The Population Myth--I

by Murray Bookchin

The "population problem" has a Phenix-like existence: it rises from the ashes at least every generation and sometimes every decade or so. The prophecies are usually the same namely, that human beings are populating the earth in "unprecedented numbers" and "devouring" its resources like a locust plague.

In the days of the Industrial Revolution, Thomas Malthus, a craven English parson, formulated his notorious "law of population" which asserts that while food supplies expand only arithmetically, population soars geometrically. Only by wars, famines, and disease (Malthus essentially argued) can a "balance" be struck between population and food supplies. Malthus did not mean this to be an argument to foster human welfare; it was an unfeeling justification for the inhuman
miseries inflicted on the mass of English people by land grabbing aristocrats and exploitative "industrialists." True to the mean-spirited atmosphere of the times, Malthus opposed attempts to alleviate poverty because they would remove the limits imposed on "population growth" by prolonging the lives of the poor.

Malthus' "law" entered into Darwin's explanation of evolution and reemerged from biology as "social-Darwinism." Propounded vigorously in the U.S. and England a generation later, this theory reduced society to a "jungle," in effect, in which a "law of survival of the fittest" justified the wanton plundering of the world by the wealthy or the "fittest," while the laboring classes, dispossessed farmers, and Third World "savages" were reduced to penury, presumably because they were "unfit" to survive. The arrogance of bankers, industrialists, and colonialists in the "Gilded Age" at the turn of the century who dined on lavish dishes, while starved bodies were collected regularly in the city streets of the western world -- all testified to a harsh class system that invoked "natural law" to justify the opulence enjoyed by the ruling few and the hunger suffered by the ruled many.

Barely a generation later, Malthusianism acquired an explicitly racist character. During the early twenties, when "Anglo Saxon" racism peaked in the U.S. against "darker" peoples like Italians, Jews, and so-called "Eastern Europeans" the notion of "biological inferiority" led to explicitly exclusionary immigration laws that favored "northern Europeans" over other, presumably "subhuman" peoples. Malthusianism, now prefixed with a "neo" to render it more contemporary, thoroughly permeated this legislation. Population in the U.S. had to be "controlled" and American "cultural" (read: racial) purity had to be rescued -- be it from the "Yellow Peril" of Asia or the "Dark Peril" of the Latin and Semitic worlds.

Nazism did not have to invent its racial imagery of sturdy "Aryans" who are beleaguered by "subhuman" dark people, particularly Jews. Hitler saw himself as the protector of a "northern European culture" from "Hebraic superstitions," to use the juicy language of a contemporary well-known Arizona writer -- a "cultural" issue that was riddled by fascist sociobiology. From Hitler's "northern European" viewpoint, Europe was "over populated" and the continent's ethnic groups had to be sifted out according to their racial background. Hence the gas chambers and crematoriums of Auschwitz, the execution squads that followed the German army
into Russia in the summer of 1941, and the systematic and mechanized slaughter of millions in a span of three or four years.

The Phenix Rises Again

One would have thought that the Second World War and the ugly traditions that fed into it might have created a deeper sense of humanity and a more sensitive regard for life -- nonhuman as well as human.

Judging from the way the "population problem" has surfaced again, however, we seem even more brutalized than ever. By the late 1940s, before the wartime dead had fully decayed, the "neo Malthusians" were back at work -- this time over the use of newly developed pesticides for eradicating malaria and antibiotics to control killing infections in the Third World. Even eminent biologists like William Vogt entered the fray with books and articles, directing their attacks at modern medicine for preserving human life and predicting famines in Britain between 1948 and 1978 and imminent famine in Germany and Japan. The debate, which often took an ugly turn, was overshadowed by the Korean War and the blandly optimistic Eisenhower era, followed by the stormy sixties period with its message of idealism, public service, and, if you please, "humanism." But the decade barely came to a close when neo-Malthusianism surfaced again -- this time with grim books that warned of a "population bomb" and advocated an "ethics" of "triage" in which the nations that were recommended for U.S. aid seemed uncannily to fall on the American side of the "Cold War," irrespective of their population growth-rates.

Viewed from a distance of two decades later, the predictions made by many neo-Malthusians seem almost insanely ridiculous. We were warned, often in the mass media, that by the 1980s, for example, artificial islands in the oceans would be needed to accomodate the growing population densities on the continents. Our oil supplies, we were told with supreme certainty, would be completely depleted by the end of the century. Wars between starving peoples would ravage the planet, each nation seeking to plunder the hidden food stores of the others. By the late seventies, this "debate" took a welcome breather -- but it has returned again in full
bloom in the biological verbiage of ecology. Given the hysteria and the exaggerated "predictions" of earlier such "debates," the tone today is a little calmer. But in some respects it is even more sinister. We have not been forced to turn our oceans into real estate, nor have we run out of oil, food, material resources -- or neo-Malthusian prophets. But we are acquiring certain bad intellectual habits and we are being rendered more gullible by a new kind of religiosity that goes under the name of "spirituality" with a new-styled paganism and primitivism.

