Malthus: Still Wrong After All These Years

Ed Dodson and I particiapted in a debate at the Bridgeport conference on the topic of whether human population is a threat to the world's ecosystem. Ed's paper in support of his presentation can be found at www.cooperativeindividualism.org *— Lindy Davies*

What is the "overpopulation argument", exactly? There are actually a few different ones, and they are sometimes conflated in confusing ways. First there are the hardcore Malthusians, who argue that human numbers inexorably tend to outstrip our means of subsistence, no matter what. For adherents, this assertion has the force of dogma, and it is buttressed with numerical projections of existing trends. The website of the US organization "Negative Population Growth", with its tables of ever-increasing numbers, is a good example.

Georgists have traditionally been staunchly opposed to such rot. After all, we advocate an economic remedy that would remove the syndrome of problems associated with population growth. Unfortunately, though, some Georgists are starting to think that because people are so darned stupid, they show no signs of implementing our solution anytime soon. Because we can't get traction with the real solution, we should switch to the interim goal of reducing fertility. Ed Dodson isn't alone in this view; he has just taken the brave step of committing these "heretical" views to paper.

They follow the lead of a more sophisticated group of modern zeepoppers, which we might call the Eco-Malthusians, who acknowledge that we must do more than simply focus on human fertility. Nevertheless, the Eco-Malthusians argue, the carrying capacity of the Earth is being pushed beyond its limits, and this certainly does correlate with increasing human numbers. They do tend to admit (often in passing) that the average North American does a heck of a lot more to trash the Earth than the average Bangladeshi. Nevertheless, they remind us with the greatest urgency that the third-worlders are breeding like – well, really, really fast, anyway, and they must be stopped, before it's too late.

It might be fair to ask, "Too late for what?" If you think, "too late for human community and dignity, too late for the billion-plus people who live without clean water or sanitation, too late for the children of Africa," you would be answering as a good Georgist, but you would also be misinterpreting the message of the Eco-Malthusians. They tend to argue that the primacy of human rights and freedoms is a luxury we cannot afford in an age of environmental dangers. By their lights, the worst problem isn't the terrible things that human beings do to each other, but rather the terrible things that *all* human beings are doing to the Earth. After all, the starving,

abused whooping cranes have already been eradicated from the marginal districts they used to inhabit – why should the starving, abused human beings be maintained in *their* marginal districts – when human beings are the ones causing all the damage in the first place?

My purpose here is not to pick a fight with the moral values of Earth Firstlers. Nor have I any desire to downplay the grave environmental dangers we face. My concern here is with the conceptual and tactical errors that I believe are caused by an over-arching concern about human population. Preoccupation with reducing human fertility will not – cannot, I believe – serve to solve deeper social and environmental problems. Furthermore, it's worth mentioning that the Eco-Malthusian focus on sheer numbers, rather than the yawning disparities in wealth, life expectancy, and human potential, rekindles the old-time charge that in terms of political economy, Malthusianism offers a convenient excuse for the status quo.

All of these issues are glaringly evident in the work of one of the most influential writers on environmental issues today, Lester R. Brown, Director of the Worldwatch Institute. By way of example, then, I will review a monograph, of which Brown was the lead author, that Worldwatch published in 1998, on the 200th anniversary of Malthus's *Essay on the Principle of Population*. It was called *Beyond Malthus: Sixteen Dimensions of the Population Problem*. I think Brown's work is a good focus here because he is widely respected, not considered any sort of eco-nut – yet he shows in this paper and in subsequent writings that he is one of the most thoroughgoing Malthusians writing today. In the introduction to *Beyond Malthus* he pays tribute to the Reverend, affording Malthus's famous arithmetic/exponential formula the status of a scientific law.

