

The Malthus Factor

Poverty, Politics and Population in
Capitalist Development

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Thomas Malthus, a 19th century cleric of the Church of England, is today remembered chiefly as the originator of a theory about human population. The principal tenet of that theory is that, because the number of people doubles every 25 years (unless checked), thus growing at a geometric rate (1, 2, 4, 8, 16, 32, etc), while food production increases at just an arithmetic rate (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, etc), population will always outstrip food supply.

Today, as in Malthus's time, this assumption persists as a common explanation for poverty, death and environmental degradation. Despite formidable and compelling criticism,¹ it continues to produce in the West and among Western-influenced elites an unremitting anxiety about "over-population". Its greatest achievement, however, has been to provide an enduring argument for the prevention of social and economic change and to obscure, in both academic and popular thinking, the real roots of poverty, inequality and environmental deterioration. As such, no other ideological framework has so effectively legitimised Western interests, development theories and strategies, especially the Green Revolution and, now, genetic engineering in agriculture.

The Malthusian argument has consistently overwhelmed other explanations of poverty. Malthusian famine scenarios have systematically distracted attention from the fact that it is not people's reproductive habits that are the principal source of most of the misuse or waste of the world's resources, but the contradictions and motives of capitalist development.

This briefing aims to show that today's debates about such issues as welfare, the minimum wage and immigration continue to be influenced by obscurantist Malthusian arguments which reaffirm the privileges of the few over the hopes of the many.

It first outlines Malthus's theory and its aims, in particular, to defend private property and to absolve the state and wealthier segments of society from responsibility for poverty. It then looks at the theory's uses in eugenicist, anti-immigration and certain environmentalist arguments, and considers uses to which Malthusian thinking has been put by Cold War and Green Revolution interests. Finally, the briefing explores some of the ways in which Malthusian thinking is currently employed in discussions of globalisation, violent conflict, immigration and the environment. The briefing concludes by noting that the rejection of Malthusianism involves systemic social change.

1. See, for example, Coontz, S., *Population Theories and the Economic Interpretation*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1961 (first published 1957).

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Malthus's "Law of Nature"

In Malthus's first *Essay on the Principle of Population*, published in 1798, population pressure is treated as a "law of nature" which makes poverty natural and inevitable.² The "positive checks" of disease and starvation are regarded as the chief routes through which that pressure can (and even should) be alleviated.

Although Malthus was convinced that "the root cause of pauperism was the excessive procreation of the lower classes", he nevertheless regarded birth control among the poor as morally unacceptable.³ Instead, he proposed, at most, delayed marriage or "moral restraint". His aim was not to reduce population pressures but to reduce the obligation of the rich to mitigate human misery. In particular, he advocated abolishing the poor laws, the closest thing that existed in his time to social welfare.⁴

By suggesting that the fertility of the poor – rather than chronic or periodic unemployment, the fencing of common lands, or high food prices – was the main source of their poverty and by implying that the poor's fertility could not be significantly influenced by human intervention, Malthus acquitted the property-owning class and the political economic system of accountability for poverty.

Indeed, far from wanting to reduce population pressures, Malthus viewed population growth and poverty as the chief stimuli for the poor to seek work and thus "a necessary stimulus to industry".⁵ He was, after all, primarily an economist, even if today he is considered as one of the "patron saints" of modern demography.⁶

The Defence of Private Property

Many seeming contradictions and inconsistencies in Malthus's writings can be resolved by recognising his political agenda. This was to defend a system of private property and to attack common property regimes.⁷

Malthus's work emerged at a time when anxieties about the legitimacy of private property were high. When his first *Essay* was published, England was in the midst of an agricultural revolution, which was transforming long-standing agrarian relations between landlords and tenants. The power of landed interests was being challenged by an ambitious middle-class attempting to forge a modern, competitive market. The country was also on the verge of an industrial revolution, which would make it the paramount manufacturing nation in Europe.