First of all, we are thinking more quantitatively than qualitatively -- all talk about "wholeness," "oneness," and "interconnectedness" to the contrary notwithstanding. For example, when we are told that the "population issue" is merely a "matter of numbers," as one Zero Population Growth writer put it, then the vast complexity of population growth and diminution is reduced to a mere numbers game, like the fluctuations of Dow stock-market averages. Human beings, turned into digits, can thus be equated to fruitflies and their numbers narrowly correlated with food supply. This is "following the Dow" with a vengeance. Social research, as distinguished from the Voodoo ecology that passes under the name of "deep ecology" these days, reveals that human beings are highly social beings, not simply a species of mammals. Their behavior is profoundly conditioned by their social status, as people who belong to a particular gender, hierarchy, class group, ethnic tradition, community, historical era, or adhere to a variety of ideologies. They also have at their disposable powerful technologies, material resources, science, and a naturally endowed capacity for conceptual thought that provides them with a flexibility that few, if any, nonhuman beings possess, not to speak of evolving institutions and capacities for systematic group cooperation. Nothing, here, is more illusory than to "follow the Dow." The bad intellectual habits of thinking out demographic -- or even "resource" -- issues in a linear, asocial, and ahistorical manner tends to enter into all ecological problems, thanks very much to the neo-Malthusians and to a "biocentrism" that equates people to nonhuman life-forms.

Secondly, by reducing us to studies of line graphs, bar graphs, and statistical tables, the neo-Malthusians literally freeze reality as it is. Their numerical extrapolations do not construct any reality that is new; they mere extend, statistic by statistic, what is basically old and given. They are "futurists" in the most shallow sense of the word, not "utopians" in the best sense. We are taught to accept
society, behavior, and values as they are, not as they should be or even could be. This procedure places us under the tyranny of the status quo and divests us of any ability to think about radically changing the world. I have encountered very few books or articles written by neo-Malthusians that question whether we should live under any kind of money economy at all, any statist system of society, or be guided by profit oriented behavior. There are books and articles aplenty that explain "how to" become a "morally responsible" banker, entrepreneur, landowner, "developer," or, for all I know, arms merchant. But whether the whole system called capitalism (forgive me!), be it corporate in the west or bureaucratic in the east, must be abandoned if we are to achieve an ecological society is rarely discussed. Thousands may rally around "Earth First!"'s idiotic slogan -- "Back to the Pleistocene!" -- but few, if they are conditioned by neo-Malthusian thinking, will rally around the cry of the Left Greens -- "Forward to an Ecological Society!"

Lastly, neo-Malthusian thinking is the most backward in thinking out the implications of its demands. If we are concerned, today, and rightly so, about registering AIDS victims, what are the totalitarian consequences about creating a Bureau of Population Control, as some Zero Population Growth wits suggested in the early 1970s? Imagine what consequences would follow from increasing the state's power over reproduction? Indeed, what areas of personal life would not be invaded by slowly enlarging the state's authority over our most intimate kinds of human relations? Yet such demands in one form or another have been raised by neo-Malthusians on grounds that hardly require the mental level to examine the Statistical Abstract of the United States.

The Social Roots of Hunger

This arithmetic mentality which disregards the social context of demographics is incredibly short-sighted. Once we accept without any reflection or criticism that we live in a "grow-or-die" capitalistic society in which accumulation is literally a law of economic survival and competition is the motor of "progress," anything we have to say about population is basically meaningless. The biosphere will eventually be destroyed whether five billion or fifty million live on the planet. Competing firms in
a "dog-eat-dog" market must outproduce each other if they are to remain in existence. They must plunder the soil, remove the earth's forests, kill off its wildlife, pollute its air and waterways not because their intentions are necessarily bad, although they usually are -- hence the absurdity of the spiritualistic pablum in which Americans are currently immersed -- but because they must simply survive. Only a radical restructuring of society as a whole, including its anti-ecological sensibilities, can remove this all commanding social compulsion -- not rituals, yoga, or encounter groups, valuable as some of these practices may be (including "improving" our earning capacity and "power" to command).

But the most sinister feature about neo-Malthusianism is the extent to which it actively deflects us from dealing with the social origins of our ecological problems -- indeed, the extent to which it places the blame for them on the victims of hunger rather than those who victimize them. Presumably, if there is a "population problem" and famine in Africa, it is the ordinary people who are to blame for having too many children or insisting on living too long-- an argument advanced by Malthus nearly two centuries ago with respect to England's poor. The viewpoint not only justifies privilege; it fosters brutalization and degrades the neo-Malthusians even more than it degrades the victims of privilege.

