

POPULATION

TOWARDS TEN BILLION

The Green movement, especially its left wing, has never been good at tackling the issue of population. That is not to say that Greens refuse to acknowledge the problem. Few deny that the tripling of the world's population in one lifetime – from 2.3 billion in 1940 to seven billion in 2012 – is seriously aggravating global environmental issues. Global warming, deforestation, species extinction, overfishing, intensive agriculture, industrial pollution: these problems could be much more easily solved, or might even fade away, if there weren't so many people.

But recognising that population levels might be a problem is not the same as advocating that "something should be done". Much of the green movement has shied away from taking any stance on population, preferring to focus on political or technical solutions to environmental problems. Robin Maynard and Jonathan Porritt recently pressed eight of the largest environment NGOs in Britain to explain their position on population and found all of them, with the exception of Friends of the Earth, more or less reluctant to do so.¹ *The Land* is equally guilty. In 16 issues, over eight years, we have not carried a single article on the subject of population. We have gone along with the tendency to consider the growth of the human population to a projected peak of nine or ten billion as inexorable, a fact of life one can do little to alter.

In some quarters mention of population has become almost taboo. In an essay published in 2012 entitled "Why the Silence on Population?", Martha Campbell writes:

"In some ways lack of attention to population has been combined with actual hostility toward raising the population question. Many young people on university campuses have been taught over the past 15 years that the connection between population growth and the environment is not an acceptable subject for discussion. Indeed in many circles it is politically incorrect to say that slowing population growth will help to make it possible to preserve the environment."²

Why Population Control Isn't PC

There are understandable reasons for this, and many of them are to be found in the work of Thomas Malthus, whose *Essay on the Principles of Population*, published in 1798, propelled the hitherto neglected issue of population into the political mainstream. There was some truth to his claim that humans, like other successful species, have a tendency to multiply to the point where their numbers exceed the carrying capacity of their habitat, at which point by some means – fair or foul, but usually foul – population growth is inevitably checked.

Malthus got his original inspiration for his essay on population from a study of predator/prey relations between goats and wild dogs on the South Seas island of Juan Fernandez. But unlike goats and dogs, humans are capable of finding co-operative solutions to population pressures. In Ladakh:

"Adaption to scarce resources sometimes involved polyandry. A number of Ladakhi brothers would marry the same woman, and that helped to keep the population down because although the gender ratio was roughly 50:50 many women didn't marry and bear children. This practice was supported by the status given to members of the religious community. An unmarried woman had a very comfortable position as a nun, and both the nuns and the celibate monks further helped support the relatively stable population growth rate."³ (See "Singular Lives", p.41).

Other cultures' solutions, though, have been bloodier. Marvin Harris, discussing tribes in New Guinea, suggests that the need to triumph in wars between clans means that male children are valued as potential warriors, while female children are undervalued, leading to deliberate or negligent female infanticide.⁴ Whether or not Harris' interpretation is correct, the undervaluing of females and female infanticide have been features of many cultures, and are still evident today in the gender selection technologies that produce a disturbing surplus of males in countries such as India and China.

Disproportionate impact on women is a key reason why focussing on population control has often been considered politically incorrect. Recent history provides good reason for this: the coercive birth control methods promoted by Western agencies and local governments in 'third world' countries in the 1970s and 1980s, sometimes including enforced sterilisations of poor women, were rightly considered patriarchal as well as racist. After the 1994 UN Conference on Population in Cairo, according to Martha Campbell:

"Drawing attention to any connection between population growth and environmental destruction became taboo, because such a connection was viewed as disadvantageous to women. 'Malthusian' and even 'demographic' became derogatory terms describing anyone still concerned about population growth."²

"Birth control" and "family planning" have now been rebranded as "reproductive health". The emphasis is on educating and empowering women, so that they can choose to have fewer children.

