals the sharp division within the population community on whether to use environmental conflict arguments. Designed to counter international family planning budget cuts by a conservative Congress, the report draws heavily on Homer-Dixon to argue that unless steps are taken to reduce 'surging population growth', resource scarcities will 'ignite simmering tensions' and foment violent upheavals around the world (Rockefeller Foundation 1997: 21). A foundation officer justified this line of argumentation to me on the basis that even if 10 per cent of the report was alarmist, the other 90 per cent was about reproductive health, and the only way to reach conservatives in Congress was through the idea of enlightened self-interest. The report was released with great fanfare in Washington, DC. According to a prominent reproductive health advocate, the mythology at Rockefeller was that it really turned the tide in Congress, though in reality it was 'in-the-dirt lobbying' that saved international family planning assistance.

The process of drafting the report produced an ideological struggle in the population community. According to Joan Dunlop, who was then president of the International Women's Health Coalition, the draft was heavily criticised by reproductive health advocates, including herself. A line was clearly drawn between those willing to use national security arguments in the service of population assistance and those who thought they would undermine the Cairo reforms.

Sometimes agencies experienced internal divisions about whether to highlight the threat of environmental conflict. USAID is a case in point. There was, and continues to be, a tension between those at the agency who view the population issue within a reproductive rights/reproductive health perspective and those who see population growth as a key 'strategic threat' that 'consumes all other economic gains, drives environmental damage, exacerbates poverty, and impedes democratic governance' (USAID 1993: 7), and thus demands a strong results-driven family planning response. After the 1994 ICPD this division became even more pronounced at the Population, Health and Nutrition Office (PHN) at USAID. In my interviews I was told by several people at USAID that reproductive health now had the upper hand in the PHN and that environmental security ideas were not very popular.

However, there were notable exceptions to this trend. Brian Atwood, USAID director at the time, borrowed heavily from Kaplan and Homer-Dixon in painting horrific visions of a degraded, violent and overpopulated Third World.[11] More importantly, Joanne Grossi, then senior technical adviser and head of USAID's Population and Environment Initiative, began to fund the Woodrow Wilson Center's influential ECSP when Pew funds dried up in 1997. Grossi stepped in as the PGSI's Susan Sechler stepped out. (Today, the ECSP also receives funding from an additional population-oriented foundation, the David and Lucile Packard Foundation.) The financial support of population interests helped ensure that environmental conflict, with its emphasis on the degradation narrative, remained a dominant theme of the ECSP. In the early years especially, Homer-Dixon's work is a major point of reference, and today population issues still occupy pride of place in the annual *Environmental Change and Security Project Report.*

When I interviewed Grossi in 1999, the PHN's contribution to the ECSP had risen from $75,000 to $600,000. She explained that the symmetry was beneficial; while USAID money helped the ECSP improve its reputation and attract more government officials to its events, the ECSP helped USAID get more of an audience for population issues. She did not foresee any concrete policy changes emerging from the collaboration, but instead more in the way of 'intangibles' like the chance to dialogue. She remarked that some people at USAID hoped that having the Department of Defense (DOD), CIA, Congressional staffers, etc. in the same room at the Wilson Center would help them to see USAID differently and impact how Congress feels about the agency. In terms of environmental security, the ECSP 'was one of the only games in town' (personal interview with Joanne Grossi, 9 June 1999).

Today, of course, is a very different political scenario than the 1990s with respect to population policy, concern for the environment, and national security. Strongly allied with religious fundamentalist and anti-abortion forces, the current Bush administration is hostile to international family planning assistance and the Cairo reforms, which advocate sexual and reproductive rights. Indeed, many in the population field worry that 'Cairo is dead' due both to conservative opposition and the concentration of foreign aid resources on HIV/AIDS. Environmental concerns are also hardly on the top of the administration's to-do list; instead, environmental regulation is the target of much undoing; 11 September and the 'war on terror' meanwhile have resuscitated Realist views of national security and US hegemony. The 1990s era of 'rethinking security' seems a very long time ago.

It is not surprising that, under siege, population interests might find it tempting once again to resort to national security arguments to win support from legislators, policy makers and the public for international family planning assistance. A worrying indication of this trend is a recent report from Population Action International, *The Security Demographic: Population and Civil Conflict after the Cold War* (Cincotta et al. 2003). Released with great fanfare at the Woodrow Wilson Center, under the auspices of the ECSP,[12] the report purports to prove that four demographic stress factors—the youth bulge (a high proportion of young males in a given population);[13] rapid urban growth; competition for crop land and fresh water (with echoes of the degradation narrative and Homer-Dixon); and AIDS-related deaths in the prime of life—contribute to a heightened risk of civil conflict in the developing world. The report confuses statistical correlation with causation, and reinforces negative stereotypes of the dark and violent poor. On its cover is an ominous picture of a young black man carrying a gun, with a crowd of what looks like protestors behind him.

