

Malthus and His Disciples were Simply Wrong

By Gregg Easterbrook

Two fundamental misconceptions animate the population debate. One is that food scarcity threatens people; the other that population density threatens the environment.

Writing in *The Population Bomb* in 1968, [Paul] Ehrlich declared that “the battle to feed humanity is already lost, in the sense that we will not be able to prevent large-scale famines in the next decade.” General famine was “a certainty” to strike even the United States by the 1980s, Ehrlich projected; by then millions or even billions would have starved to death in the Third World, where agriculture would collapse utterly. That India could ever feed itself was, Ehrlich wrote, “a fantasy.” Instead, since *The Population Bomb* was written, what the United Nations defines as “chronic malnutrition” has declined 16 percent worldwide. Starvations occurred in Bangladesh and the Sudan during wars and Ethiopia and China as a result of deliberate government policies. No starvation caused by general ecological failure happened anywhere.

According to a study by Dennis Avery, a former agricultural analyst for the State Department, since *The Population Bomb* was written world food production has consistently grown faster than population. Developing countries today harvest 73 percent more grain than they did in 1968. The 1980s was a strong decade for world agriculture, aided in part by mild winters: a restive point for environmental orthodoxy, since if this mild weather stemmed in some way from greenhouse gases, then the first impact of global warming was help in feeding the hungry. During the 1980s India recorded a succession of record harvests. Only a small percentage of the country’s population “ate high” by con-

suming beef or poultry, but mass hunger did not occur....

A common 1960s doom prediction was that shortages would cause the price of food to escalate dramatically. Instead real-dollar food prices have declined almost annually since 1968. Adjusted for inflation, First World food prices fell by 20 percent in the 1980s alone, as

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supply consistently outpaced demand....

Human population growth may be bad because it causes overcrowding, political tension, flooded job markets, lack of sanitation, illiteracy, air and water pollution, ethnic assaults, civil wars, species loss — you name it — bad for just about every reason except the Malthusian fear of everyone starving to death. This cannot be ruled out, but so far there seems little reason to expect it.

Equally misplaced is the notion that population density is in itself bad. If this were so why would the densely populated Netherlands be prosperous and reasonably clean while the Sudan, sparsely populated, is impoverished and shows numerous signs of environmental distress? Why is densely populated Switzerland prosperous and squeaky clean while sparsely populated Mozambique

is poor and has terrible water pollution? Why do the densely populated countries of Western Europe have the world’s highest life expectancies?

Herve Le Bras, a researcher at the National Institute of Demography in Paris, has plotted population densities against the “human development index” used by the United Nations. The index makes a rough judgment of quality of life based on per-capita GNP, life expectancy, and literacy. Le Bras finds, “There is no demonstrated unfavorable relationship between population and the quality of life.” Some quality of life indicators usually improve with population density, at least in industrial nations. For instance health care in the cities of the United States and Western Europe generally is good, in part because population densities support networks of hospitals and health-care providers. In the poor and often sick Sahel region of Africa, health care facilities are hundreds of miles apart. The population density is too low for high-input service such as hospitals.

This hardly means population density is inherently good, just mistaken as an inherent evil. Nature might prefer some features of the materialist life—putting most people in relatively small urban areas, drawing most energy resources from nonliving geologic strata, using high-yield agriculture that produces society’s food from relatively restricted acreage—to scattering people

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across the land in some romanticized hunter-gatherer format....

Village Life

Most third world women alive today are descended from generations of women who were essentially continuously pregnant throughout early adulthood, bearing or attempting to bear ten or more children in order that a few would survive to secure the family's ability to maintain subsistence. Beginning roughly in the 1930s an important element of this dynamic changed. Health care in most of the developing world remains poor, but basic drugs are often available, and they have placed on the run most infectious diseases that traditionally claimed so many children in the village world. Rather than bearing ten children and watching three survive to adulthood, the developing world woman who today bears ten will see eight or nine live to become adults. The United Nations agency UNICEF reports that developing world infant mortality rates have declined 50 percent in the past twenty-five years, with current rates like 2.8 per one hundred births in Jamaica, 3.7 per 100 in Sri Lanka. If trends hold, most of the developing world will soon reach the First World infant mortality rate of about one per 100 births.

Statistics such as those above convey a fundamental though little-understood truth about the human population surge. Population growth is assumed to be caused by more people being born: Actually the operative factor is fewer people dying—more specifically, later death. As recently as the year 1750, the typical life expectancy at birth was no more than 30 years, even in Europe. That number had changed little since prehistory, a graph of human life expectancy being essentially flat from about 10,000 years in the past till the mid-eighteenth century. Suddenly the life-expectancy graph line began to shoot upward like a moon rocket. By 1950 life expectancies in Europe were nearly at 70 years, in just two centuries the typical period of living time more than doubling: something Julian Simon has called “this amazing

demographic fact, the most important achievement in human history.” Drastically lower rates of infant mortality were the first factor in longer life expectancies; more food and then sulfa drugs and antibiotics were leading factors in prolonging the lives of adults.

Through the postwar era life expectancies even began to perform the moon-rocket ascent in impoverished nations,

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Important in this context is that the decline in rates of death, not an increase in baby-making, is what has caused the Third World populations to take off. Baby-making per woman has been stable or in decline virtually everywhere in the world during the period of the population explosion. As the scientist and writer Gerard Piel has noted, “A population undergoing industrial revolution makes the transition from near-zero growth at high death rates and high birth

rates to near-zero growth at low death rates and high birth rates.” Growth rates are today so high in the Third World because high birth rates have not yet adjusted to low death rates. Historical patterns observed in all developed countries suggest the adjustment will soon come, with stabilized human population achieved in the ideal way: low birth rates and low death rates....

One example of the surprisingly rapid reversal of a gloomy population trend involves marrying age in the least developed nations. For centuries, women in village cultures have married in their teens, which forecloses most personal or educational opportunity for the women but starts the cycle of pregnancy early enough for ten attempts at children. According to the Bangladesh Fertility Survey, in 1960 the average marrying age for Bangladeshi woman (girl, in this case) was 13.9 years. Today the average marrying age in Bangladesh is 18, which is a big step toward the norm of countries that do not have runaway population growth. Several regions of the subcontinent and of Africa, though not all, show similar trends away from girl marriage.

Equally important, trends toward fewer total pregnancies are beginning to manifest. Writing in 1993 in *Scientific American*, demographers Bryant Robey, Shea Rustein, and Leo Morris declared that “the developing world is undergoing a reproductive revolution. Throughout the Third World women differing vastly in culture, politics and social and economic status have started to desire smaller families.” As recently as the 1960s, typical Third World woman bore six live children. Today the number has declined to four live children per woman. Robey, Rustein, and Morris expected the trend of decline in Third World family size to continue....

If antibiotics and Green Revolution agriculture created a population bomb, knowledge of the modern world, now spreading in many developing nations, represents the bomb squad.