Moreover, England was five years into a counter-revolutionary war with its growing commercial rival, France, where a decade or so earlier, revolution had "destroyed the landmarks of the old established order in politics, economics, social life and thought"⁸ and unleashed many threatening ideas about the legitimacy of private property.

Malthus continuously reworked his theory over the years to adapt it to changing conditions in the European social and industrial landscape. What never changed, however, was its role in trying to legitimise private property. First, Malthus negated radical contemporary ideas of social progress, many of which were associated with the abolition of private property, by proclaiming the inevitable and dismal consequences of population increase on the available means of subsistence. Second, he absolved the system of private property of responsibility for human misery by describing the latter as a natural effect of irrepressible biological urges on the part of a class that, innately or otherwise, had

2. Most theories about the roots of poverty or underdevelopment fall into two general camps: one regards poverty as the result of societal arrangements and thus susceptible to change for the better through a structural transformation of society; the other assumes that poverty is largely the product of circumstances beyond human control: innate physical or genetic features of the population in question, relatively intractable cultural or psychological characteristics, aspects of a population's environment which impede economic and social development, or the inevitable consequences of population increase, as in the case of Malthusian theory. Explanations which naturalise poverty and underdevelopment and try to neutralise the influence of alterable economic and social conditions tend to reinforce each other. Between these two general perspectives — one seeking systemic change, the other denying its likelihood or necessity — lies a world of irreconcilable political aims over which people have contested strenuously for centuries. These differences are not simply theoretical. For too many people, their implications have been a matter of life and death. See Kegel, C., "William Cobbett and Malthusianism", *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 19, 1958, pp.348-62; Harvey, D., "Population, Resources and the Ideology of Science", *Economic Geography*, 50 (3), 1974, pp.256-77.

3. Malthus branded known and used birth control methods such as non-coital sex, withdrawal, abortion and contraception as "vice" or "improper arts". Withdrawal or *coitus interruptus* was in fact "the main brake on fertility" in 19th century Europe and one of the most popular and effective forms of contraception well into the second half of the 20th century, largely because it was safe, free and remarkably effective. See McLaren, A., *Reproductive Rituals: The Perception of Fertility in England from the Sixteenth Century to the Nineteenth Century*, Methuen, London, 1984, p.75; Santow, G., "*Coitus Interruptus* in the Twentieth Century", *Population and Development Review*, 19 (4), 1993, pp.767-92; Glass, D., "Family Planning Programmes and Action in Western Europe", *Population Studies*, (19) 3, 1966, p.228.

4. See Chamberlain, N., *Beyond Malthus: Population and Power*, Basic Books, New York, 1970, pp.3-4.

5. quoted in Glass, D., "Malthus and the Limitation of Population Growth" in Glass, D., (ed.) *Introduction to Malthus*, Watts and Company, London, 1953, p.29.

6. Teitelbaum, M. and Winter, J., (eds.) *Population and Resources in Western Intellectual Traditions*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1989; Coleman, D. and Schofield, R., (eds.) *The State of Population Theory: Forward from Malthus*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1986; Caldwell, J. and Caldwell, P., *Limiting Population Growth and the Ford Foundation Contribution*, Frances Pinter, London, 1986, p.5.

7. See Waterman, A.M.C., "Analysis and Ideology in Malthus's *Essay on Population*", *Australia Economic Papers* 31 (58) 1991, pp.203-13.; Harvey, D., op. cit. 2.

8. Thomson, D., *Europe Since Napoleon*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1966, p.49.

little capacity for rational control. Finally, he argued that any form of social welfare was little more than a subsidy for the fertility of the poor (at the expense of the well-to-do) and therefore brought about further misery. (This argument studiously ignored the question of how the poor subsidised the well-to-do.)

In fact, Malthus insisted that anything that humans might do through their own social or political efforts to redress inequalities or to mitigate suffering would be counterproductive because it would only increase population and therefore place more pressure on productive resources. A system of common ownership capable of supporting greater populations was, moreover, an affront to the “natural” order of things.⁹ Capitalism was the only admissible system.