The report's end goal is to prove that reducing population growth will help reduce violent conflict. And the best way to reduce population growth is through women's empowerment and reproductive health—in other words, the Cairo approach. The report, thus, once again marries the Cairo reforms to national security threats and fears. Its release rated a Reuters story, 'Study: Women's Health Linked to Unrest—High Birth Rates, AIDS Set Stage for Global Violence' (2003), and news of it circulated, uncritically, on various progressive Web sites, including that of *Common Dreams* (Lobe 2003).

What is wrong with using such a strategy if it works to get the attention of policy makers to women's rights? Don't the ends justify the means?

Bad means, however, have a way of undermining good ends. Using the security argument to advocate for reproductive health is always a danger, a prominent feminist in the population field told me. Perhaps if human security had really replaced conventional security in the 1990s, it might be all right, but it didn't, and the bogeyman from the 1950s persisted. 'You can't "take back the night" on security,' she concluded (phone interview with Judith Bruce, Population Council, 17 October 2002).

What are some of the dangers of using a security rationale? On the most basic level, viewing women as breeders of conflict is likely to have a negative effect on how family planning services are delivered, encouraging a reversal to target-based population control, despite any rhetoric to the contrary. You cannot have your cake and eat it too. Good quality reproductive health services depend on viewing women's rights as worthy of pursuit in and of themselves, not as a neo-Malthusian instrument of national defence. And then there is the issue of ideological obfuscation. Is it really demographic and environmental stress that is causing most of the conflict in the world today? Blaming the Third World poor is one of the oldest games in town. It draws on and reinforces racism both at home and abroad, and does nothing to illuminate deeper causes of conflict or possible solutions.

Perhaps the Cairo consensus was fundamentally flawed in the first place because of the way it linked women's rights to neo-Malthusian causalities, and thus facilitated the linkage with national security. If it is dying, maybe there is an opportunity to craft a new consensus, a new coalition, which eschews the politics of threat and fear, the dark side of liberal stewardship and American universalism. A Democratic administration in Washington in 2008 might provide an opening, but it might equally well—with the assistance of strategic philanthropy—renew the lease neo-Malthusianism holds on political life and foreign policy in the United States. This article is offered as a cautionary tale.

Appendix: Challenging the Degradation Narrative

The following are some of the key problems with degradation narratives:

1. ***Overgeneralisation***: Degradation narratives ignore the great diversity in both social systems and ecological conditions in the global South. Context, contingency, agency and specificity are sacrificed to a universalising 'one size fits all' model.
2. ***Localisation of blame***: In focusing on poor peasants and pastoralists as the destroyers of the environment, degradation narratives

do not take into account other social, economic and political forces that may be strongly implicated. 'Effective demand' from elsewhere for a region's natural resources may drive environmental degradation much more than local poverty or population growth. For example, the crucial role of extractive industries—mining, timber, agribusiness, etc.—does not figure in the story at all. Also ignored are the complex interactions between resource appropriation and power structures at the local, regional, national and international levels (Fairhead 2001).

3. ***Neo-Malthusian causality*:** The belief that population pressure is *automatically* associated with both increased poverty and environmental degradation is overly simplistic and deterministic. Whether population pressure is beneficial or damaging to the environment depends on a host of intervening institutional and technological factors as well as the nature of the particular environment in question.

   Degradation narratives fail to take into account that under some circumstances population pressure may spur agricultural innovation and intensification. For example, while population growth may decrease the size of landholdings, it can also expand the family labour supply, encouraging more labour-intensive cultivation and conservation techniques. Thus, a study in Rwanda found that declining landholdings were associated with more investments in soil conservation and greater managed tree densities per unit of land (Templeton and Scherr 1999). Degradation narratives also ignore the possibility that *depopulation* of an area may lead to environmental decline. In Brazil, for example, many areas depopulated by poor peasants because of their lack of access to land and agricultural inputs have gone over to ecologically damaging extensive cattle raising, industrial monoculture and logging. Similarly, in Mexico the exodus of poor peasants to urban areas has led to the loss of valuable micro-habitats and crop genetic diversity previously sustained by their labour (Garcia-Barrios and Garcia-Barrios 1990; Mello 1997).

   Such is the power of neo-Malthusian reasoning, however, that in some studies, such as a 1999 UNEP report on Africa, increases in population density are used as a proxy for the location of emerging environmental threats (Singh et al. 1999).

4. ***Failure to consider livelihood diversification*:** Degradation narratives tend to promote a one-dimensional view of the peasantry as living solely off the land, ignoring the reality that many peasant households have diversified livelihood strategies. In a village in Bangladesh, for example, one family may have different members engaged in agricultural labour, petty trade, rickshaw driving,

teaching and service in the military. Income derived from non-agricultural activities, meanwhile, is often invested back in productivity-increasing land improvements (Hartmann and Boyce 1983).

Degradation narratives also fail to differentiate types of rural poverty and their relationship to environmental change. Agrarian scholars have pointed out how poverty cannot be treated as a single concept and that assets must be broken down into specific categories. When households are 'investment poor', lacking the cash and human resources to invest in maintenance or enhancement of the natural resource base, then environmental degradation is more likely to occur. However, there are many different reasons for investment poverty, and analyses need to be time- and site-specific. Moreover, the precise nature of the environmental change in question must be specified (Reardon and Vosti 1995).