And frankly -- they often lie. Consider the issue of population and food supply in terms of mere numbers and we step on a wild merry-go-round that does not support neo-Malthusian predictions of a decade ago, much less a generation ago. Such typically neo-Malthusian stunts as determining the "per capita consumption" of steel, oil, paper, chemicals, and the like of a nation by dividing the total tonnage of the latter by the national population, such that every man, women, and child is said to "consume"
a resultant quantity, gives us a picture that is blatantly false and functions as a sheer apologia for the upper classes. The steel that goes into a battleship, the oil that is used to fuel a tank, and the paper that is covered by ads hardly depicts the human consumption of materials. Rather, it is stuff consumed by all the Pentagons of the world that help keep a "grow-or-die" economy in operation -- goods, I may add, whose function is to destroy and whose destiny is to be destroyed. The shower of such "data" that descends upon us by neo-Malthusian writers is worse than obscurantist; it is vicious. The same goes for the shopping malls that are constructed that dump their toxic "consumer goods" on us and the costly highways that converge upon them. To ignore the fact that we are the victims of a vast, completely entrapping social order which only a few can either control or escape from, is to literally deaden the political insight of ordinary people -- whose "wants," of course, are always blamed for every dislocation in our ecological dislocations.

On the demographic merry-do-round, the actual facts advanced
by many neo-Malthusians is no less misleading. In the West, particularly in countries like Germany which the neo-Malthusian prophets of the late 1940s warned would soar in population well beyond food supplies, birth rates have fallen beyond the national replacement rate. This is true of Denmark, Austria, Hungary, indeed, much of Europe generally, including Catholic Italy and Ireland -- where tradition, one would expect, would make for huge families. So traditions that foster the emergence of large, predominantly male families by which the high birth rates of India and China were explained, are not frozen in stone. The U.S., which the more hysterical neo-Malthusians of some two decades ago predicted would be obliged to live on oceanic rafts, is approaching zero population growth and, by now, it may be lower.

Nor is food supply lagging behind overall population growth. Cereal production rose by 12 percent since 1975, making it possible recently for even Bangladesh to drastically reduce its grain imports. The markets of western Asia are being flooded by
Chinese corn. Even "barren" Saudi Arabia is selling off its accumulations of wheat, and, in Finland, farmers are so over loaded with surplus wheat that they are turning it into mink fodder and glue. India, the so-called "worst case example," tripled its production of grain between 1950 and 1984. Its greatest problem at present is not population growth but trans portation from grain-surplus areas to grain-shortage ones -- a major source of many Indian famines in the past.

Although Lester R. Brown of Worldwatch Institute divides the world "into countries where population growth is slow or nonexistent and where living conditions are improving, and those where population growth is rapid and living conditions are deteriorating or in imminent danger of doing so" one might easily conclude by the mere juxtaposition of Brown's phrases that declining living conditions are due solely to increasing population. Not so -- if one closely looks at even Brown's data as well as other sources. How much of the disparity between population growth and bad living conditions is due in Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan,
for example, largely to patterns of land ownership? In southern Asia, some 30 million rural households own no land or very little, a figure that represents 40 percent of nearly all rural households in the subcontinent. Similar figures are emerging from African data and, very disastrously, Latin America. Land distribution is now so lopsided in the Third World in favor of commercial farming and a handful of elite landowners that one can no longer talk of a "population problem" without relating it to a class and social problem.

It would take several volumes to untangle the mixed threads that intertwine hunger with landownership, material improvements with declining population growth, technology with food production, the fragility of familial customs with the needs of women to achieve full personhood, internal civil wars (often financed by western imperialists) with famines -- and the role of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund with patterns of food cultivation. Westerners have only recently gained a small glimpse of the role of the IMF and World Bank in producing a
terrible famine in the Sudan by obliging the country to shift from the cultivation of food in areas of rich soil to the cultivation of cotton.

This much must be emphasized: if the "population issue" is indeed the "litmus test" of one's ecological outlook, as the top honcho of "Earth First!", David Foreman, has declared, then it is a wildly scrambled bundle of social threads, not a Voodoo ecology talisman. Greens, ecologically oriented people, and radicals of all kinds will have to unravel this bundle with an acute sense of the social, not by playing a numbers game with human life and clouding up that social sense with thoroughly unreliable statistical extrapolations and apologias for corporate interests.

Nor can human beings be reduced to mere digits by neo-Malthusian advocates without reducing the world of life to digits --- at least without replacing a decent regard for life, including human life, with a new inhuman form of eco-brutalism.

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