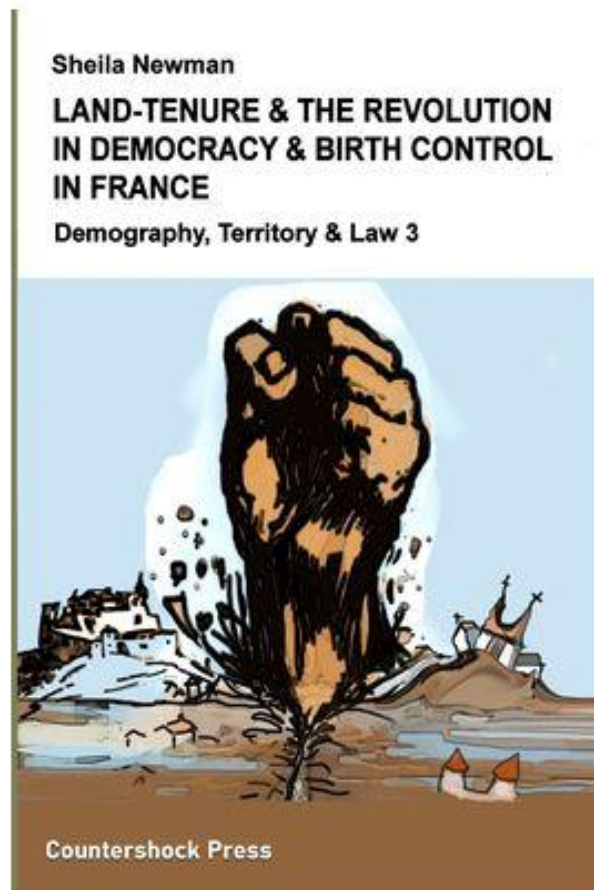


Rational Anthropology: A Review of Sheila Newman's *Land-Tenure & The Revolution in Democracy & Birth Control in France*

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If philosophers are not always historians, if it were, at any rate, to be wished that historians were always philosophers. (Gibbon, 1814)

1. Borderless Philosophy: A Case Study

Robert Hanna has argued (Hanna, 2021), that contemporary analytic philosophy, as practiced in most Anglosphere university philosophy departments, is theoretically and practically bankrupt. As he puts it, such philosophy is “fundamentally theoretically, emotionally, morally, and/or socio-politically at odds with the rest of humanity” (Hanna, 2022: p. 49). Contemporary philosophers are academics and

professionals, and this, he says, leads to careerism, conformity, dogmatism, coercive authoritarianism, esotericism and hyper-specialization. Added to that can be arguments by a significant minority of insider philosophers, regarding the failure of the discipline to make progress in the light of perennial philosophical disputes (Smith, 1988). As Brennan puts it: “pursuing philosophy is not a reliable method of discovering true answers to philosophical questions (Brennan, 2010).

Hanna has sought to develop an alternative “life-shaping philosophy,” which is, in six words: existential, Kantian, dignitarian, anarchistic, cosmopolitan, and ecosocialist. “Real philosophy” will embrace the natural, formal and social sciences, and humanities, but go beneath and beyond them, incorporating, aesthetic, artistic, emotional, ethical, social and political insights about the human condition. “Real philosophy” will thus transcend “naturalized epistemology” (Quine, 1969, 82), for example, as an investigation of the limits of science is one of its goals. Such a project constitutes a rational anthropology, a systematic, critical reflection about all that exists in the natural, formal, and social worlds (Hanna, 2022).

In this essay I will offer an illustration of what I interpret as one example of a rational anthropology program, through a review of Sheila Newman, *Land-Tenure & The Revolution in Democracy & Birth Control in France* (Newman, 2023) (hereafter referred to as *Land-Tenure & The Revolution*, for short).