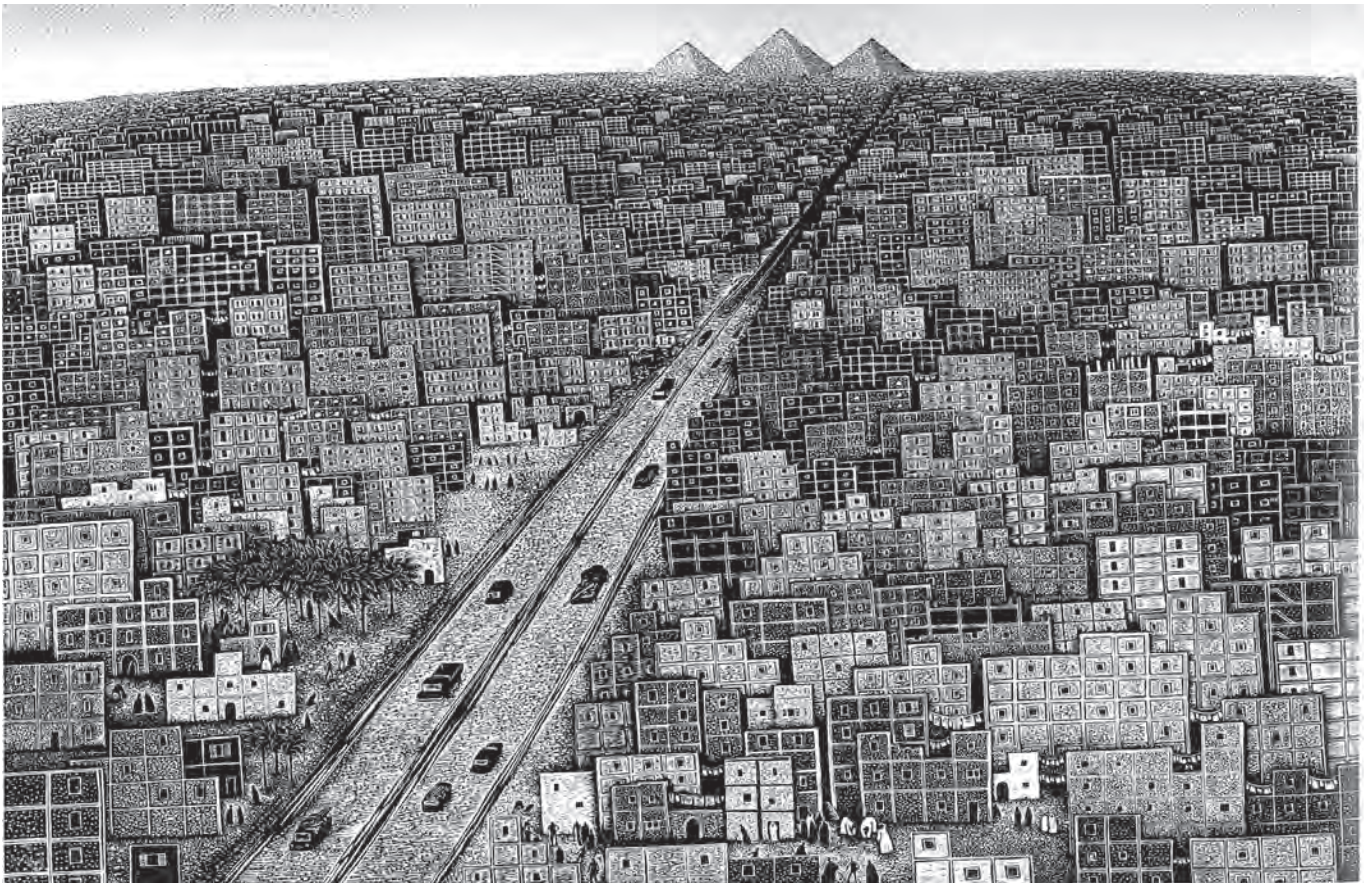
The Malthusian Fallacy

Malthus's appeal to "the laws of nature", to explain why the poor should be left to starve, is particularly repellent:

"By the laws of nature independently of any institutions, except the great one of property, which is absolutely necessary in order to attain any considerable produce, no person has any claim of right on society for subsistence if his labour will not purchase it . . . A man who is born into a world already possessed, if he cannot get subsistence from his parents on whom he has a just demand, and if the society do not want his labour, has no claim of right to the smallest portion of food, and, in fact, has no business to be where he is."⁵

The exception made for the "great institution of property" makes a nonsense of Malthus's appeal to nature. No goat or wild dog secures more than it requires for its own subsistence, and hence starvation arises only when carrying capacity is breached. But in a human society where individuals accumulate land and resources that they do not need, rendering them inaccessible to others, misery and starvation occur well before that point. The "laws of nature" are a false analogy that Malthus invoked to salve the conscience of the privileged class to which he belonged.

Few people or governments today openly subscribe to Malthus's view that welfare programmes should be scrapped because they encourage the poor to breed. But the legacy of the Malthusian fallacy persists in the suspicion, often justified, that the rhetoric of overpopulation is employed to disguise the impacts of privilege and exploitation. Incursions of 'squatters' into forests in South America or Africa are blamed on overpopulation, when frequently they have been



Hilary Paynter

Cairo, the largest city in Africa (population 12 million), hosted the “watershed” UN Conference on Population and Development in 1994.

displaced by the enclosure of land to grow crops exported to wealthy countries. Politicians in Britain agonise about rising population in Africa, failing to note that England is more densely populated than any country on the African continent, except possibly Rwanda, while British citizens rely on “ghost acres” around the world to support an unsustainable way of life. For some on the left of the environmental movement, the population debate is irrevocably tainted by Malthus, and they refuse to go near it.

I=PC

The debate, in its polite form, often focuses on the formula I=PAT, in which human impact upon the environment is framed as the product of Population, Affluence and Technology. This formula elaborates the more basic truth that total Impact equals the number of People multiplied by how much they each Consume, or in algebraic form I=PC. Cornucopians argue that technological improvements such as GM and energy efficiency will be sufficient to address increased impacts arising from increases in population or affluence. Many environmentalists think otherwise, but are divided as to whether Population or Consumption should be the primary target for reductions.

For example in 1992, Paul Harrison, author of *The Greening of Africa* stated:

“The poorest one billion must increase their consumption. The middle three billion will go on aiming for the Western dream – including cars. The richest billion will not readily renounce even part of their affluence. Technology must be softened but don’t let’s expect miracles. Population is actually the easiest of the three knots to cut.”⁶

Twenty years and two billion people later Martha Campbell writes:

“Population is the multiplier of everything we do and everything we consume. While we need to consume less it is actually easier to change family size around the world than it is to change patterns of consumption. There is a large unmet

need for family planning today, while it is likely to take a long time for people to want to reduce their consumption.”⁹

On the other hand Fred Pearce writes in 2014:

“But why do we blame the poor in Africa for having babies when the real issue is overconsumption closer to home? It is the ravenous demands of the rich world that are enlarging the human footprint on our planet - pumping greenhouse gases into the air, polluting the oceans, trashing forests and the rest. Any further rise in numbers of poor people will barely figure in that.”⁷

These opposing outlooks could be viewed as two sides of a collective fatalism – “we can’t do much about population” and “we can’t do much about consumption” – with each camp unwilling to admit that we can’t do much about either.

The dominant view is that population will stabilise of its own accord (perhaps at around ten billion) because as people become better educated, richer and more urbanised, their birth rate tends to go down: the population issue is being settled by “development”. However as people become better educated, richer and more urbanised, their consumption of resources increases, so it is questionable how much net reduction in impact there will be as this decline in the birth rate materialises. Extricating humanity from this Catch 22 situation would seem to require dramatically lowering the consumption of elites and rich countries, while finding ways of reducing population, both North and South, that are non-coercive and don’t rely on promoting unsustainable consumer lifestyles.

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