Welfare Reform

A major focus of Malthus’s concerns and those of English capitalists, industrialists and gentry alike, was the poor laws. Established in the 16th century, these laws provided for local parish relief paid for out of taxation. They had not originated as a form of charity. Both in England and on the European continent, they were, rather, a form of social control of the great numbers of poor who had been displaced by the enclosure of common lands and driven to seek a living wherever and however they could.¹⁰ By the late 18th century, however, the poor laws were regarded by wealthier individuals not only as a drain on their private income but also as the principal impediment to the creation of a free and mobile labour reserve which emergent industrial capitalists required to make the most of their opportunities for investment and profit.

For the landed and commercial interests who argued against the poor laws because of the rising costs of parish relief, Malthusian theory offered a compelling line of argument: the fertility of the poor was being stimulated by the security which poor relief offered. It made the reproductive habits of the poor responsible for their poverty, for the process of proletarianisation which was a predominant feature of the period, especially in rural areas, and for the burdens which the poor laws increasingly placed on people of property. What Malthusian thinking usefully obscured was the fact that, while there were indeed increasing numbers of dependent poor, they had to a large degree been made, not born. Neither the rise of a proletariat nor the rising cost of poor relief was really due to increasing population *per se*, but to the intense commercialisation of agriculture, the accompanying enclosure of common lands, and laws keeping the price of grain high.¹¹

By disguising their aims as disinterested “nature”, the class interests behind such policies succeeded in getting the New Poor Law passed in 1834. This reform instituted a system of workhouses in which conditions were deliberately made so bad that people would choose to take the poorest paid work rather than enter them. “Our intention”, said one Poor Law Commissioner, “is to make the workhouses as like prisons as possible”, while another declaimed: “our object . . . is to establish therein a discipline so severe and repulsive as to make them a terror to the poor and prevent them from entering”.¹² At a time when the condition of the English working class was perceptibly worsening, the Poor Law Commissioners soon became “the most detested men in England”.¹³

The Malthusian spectre of over-population was of “central intellectual significance” in shaping the new law and the nearly 40 years of debate

9. See Malthus, T., *A Summary View of the Principle of Population*, John Murray, London, 1830, pp.71-3.

Malthus conceded in private, however, that the disparity between population and resources was not entirely natural, and could not be separated from the system of production. In an especially revealing passage, he wrote, “it is unquestionably true that the laws of private property, which are the grand stimulus to production, do themselves so limit it, as always to make the actual produce of the earth fall very considerably short of the power of production.” See Malthus, T., *ibid*, p.36. See also Huzel, J., “Malthus, the Poor Law, and Population in Early Nineteenth Century England”, *Economic History Review* 22, 1969, pp.430-52..

10. Jordan, W.K., *Philanthropy in England 1480-1660: A Study of the Changing Pattern of English Social Aspirations*, George Allen and Unwin, London, 1959; Hildyard, N., Lohmann, L., Fairlie, S. and Sexton, S., *Whose Common Future? Reclaiming the Commons*, Earthscan, London, 1993.

11. During much of the period when Malthus wrote, British grain production was on the increase. Aside from the introduction of new farming methods and technologies (and access to Irish grain), this owed much to the fact that large amounts of common land were being enclosed in response to the high war-time grain prices. Enclosure transformed land in which an entire community had rights of use into land in which only the individual owner or occupant had the right of use. Between 1750 and 1850, about one quarter of England’s cultivated acreage was transformed from open field, common land or waste land into private property. Because many of the dispossessed could not find secure employment or alternative livelihoods either in the countryside or in the towns, they had to depend on poor relief. See Blum, J., *The End of the Old Order in Rural Europe*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1978, p.263; Hobsbawm, E. and Rudé, G., *Captain Swing*, W.W. Norton, New York, 1968, p.27.

The Corn Laws restricted grain imports whenever the price of grain fell below a certain level. The effect of these laws (a prime example of market intervention) on the price of bread was a significant factor in the declining living standards of the working-class. Malthus and others attributed that poverty to the result of over-breeding on the part of the poor themselves. See Morton, A.L., *A People’s History of England*, Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1979 (first published 1938), p.401.