2. Newman’s Rational Anthropology

Land-Tenure & The Revolution is book 3 of a four-book series, *Demography, Territory and Law*, and in my opinion, the works make a major contribution not only to historical research, but philosophy in the broad sense characterized above, in the somewhat neglected field of philosophical demography (Pavlik, 2000). Furthermore, Newman’s research methodology is quite along the lines of “rational anthropology,” in her multidisciplinary approach. As she says:

The use of multiple disciplines is unusual because most research literature builds on a narrower base of accepted theories in a single discipline and expects the reader to have some familiarity with the material. This is a limitation of the academic environment and why this book was written outside of an academic institution. (Newman, 2023: p. 245)

As we will see, Newman’s project certainly stands against the narrow professionalism and specialization of much of academic social science, which has limited thinking about the topics to be discussed. She investigates the origins of the French Revolution using demographic patterns, land-tenure and inheritance systems, and comparative research, as well as a framework of sociobiology, to show the causes of major social and political differences between British and French societies, and why a “democratic

(republican) revolution” occurred in France, but not Britain, Ireland, or French Canada.

The works aim to establish the thesis that democracy flourishes in systems that preserve power in local control, and local control is most sustainable when the populations have strong clan and family connections to the locality and land. On the other hand, market capitalism is most resilient in systems that break up local power and families from their locality.

Population viscosity is characterized by living long-term in the same territory with limited dispersal, and being endogamous, involving marriage within one’s tribe, clan or community (Dawkins, 2016: p. 282; Newman, 2023: p. 22). Viscous populations, through the consolidation of kinship relations, increase trust and the capacity for individuals within groups to effectively organise for political actions (Newman, 2023: p. 48), compared to dispersed, atomized populations (Newman, 2023, 44).

Land-Tenure & The Revolution sets out to show that population viscosity promotes political self-determination and population number stability. Newman in reviewing the historical data shows that land-tenure and inheritance practices in France reinforced viscosity, unlike in Britain, which experienced social atomization, produced by land-enclosures and its Salic inheritance system (Laslett, 1965).

Old Regime France, compared to Britain of the time, had a clan-based land-tenure system that was able to transform more readily intergenerational values than the atomized, individualized society of Britain. This higher level of social trust enabled the seeds for the “democratic revolution” to be sown and cultivated over a number of generations. In Britain, the upper classes were much more viscous and endogamous than the lower classes and were able to oppose any revolutionary spirit that might arise from below, so that attempts of a revolution in Britain and Ireland failed.

3. Land-Tenure, the Inheritance Systems and Birth Control

Salic law was imposed by William the Conqueror in 1066 in England, establishing male primogeniture, preventing women from inheriting land. Norman conquest had established this system of male primogeniture, where the rights of the eldest son to succeed to the estate of his family to the exclusion of others, was given. Although Normans (Vikings) were from France, the male primogeniture system had existed only among nobles. Even this was eliminated by Napoleon’s Civil Code, which had equal inheritance for all children. That was not so in Norman England, where Viking tradition held that land acquired in conquest had to be defended, and women were not thought to be capable of this. This meant that apart from the first son, the rest of the family was disinherited, and landless. In turn, land was concentrated in fewer

hands, opening the great masses of people to being landless labor and vulnerable to enclosure, and providing the foundation for industrial capitalism, along with technological innovation and raw materials such as iron and coal (Newman, 2023: p. 113).

The English lower classes were serfs under the Normans, and after the breakdown of feudalism and the emergence of industrial capitalism, they were landless laborers, roaming the land in search of work, supplying cheap labor to the coal and iron industries. This population movement resulted in greater fertility opportunities, with marriage outside of former clans and villages, by contrast to France's viscous and endogamous population, where there was equal inheritance for all children of the entire parental estate (Newman, 2023: p. 31) This was a major factor in the population explosion of Britain in the 19th century.

Old Regime France had very high fertility, and severe poverty in the lower classes, but the population still grew slowly because of late marriages and the high infant and child mortality (Newman, 2023: p. 208). Birth control information and the means for birth control were controlled by the ruling elites, who themselves practiced birth control. However, after the French Revolution, birth control knowledge and the means to achieve it, were available to the lower classes. This information came from a greater democratization of the press. In Old Regime France, the church and monarchy controlled education, writing and publications, but that control ended with the Revolution. Thus, smaller families resulted, and infant mortality decreased.

The decrease in French family size occurred at least a century before such a decrease occurred in Britain; France therefore reduced its population prior to industrialization, presenting a counter-example to the demographic transition thesis. The demographic transition thesis is one of demography's sacred cows. It holds that prior to industrialised economic development, societies were characterized by large families and high mortality, living in poverty. Industrial development with a "trickle down" effect, increased standards of living, with higher per capita income increasing, and longer life expectancy, and family sizes were predicted to decrease. Newman argues that the demographic transition thesis is limited in applicability, with the counter-example of Revolutionary France. Newman hypothesizes that there is a relationship between self-determination/democratization, and the demographic transition, and population regulation.