Numbers are a key element of the Malthusian methodology, which is all about extrapolating from past trends. It's really inaccurate to say "current trends", for to be a trend at all, a social phenomenon must have a considerable amount of history. *Beyond Malthus* is, then, an arithmetical exercise to scare us about *what will happen* if what went on from 1950 to 2000 continues until 2050. Extrapolating from trends is, of course, what demographers do; it is how they come up with estimates of human population. But true demographers base their predictions on many complex, interconnected factors. The current UN model for world population growth – which is accepted by Brown and other writers on both sides of the

argument – predicts a leveling off of world population before the end of the 21st century, at a figure of somewhere between 8 and 11 billion.

Although predictions of overall world population growth have consistently been revised downward over the last forty years, projecting sheer human numbers is considered to be do-able. In some of the more dynamic areas of human life, however, such as technological development or political change, extrapolation from trends has always been wildly inaccurate. We human beings may keep making the same mistakes, but we are very good at coming up with unexpected ways to make them. Brown does nothing, at any rate, to explain why trends in areas such as forest-cutting, meat production or greenhouse-gas emission *should* continue their current trajectories. Many of his graphs show considerable oscillation during the period of recorded history, followed by straight shots toward pessimism in the extrapolated periods. Considering all the unexpected things that happened in the 20th century, one might think the burden of proof should lie with those claiming continuity, but Brown simply assumes it.

Brown's numerical strategy leads to some whoppers. The most striking one in the book, I think, is his statement that growth of the world economy from 1990 to 1997 exceeded the growth during the 10,000 years from the beginning of agriculture until 1950. Apparently that statement is true on some level, but its meaning quite escapes me. Archaeologists have achieved little by way of statistical precision concerning the first few centuries of human agriculture. And anyway, how do we know that "economic growth" meant the same thing then as it does now – or, for that matter, that "economic growth" will mean the same thing in twenty-five years as it does now? The more one examines the various yardsticks for "economic growth", the fuzzier and more problematic the concept gets. The World Bank estimates that 1.3 billion people today live on $1 per day or less. Now, can you, dear reader, imagine yourself actually subsisting on one dollar a day, anywhere in the world today? And yet that 1.3 billion (who, by the way, are breeding like there's no tomorrow) manage to get by somehow. It's closer to the truth to say that those 1.3 billion people, averaging less that $1 per day in *money* income, are not invited to participate in what the pundits call "the global economy" – but, unless they are bombed or poisoned out of existence, they will continue to eke out a living somehow. The irony of this is that when such a person gets a 500% raise, and actually goes out to spend it, the economy is said to have "grown" by that amount. Economic statistics that

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purport to talk about the entire world, then, must be meaningless if they fail to account for the degree to which people participate in the formal, monetized "world economy".

The other problem with "economic growth", of course, is the degree to which it accounts for "illth" – the *dis*-satisfactions caused by damage, degradation and waste. It has begun to dawn on us that an economy can go on churning out increasing supplies of big old American widgets, while actually shrinking in real terms. An economy, meanwhile, that produces *fewer* widgets is truly growing, if those widgets are lighter, more cleanly produced, and longer-lasting. The standard measure of Gross Domestic Product, while still useful for some analytical purposes, is inadequate as a measure of an economy's growth at its fundamental task: providing people with what they want, with satisfactions. As clean air, clean water and some measure of natural diversity become more valuable to people, market demand for them increases, and their provision becomes part of economic growth – whether it is accurately measured or not.

Another problematic area that Brown's number-crunching takes for granted is the status of nations. Brown falls into the familiar trap of treating every member of the UN General Assembly as though it were a co-equal member of the global community. He notes that Somalia "is still treated by UN demographers as a country, but in reality it is not. It is a geographic area inhabited by warring clans – one where ongoing conflict, disintegration of health care services, and widespread hunger combine to raise mortality." This is true in Somalia, however, only to a slightly greater degree than it is in dozens of nations today. Although Brown wrote a book called *World Without Borders*, his population arguments do not question the relative status of the world's governments, beyond the exceptional case of Somalia. He calls on governments to move forward to implement the fertility-reduction plans he advocates. It is painfully evident, though, that the governments whose nations have grossly high birth rates are precisely those which have no prayer of implementing effective fertility-reduction programs.

