

The Ohio State University
Department of Geography
COLLOQUIUM SERIES 2012-2013

**Governing (Over) population: Famine,
contraception, and empire in historical perspective**

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To trace a history of ideas about overpopulation, this paper focuses on two pivotal events in the nineteenth-century British Empire: a massive famine in southern India (1876-1878), and the criminal prosecution of Annie Besant and Charles Bradlaugh (1877) for disseminating information about contraception in England. I consider how each of these events contributed to a popular conviction that India was an overpopulated place, despite the fact that empirically, population growth rates were negligible. The perception of Indian overpopulation proved to be deep-rooted and longstanding, shaping ideas not only about political governance and economy, but also about sexuality, reproduction, and women's bodies. By focusing on the development of these ideas in colonial India in the 1870s, the paper challenges assumptions that there existed a history of liberating reproductive rights in the West that can be easily separated from repressive population control in the colonies. Rather, both colony and metropole were implicated in a shared history of population and reproduction, which in turn was shaped by imperial circulations of discourse, modes of governance, and capital.

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