Newman argued in her earlier books, *The Urge to Disperse* (Newman, 2011) and *Demography, Territory and Law* (Newman, 2013), that contrary to Malthus's early work, human and animal populations generally adjust to the carrying capacities of their environments, due to the operation of the Westermarck effect, and incest avoidance. The Westermarck effect, is similar to incest avoidance, but is the more general lack of sexual attraction among people living together in the early part of their lives. This is

not a conscious process, but Newman hypothesizes that it is regulated by hormones (Newman, 2023: 263). Studies show, reviewed elsewhere by her (Newman, 2013), that hormones are affected by the presence of close family members, such as the suppression of oestrus to promote incest avoidance. This thesis that these hormonal effects will regulate fertility in accordance with the available space, was also discussed by Newman in previous works (Newman, 2013). More viscous populations are thus better able to control their population numbers, than more atomized/individuated ones.

4. The French Revolution

Newman's thesis is that the viscosity of pre-Revolutionary France enabled the Revolution to succeed, while she describes the many attempted revolutions in Britain that failed, including the Peasants' Revolt of 1381. The details of the revolts were scrubbed from historical memory as the royal administration killed as many known revolutionaries as they could. Particularly after the French Revolution, the British government put spies in various societies that could pose a possible threat. The British Chartist land-rights protests of April 10, 1849, saw hundreds of thousands of protestors gathered near parliament but "[t]he elites told them to go home – and they did" (Newman, 2023: p. 36).

In France by contrast, the French revolutionaries were largely professionals, lawyers, doctors, business people, travelling salesmen, and pedlars. The pedlars were important in distributing revolutionary pamphlets, and this disturbed the Old Regime so much that laws were passed to prohibit them doing such distribution, under pain of execution. But that did not stop the pedlars. And, as well, pedlars distributed literature normalising contraception, along with pornography, and satire of the monarchy.

Newman gives a detailed discussion of the role of secret societies in disseminating the revolutionary spirit, including the controversial role of the Freemasons. Freemasonry lodges were popular in France, with the nobles and the bourgeois, and such lodges were infiltrated by revolutionaries. Contrary to conspiratorial literature in the English language, Newman follows French historians as seeing Freemasonry being penetrated by revolutionaries, rather than vice versa. The English conspiratorial literature holds that the Illuminati were the dominant influence behind the French Freemasons. Newman shows from the French sources that there was little influence of the Illuminati upon the French Freemasons (Newman, 2023: p. 75).

5. Conclusion

Newman's four volume work makes use of comparative historical and political analysis, using multiple disciplines, including demography, history, political theory,

statistical analysis, ecology and genetics, as well as literary analysis. Detailed evidence is drawn from English and French language sources, with much of the French sources not previously discussed in English, not having been translated. As a bilingual work, many French historical sources are translated into English for the first time in a publication. *Land-Tenure & The Revolution* is thus an immensely scholarly work, with 810 lengthy footnotes, spanning 98 pages.

Newman's book is a major contribution to the fields it spans, not only for its insights into the social and ecological causes of the French Revolution, and population regulation, but also for an implicit contribution to the problem that was discussed in section 1 above: what should real philosophy be, and do? In my view, real philosophy is a return to the "natural philosophy" ideals of the past, updated for the present world-situation, a multi-disciplinary approach to the challenges of our times, that eschews narrow specialization and departmentalism, seeking to understand the world in the broadest terms. Real philosophy in this sense is something that can, and should, also be done by those working in the social and natural sciences, insofar as that approach will incorporate empirical knowledge, as well as conceptual and methodological analysis: so it is something to be done outside of contemporary orthodox professional academic philosophy departments.

This essay has given one illustration of how such an approach would work, and the same spirit of inquiry should be employed not only in a reformed extra-professional-academic philosophy, as real philosophy, but also in other disciplines such as psychology, sociology, geography, and especially economics, all of which need to begin to see the world as being a radically larger and radically more complex place than the view from their professional academic playpens presently affords them (Smith et al., 1999).

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