Brown is dismissive, in this study, of the relative environmental effects of affluent vs. poor consumers. (He refers interested readers to another Worldwatch study on that topic by Alan Durning.) Nevertheless, the numbers that he cites on this score are astounding. *Beyond Malthus* reports that:

• People in the United States consume 1,460 times as much grain per capita as people in India.

• People in the United States emit 17.3 times more atmospheric carbon per capita than people in Africa.

• People in the United States use 13 times as much energy per capita as people in all the developing nations.

• People in OECD nations generate 2.4 times as much municipal waste per capita as people in developing countries.

And yet:

• Women in developing countries have approximately 1.5 more children per capita than do women in the United States.

Brown's numbers are particularly fanciful when he talks about world grain harvests. He goes on and on about the shrinking per capita share of grain land, which, if trends continue, will soon be down to the area of the strip between the ten-yard markers on a football field. He also reports, however, that as world population has doubled between 1950 and 2000, world grain production has almost tripled. In his worry over the potential capacity of developing countries to feed themselves, he notes that "population pressures on a fixed base of land can result in rural landlessness." In other words, more and more people will no longer possess enough land on which to grow their own food – is this not a sure harbinger of Malthusian catastrophe? Well, how many people in the industrial countries possess the land on which they grow their own food? It is also true that hungry Bangladesh has twice as much land under cultivation per capita than well-fed South Korea – and that India, the source of no end of dire statistics on overpopulation and poverty, continues to be a net *exporter* of food. There is much to observe about patterns of international trade and how they contribute to both prosperity and poverty – but to require each nation to have enough arable land for each family to grow its own food is to completely ignore the effects of trade — which is unrealistic, to say the least.

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Unlike Rev. Malthus's arithmetic, the classic demographic transition has been so widely confirmed as to have achieved the status of an accepted scientific theory, and Lester Brown acknowledges it as such. The demographic transition model observes three stages of population growth. In stage one, societies lack modern health care, and high death rates tend to balance out high birth rates. Life is most often nasty, brutish and short, and net population growth is slow. In stage two, access to health care, better nutrition,

etc. cut the death rate, but the birth rate remains high, and population growth is rapid. This was the stage the developing world was in the thick of back in 1962-63, when world population growth reached an all-time high of 2.19% per year. (Since then the rate has slowed to a rate of 1.2% for 2002). Many of the faster-growing nations in today's world, however, such as Nigeria, Ethiopia, Pakistan and Indonesia, are still very much in stage two. In the third demographic stage, birth rates decline to sustainable levels, due to a complex interplay of beneficent social forces including overall living standards, educational levels – particularly for women – and state policy (such as the fertility limits imposed by the Chinese government).

In a truly inspired rhetorical twist, Lester Brown coins a tautology-in-a-term – "demographic fatigue" — to describe the situation of the poorest nations, beset with international debt, political instability and a host of social problems, who are in danger of an accelerating death rate that would revert them to the first demographic phase. In nations such as Zimbabwe, Zambia and Lesotho, the devastation of AIDS and other diseases has already brought this about. But "demographic fatigue" cannot possibly be the cause of these nations' problems. Their increasing numbers, Brown points out, will increase their needs for sanitation facilities, jobs, education, timber, paper and fossil fuels – all things that they have lacked sufficient supplies of *for decades*. There is fatigue, all right – brought about by a sustained, systematic denial of economic opportunity to most of the people.

When they lack all other opportunities, people have always turned to children for economic reasons. By the age of twelve, the average Bangladeshi child contributes more to family income than he or she consumes. When people have economic opportunities, access to education and a sense of a more positive future, they make the rational decision to have fewer children. All around the world, the strongest predictor for lowered fertility is women's levels of access to education and economic participation.

