

The myth of overpopulation

In 1798, regarding with horror the tide of republican sentiment sweeping out of revolutionary France, the English aristocracy spawned a champion for their anti-democratic cause.

In reply to the revolutionary code of liberty, equality and fraternity, the Reverend Thomas Malthus advocated enforcement of wage slavery, unequal distribution of wealth and strengthened rule by those who owned property.

In *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, Malthus masked, behind dubious arithmetic calculation and unfounded generalization, a fierce resistance to the legacy of the French Revolution—faith in the perfectability of society and belief that the human condition can be changed for the better.

Today, similarly aghast at the advance of anti-imperialist movements in Asia, Africa and Latin America, the reactionary forces have produced their own defenders.

Barry Commoner's essay on population and poverty, reprinted from *Ramparts* magazine in the *Chevron* (September 19), is a true successor to Malthus' scandalous attack on the people of the world.

Commoner makes a great show of piercing the arguments of the most blatant racists and defenders of imperialism. This has become a popular position, especially in view of the remarkable record established by China over the past quarter century in drastically improving the living standard of its people, and with the rise of popular liberation movements in colonized countries. To use a phrase of the '60's, it's radical-chic.

But pious sermons about ending "the exploitation of poor nations by rich nations" aside, Commoner propagates fundamentally erroneous views about the nature of and solution to the pressing problems of the world's people.

Commoner, then, is a latter-day Thomas Malthus.

At heart, Commoner accepts and repeats the outrageous lie that people are a burden on the world, rather than its most valuable resource and greatest hope for its own perpetuation in peace and prosperity.

Says Commoner: "There is a way to control the rapid growth of population in developing countries. It is to help them develop—and more rapidly achieve the level of welfare that everywhere in the world is the real motivation for balanced population."

Despite his assertions that widespread hunger in the world is not evidence that the world's population has outrun its capacity to produce sufficient food, Commoner continues to regard limiting the number of people on the earth as a solution to hunger.

Salvation, claims Commoner, lies in doling out just enough wealth for the undeveloped world to realize the economic incentive to restricted reproduction that comes with luxury. (This fallacy will be dealt with later.) He has not transcended Malthus' argument that "The power of population is indefinitely greater than the power in the earth to produce subsistence for man. Population, when unchecked, increases in a geometric ratio. Subsistence increases only in an arithmetic ratio. A slight acquaintance with numbers will show the immensity of the first power in comparison of the second."

It is instructive to recall Frederick Engels' reply to Malthus: "Where has it been proved that the productivity of the land increases in arithmetic progression? The area of land is limited—that is perfectly true. But the labour power to be employed on this area increases together with the population; and even if we assume that the increase of output associated with this increase of labour is not always proportionate to the latter, there still remains a third element—which the economists, however, never consider as important—namely, science, the progress of which is just as limitless and at least as rapid as that of population."

Commoner is only one of many who refuse to recognize the immense capacity of the earth and its people to produce wealth and food.

These latter-day doom-mongers insist that both extensive (that is, increasing acreage under cultivation) and intensive (that is, applying more labor and technology to the same land) cultivation of the earth has already proceeded to its limits. Yet there is still mass starvation.

And science, too, has become the god that failed. The "green revolution" was a short-term, Pyrrhic success, these population pessimists contend. This increased food production is a phenomenon which can only be duplicated at prohibitive expense. Skeptics cite the huge demand for fertilizer and fuel, which cannot now be supplied because of energy "shortage" and high cost.

Moreover, this new-found productivity only spawned greater population, which now presses against dwindling food stocks.

The slightest familiarity with China's experience of the past 26 years disproves these arguments. It is significant that throughout Commoner's lengthy article no mention is made of China. This is no oversight. He who is so blind as to overlook the lesson taught by 800 million people engaged in a day-to-day refutation of Malthus is blinded by ideology, not by physiology.

On the eve of the establishment of the People's Republic, China was incapable of sustaining more people, according to a doom theorist of the day (*Road to Survival*, William Vogt, 1949).

Yet since then China's population has risen by nearly 60 per cent, from about 500 million to about 800 million. And, in the same period, annual grain output has more than doubled, rising from 110 million tons to 250 million tons.

China has conducted a "green revolution" of its own—including the development of "miracle" rice strains—without the attendant problems of fertilizer scarcity, inappropriate mechanization, land monopolization and extravagant profit accumulation by imperialist corporations ostensibly sponsoring the food drive.

The conclusion is undeniable. Immense reservoirs of stifled human energy and wastefully-applied labor power are unleashed with the physical eradication of capitalist relations of production. Food output took a quantum leap with the pitting of massive amounts of labour-power and human initiative against the problem of food production, even in the absence of sophisticated technology. Elimination of small plots by socializing the land, and ending the anarchy of capitalist production—seen in the inefficiency and inequality of profit determining what food is produced, where, when and how—all contributed.

The masses, regarded by most Western authorities as China's greatest hindrance, have played a triumphant role in this economic breakthrough.

The Chinese Communist Party's guideline is a death-blow to Malthusian cynicism: "Of all things in the world, people are the most precious. Once the people take their destiny into their own hands, they will be able to perform miracles."

In developing agricultural lands more extensively and more intensively, the Chinese have put the lie to the Malthusian belief that food sources may only grow in arithmetic progression. Even in Canada, where land is daily taken out of production because of the perverted logic of monopoly capitalists, agriculture becomes yearly more efficient, and usually records improved yields.

The main threats to this surplus are land speculation, destruction and monopolization, all of them stark witnesses to the stagnation and parasitism of monopoly capital. Such a system cannot rationally evaluate the long-term costs of despoiling land—or, indeed, any resource, people included. The rallying cry of monopoly capitalism is "Profit now—and damn the-children!"

By citing the failure of the "green revolution" in undeveloped countries, reactionaries would cast doubt on the capacity of science and technology to stimulate greater production.

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