5. ***Migration*:** Degradation narratives have a similarly one-dimensional view of migration as distress-generated and -generating. However, the causes of migration are extremely complex and context-specific, and there is little evidence to support the view that demographic pressure is at the root of many population movements (Suhrke 1997). Moreover, migration from rural areas is often not a linear phenomenon or a rejection of rural livelihoods. Instead, it can be a vital part of sustaining them. A study in Vietnam found that internal migration is frequently circular and seasonal, with migrants returning to the rural areas at harvest time. Their remittances from urban jobs often help fund investments in agricultural intensification, children's education, etc., enhancing the ecological and social resilience of the household (Locke et al. 2000).
6. ***Gender*:** Despite lack of explicit attention to gender issues, certain views of women are implicit in degradation narratives, especially given the central and negative role they ascribe to population growth. Subsumed into the analytic frame of population pressure, women, through their fertility, become the breeders of environmental destruction, poverty and violence, and controlling their fertility becomes the magic bullet solution. Women's access to land and property rights, labour obligations, roles in environmental resource management, and relative status in the household and community are not part of the picture, even though gender dynamics can have an important impact on agriculture and the environment. Case studies in Africa note how in many places women are making day-to-day decisions about agriculture when access to land is still invested in men, a contradiction that can lead to agricultural stagnation (Turner et al. 1993).

Notes

1. See Hartmann (2003) for a full list of interviewees.
2. See Karim (1997) for a discussion of the role of such core stereotypes (*topoi*) in the representation of the Third World 'Other'.
3. Recent scholarship points to the important role environmental narratives play in policy formulation and outcome. See, for example, Harper (2001), Keeley and Scoones (2003), Roe (1995) and, on environmental conflict specifically, Timura (2001).
4. The extent of degradation was often overstated not only due to value bias, but faulty scientific methodologies. The exclusion of historical data on landscapes led to speculative projections about the past, which romanticised previous environmental conditions, or conditions at a particular time were assumed to be representative of an abiding state of affairs. For example, colonial administrators viewed the low population densities found in the East African savannahs at the beginning of the 20th century as the norm, but in reality they were the result of a severe depopulation of humans and livestock as the result of recent war, famine and disease (Leach and Mearns 1996). See Leach and Fairhead (2000) for a more recent example of faulty methodologies.
5. For a critique of the concept of 'environmental refugees,' see Black (1998). Without any substantive evidence, Norman Myers (1995: 63) claimed that there were 25 million environmental refugees in the world, who could also be termed 'population pressure' refugees.
6. Other environmental conflict theorists have similarly embraced the degradation narrative. See Baechler (1999); Kahl (1998); and Lietzmann and Vest (1999).
7. Other important references on this subject are Greenhalgh (1996), Hodgson (1983, 1988 1991) and Szreter (1993).
8. See Hartmann (2002) for an analysis of the pros and cons of the Cairo consensus.
9. Other members were Judith Bruce of the Population Council; Stephen Del Rosso of the Pew Charitable Trusts; John R. Dellenback, a Presbyterian Church leader; David Devlin-Foltz of the PGSI, demographer Leobardo Estrada; PGSI programme officer Susan Gibbs; political scientist Jack Goldstone; Robert Kaplan; Paul Kennedy; Robert Litwak of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars; Christopher Makins of the Aspen Institute; Georgetown University professor Theodore Moran; George Perkovich of the W. Alton Jones Foundation; Jeremy Rosner of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace; Emma Rothschild; Susan Sechler; John Steinbruner of the Brookings Institution; Michael Teitelbaum; Barbara Torrey of the National Research Council; Thomas Wander from American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS); and Jeff Wise at the Aspen Institute's Environmental Security Policy Project (PGSI 1994c). Interestingly, Homer-Dixon had recommended to Sechler in June that Joan Dunlop of the International Women's Health Coalition be part of the advisory team since she could help the project

understand how its findings might be received or misconceived by women's groups. However, Dunlop did not join the team, and the project ended up having little contact with women's groups.

10. At the time the CSIS was doing a major study of population and security in Haiti. See CSIS (1996).
11. In one speech, Atwood (1996: 86) said, 'If rural migrants overwhelm the cities by the tens of millions, we must breathe the air they pollute and drink the water they foul. Their diseases will find us. Their misery will envelop us'. Also see Atwood (1994).
12. The Wilson Center event on 17 December 2003 featured commentary by retired defence and intelligence officials, and an introduction by William H. Draper III, the son of Major General William H. Draper, Jr, whose official study of the US military assistance programme in the late 1950s made the argument that population control should be an important matter of national security (Ross 1998).
13. See Hendrixson (2002, 2004) for a critique of the youth bulge theory, and Hartmann and Hendrixson (2005) for the way the youth bulge and degradation narrative are both implicated in today's strategic philanthropy.

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