The Eco-Malthusian argument is disabled if it fails to consider the gross disparity in environmental impact between the poor, fast-growing developing world and the affluent, steady-state north. It seems that we are, indeed, facing grave environmental dangers – but they are not caused by poor people in Nigeria or Indonesia having more children. Therefore, restricting the number of children that poor people in Nigeria or Indonesia can have will do very little to solve those problems.

Henry George penned the most stirring and comprehensive refutation of the Malthusian theory ever put to paper, and he articulated the "sovereign remedy" that would render the "population problem" utterly harmless – indeed would make population growth a positive benefit for the entire

community. But, our Geo-Malthusian friends sadly observe, the world has turned its back on the Georgist remedy. We must not cling romantically to a failed program. We must bravely face the challenges of today, and – failing implementation of the single tax – the single most important problem of today is the terrible stress that human population growth is placing on the natural environment. We've got to limit fertility—now!

So we must ask what would be achieved if we succeeded in persuading the teeming breeders of the third world to limit their fertility. Suppose we could somehow manage to limit human fertility on planet Earth to the replacement rate. That would leave us with only about one billion who lack clean water and sanitation – not to mention literacy, adequate health care, primary education or internet access. We'd have to get to work.

> The adult who lacks the means of having medical treatment... is not only prey to preventable morbidity and possibly escapable mortality, but may also be denied the freedom to do various things — for herself and for others — that she may wish to do to be a responsible human being. The bonded laborer born into semislavery, the subjugated girl child stifled by a repressive society, the helpless landless laborer... are all deprived not only in terms of well-being, but also... of the ability to lead responsible lives.... Responsibility *requires* freedom.... The linkage between freedom and responsibility works both ways. Without the substantive freedom and capability to do something, a person cannot be responsible for doing it. But actually having the freedom and capability to do something does impose on the person the duty to consider whether to do it or not.... In this sense, freedom is both necessary and sufficient for responsibility.
>
> — Amartya Sen

Those who foresee ecological chaos happening long before we implement the single tax may well be right. Things might get very bad. I submit, however, that all-or-nothing thinking of this sort can only lead us to despair. Although he did admit the possibility of a return to barbarism, Henry George himself didn't waste time on dwelling on it. Instead, he provided a clearly-delineated continuum along which to measure our progress. Initiatives that serve to increase overall levels of association, or equality, or – preferably – both, will justly and sustainably move society in the direction we want it to go.

The modern Nobelist Amartya Sen has articulated a remarkably similar point of view in his book *Development as Freedom.* Development, in Sen's analysis, depends on not only political freedoms but the economic freedoms to make a living, seek an education, save and plan for the future, etc. He critiques conventional assessments of development for focusing too narrowly on "economic" factors as defined in industrial countries, and discounting the real

economic choices that people must face. It seems to me that if Henry George and Amartya Sen had the chance, they could share a most fruitful conversation on the factors that make for social retardation – and human progress.

This debate presents us with two choices for our activist energies: working straightforwardly for the single tax, or placing that goal on the back burner and concentrating on reducing fertility. Let us evaluate those two choices by George's criteria.

Fertility reduction *per se* deprives poor people of association with the children they need to help them eke out a meager living, and care for them in old age. Its application is unequal, for it singles out the most impoverished people for special consideration. It does nothing to foster human association, for it focuses simplistically on a single problem without any requirement for cultural understanding or sympathy. It does nothing to foster equality, for it does not address the deep poverty that exists among the people it deals with. In fact, by depriving poor people of the economic resource of their children, it serves to deepen inequality.

It may be that family planning, as part of an integrated strategy of poverty reduction (which included suitable funding for infrastructure, education and health needs) could escape some of the above criticisms. Indeed, research shows that it is most effective in the context of an overall anti-poverty program, and least effective when pursued solely.

Working straightforwardly for the single tax, on the other hand, fosters equality by emphasizing popular, universal education as a strategy, and by affirming humanity's equal right to share in the gifts of nature. It fosters association by working to penalize land-hoarding, reducing the barriers imposed by urban blight and sprawl. I think the choice is clear. **GJ**

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