

## World population

. . . if the human population of our planet were to continue to expand at the doubling time of 35 years then within a period no longer than that of recorded history the entire substance of the universe would be converted to human tissue and the diameter of the resulting human mass would be expanding at the speed of light. (Dr Paul Ehrlich, quoted in the *Guardian*, 18 June 199)

Many figures and doomsday predictions like the above have been cited to express the urgency of the "problem" of population growth. In response to this the United Nations declared 1974 World Population Year, the key event of which was a conference in Bucharest. Last month, after a period of ten years, the second such conference was held in Mexico City; attended by delegates from over 140 countries, it discussed population in the light of the poverty and widespread hunger of humanity.

The real boost to concern with population growth came in the United States from the President's Commission on Material Policy in 1952. This report considered the question of "whether the US had the raw materials to sustain its civilisation". This was considered likely only "if



Dumped fruit: surplus to MARKET requirements.  
Whilst millions starve.

Third World raw materials remain reliable". The report concluded that the greatest threat to those reliable resources was population growth. From then on population control gained respectability, growing to prominence in aid programmes and the activities of the World Bank, which sees population control as a necessary consideration in its lending activities: "The Bank does not feel it can legitimately allocate funds of its bond holders and contributing states to countries which are bad risks - don't have population under control" . (*Science for People Journal*, No. 26)

This concern is not new. In 1798, the Reverend Thomas Malthus wrote his *Essay on the Principle of Population* at a time when the British population was rapidly increasing. The reason for this, as the *Third World Quarterly* explains was: 'Until the seventeenth century, world population grew, on average, by less than one per cent a century. The extraordinary growth in human population occurred primarily after the Industrial Revolution' (Wasim Zuman, "The World Population Situation", *Third World Quarterly*, July 1980).

Malthus took the view that widespread poverty was due to the fact that human population tended to increase more rapidly (by a geometric expansion) than their means of subsistence (arithmetic growth). Thus "to remove the

wants of the lower classes of society is an evil so deeply seated that no human ingenuity can reach it". This "law of nature" therefore could justify starvation, slums and all the problems of poverty because "to prevent the recurrence of misery is alas! beyond the power of man. But this relied on a vastly oversimplified model of the relationship between human population and human environment. The Malthusian view, and that of the quote at the top of this article, are based on very selective trends; they view human population as being solely subject to some constant and incontrovertible natural law. In so doing they fail to take account of the ability of humans to rationally apply themselves to their environment and so control nature.

Malthus was disproved by the first 150 years of industrial capitalism, when the population of England grew threefold and there was an unprecedented growth in the productive forces. In this period the supposed "superior power of population" was checked without producing "misery or vice" on the scale predicted. However these ideas of population control have been revived in recent years, appearing in the 70s in the Club of Rome's *Limits to Growth*, which claims that "The greatest Possible impediment to more equal distribution of the earth's resources is population growth.

Is there then a problem of overpopulation? If so, then the reader should be well aware of it, for the United Kingdom is the ninth most densely populated country in the world and England and Wales is fourth in the demographers' league of over crowded nations. For that matter, the whole world's population could be accommodated, packed like passengers in the rush hour, in an area of only 20km by 20km.

If we accept though that overpopulation exists, when the population exceeds the available resources, we must then ask if the concept is a natural law or a relative one which holds in certain situations and not in others. Harry Rothman in his book on pollution and resources *Murderous Providence* answers this by detailing different situations;

In societies of nomadic shepherds one finds population densities of 40 - 100 per square mile; nomad with agriculture 200-300; with intensive agriculture 200 - 500; regions with intensive agriculture 2,000 - 4,000. In regions of India where irrigation makes multiple cropping impossible over 10,000 people per square mile can be kept alive, and finally, in the metropolitan areas of industrial societies densities of over 15,000 per square mile are found.

Rothman concludes that "with the development of more advanced productive forces the capacity of areas to support human populations can be increased" (page 330)- This was precisely the criticism that Marx had of Malthus, when he showed how capitalism artificially swelled or shrank the population according to its requirements - in recession the population appears large; in times of boom it appears too small.

As well as varying from time to time, it can be similarly seen that the requirements of capital will seem to vary the population from place to place - the initial rise of capitalism brought with it the first large scale concentrations of men and women in cities to meet demand for a large number of wage slaves. Indeed, current concern for the problems of poverty in the Third World is largely due to the greater rate of urban population growth compared to rural in countries undergoing very rapid industrialisation. Yves Benot points out that "many of today's underdeveloped countries could well show up as under populated if they were to experience the same developmental process as that experienced by 19th century Europe". (*Qu'est-ce que le developement ?* p.9.)

The effect of capitalist requirements dictating what is the "natural level" of population at any one time can be seen in the large-scale movement of migrants to the United States, Canada and Australia, into Arab OPEC countries and in the guest workers of Western Europe. David Eversley describes this process: "In a country like Germany a dilemma threatens to arise: in the 60s they had the problem of their foreign workers; when the economic growth rate slowed down, they sent home as many as they could; but if, for instance, there is a new boom in the early 80s they will face this with an ever-shrinking indigenous labour force entry, and the necessity therefore to invite the guest workers back again until the next recession". ("Zero Population Growth: Problems for the 21st Century", *New Internationalist*, June 1977.)

This prompted a German politician to say in 1980 "the nation is dying beneath the blankets". In fact, a German ministerial report earlier this year expressed serious concern over shortages in the labour force, a lack of recruits for the armed forces and high unemployment in the teaching profession (*Population Today*, February 1984). This would really endanger the interests of the owning class in Germany, or any other country -- by the end of the century the army will be severely below strength" (*The Times*, December 15, 1983). Similarly in America a recent internal study for the Cabinet Council of Economic Affairs viewed with alarm the decline in the youth population as far as filling the volunteer armed forces goes (*Population Today*, March 1984).

This shows in exactly whose interests population levels are thought to be too great or too small from time to time, or place to place. Malcolm X (for one) noted this: "Whenever they are speaking of the population explosion, in my opinion they are referring primarily to the people in Asia or in Africa . . ." But he goes on: . . . in fact in most of the thinking and planning of whites in the West today, it's easy to see the fear in their minds . . . that the masses of dark people . . . will continue to increase and multiply and grow until they eventually overrun the people of the West" (*Malcolm X Speaks*, p.46).

This apology for an explanation conveniently ignores the fact that the world-wide capitalist system of society is run in the interests not of the "whites in the West" but in the interests of the minority who own virtually all the land and productive resources on it, regardless of the country or colour of skin of exploiter and exploited.

The Declaration of the United Nations International Conference on Human Rights in 1968 stated that ". . . couples have a basic human right to decide freely and responsibly on the number and spacing of their children". But rights or no rights, regardless of any "free and responsible decision", there is a real material basis which "for most people in the underdeveloped countries is the stark reality that there is little or no economic security in old age or in case of disease, other than one's own children, not all of whom will survive until adulthood" ("Not Better Lives, Just Fewer People", *Science for People*, No.26). This is summed up by a village blacksmith in India: "A rich man invests in his machines. We must invest in our children, it's that simple" (quoted in *The Myth of Population Control*, Mahmood Mamdani). Therefore any attempt to reduce fertility by changing people's awareness of their best interests, without trying to change their material basis, fails because, quite simply, people are unlikely to plan their families if there is no possibility of their being able to plan their whole lives.

Similarly countries like China, (held up by the Mexico City Conference as having ideal birth control measures) have problems with female infanticide because of the desire for sons, which occurs in the strict One Glorious Child scheme. *The Scotsman*, (25 May 1984) also considers other countries in South East Asia where ". . . children were so little valued that they were being bought and sold in markets". The article quotes Professor Scorer saying that people don't care about their children "because they don't have any material opportunity to do so".

A few weeks before the World Population Conference, the media discovered that people were starving to death in drought hit Ethiopia. This is despite the statement by the editor of the Observer to his staff (8 April 1984) that "Hunger is boring" no doubt the hungry wish it were so. Boring or not though, the BBC did not think twice about perpetuating a few myths by laying the blame for hunger squarely on the 2½ million hungry: "They expected too much from the land which could not provide enough ." (roughly quoted from Jan Leeming on the News Report, 22 July 1984). With "overpopulation" mistaken for the cause of the problem of poverty and starvation, any attempt at a solution amounts to little more than trying to do away with the poor rather than the cause of poverty.

What the conference ignored is that the world has the capacity almost immediately to provide enough food, drink, housing and health care for the world's population many times over - yet one out of every ten babies born today will die within a year, victims of a system that must put the profits of the owning minority before the needs of millions who cannot put money where their hungry mouths and swollen bellies are.

Lester Brown of the World Watch Institute, Washington, disputes this, putting forward a falsely simplistic relationship between population and food production which does not recognise that capitalism requires food to be produced and distributed only when it can be sold. "Throughout most of

human existence", he claims, "there were more fish in the oceans than humans could ever hope to catch or consume. As world population expanded following World War Two, population continued to grow, but the fish catch did not". As well as oceanic fisheries he cites grass lands as a second global life-support system that is under mounting pressure. He sees this as evidence that "human needs have begun to outstrip the productive capacity of many local biological systems". This may well be true, but the world under the capitalist system has effectively become an integrated unit of production of all wealth and has the potential (which cannot be realised under the profit system) to overcome specific problems of failing harvests and famines.

Nevertheless it is still commonly held that attacking the population levels provides some solution to the problems of poverty. Lester Brown, for example, suggests that, short of an abrupt slowdown in world population growth, there will come a time when "the rationing of scarce supplies through rising prices in the world market may leave some people unable to get enough food while others enjoy a surfeit". But there is no maybe about it. People were starving to death in the early 1970s, when food production was at its highest levels in the areas Brown cites - fish in 1970; mutton 1972; cereals 1971. And the last two decades have seen a doubling in the world beef production. Yet every so often we face the sickening sight on television of mass burials of children, and the only slightly less unpleasant sight of Frank Bough or some other talking head appealing for a few pounds for charity in the hope that it will keep this quiet carnage of capitalism off the television screens for at least a few months.

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Socialist Standard October 1984