12. quoted in Thompson, E.P., *The Making of the English Working Class*, Vintage, New York, 1963, p.267.

13. Morton, A.L., *op. cit.* 11, p.397.

Ireland: The Promised Land of the Principle of Population?

As a result of the Great Famine of 1846-49 in Ireland, some two million people died or emigrated within five years.ⁱ The famine was triggered by potato blight, caused by a fungus, which ruined the staple food crop upon which most poor people depended.

Instead of attributing the famine to people's lack of access to land and lack of access to food other than potatoes, most commentators took it as definitive proof of Malthus's theory. The English government in particular argued that Ireland's poverty, agricultural crises and general unwellness were principally the result of too many lazy people.

What Malthusian explanations missed was the role of English colonial interests. In the 18th and 19th centuries, England depended upon Ireland to provide food for its Caribbean plantations and then, increasingly, for itself, and to provide a strategic reserve of cheap labour for its factories.

Spuds U Have To Like

Malthusians largely attributed demographic growth in Ireland to the peasantry's "irrational" dependence on the potato, an American cultivar introduced into Ireland probably in the 17th century. As one writer put it in 1847:

"The fatal luxuriance with which this vegetable flourished in the soil of Ireland caused population to run fearfully ahead of the requirements and capabilities of the country."ⁱⁱ

Potatoes were popular partly because landlords encouraged their tenants to cultivate them. Because they would grow on poorer soils, the tubers allowed the landlords to take over more and more good arable land to grow wheat or to grow feed for cattle for a growing export trade.

When the fungus *Phytophthora infestans* destroyed most of the potato crop in 1845 and subsequent years (as it did throughout Western Europe), the rural poor could not afford to buy

or to eat anything else, even if they produced it themselves. What produce they had went on paying the rent, taxes and tithes or was exported to England. It was not that Ireland produced too many people or too few (or only) potatoes, but rather that landlords prevented tenants from retaining enough other food for themselves. As one contemporary observer pointed out:

"instead of not producing sufficient for the sustenance of its inhabitants, [Ireland] produces far more than they ever consume, exporting a greater quantity of its edible products than probably any other country of equal extent in the whole world".ⁱⁱⁱ

Industrialist Robert Owen had emphasised back in the early 1820s that Ireland was "competent to maintain, not only its own inhabitants, but more than double the whole population of Great Britain and Ireland, in comfort heretofore unattained by any nation or people, at any period of the world".^{iv}

That the famine was God's way of redressing a Malthusian imbalance between people and resources was an argument which appealed to a British cabinet dominated by Irish absentee landlords. Nature must be allowed to take its course, it was argued; aid would only confound the workings of the "market". Thus during the famine years, Irish exports to England increased, even as the famine was portrayed as a sign of how catastrophically the Irish had mismanaged their resources and failed to diversify their diet.

The English government thus took advantage of the famine to accelerate evictions from the land of "cottiers and squatters", a process for which Malthusian thinking provided a convenient excuse.

The Clearance of the Irish Countryside

The end of the Napoleonic Wars with France caused the boom market in grain to collapse and spurred landowners to raise more cattle. Only then did landlords in Ireland begin "to utter bitter complaints of surplus population."^v As a Dublin farmer put it in 1881:

"It became profitable for the landlords to get rid of the people, and to let their land in large tracts to graziers, owing to the great price paid for the article of fresh meat in England . . . [This] had the effect of with-drawing so much land from the Irish people as to leave undue competition for the remainder of the lands, near the Cities and towns and centres of population, into which the people had to go."^{vi}

Thousands of homeless people were sleeping and living in the streets of Ireland's capital, Dublin, because landlords no longer wanted them on land which could otherwise have supported them.

The Irish were encouraged to emigrate, not because Ireland was resource poor, but because its rich resources were so attractive to the English. If Ireland was to be little more than a cattle farm for England, then there was little room for the Irish. Despite depopulation in rural Ireland, emigration became - and remains - a way of life for many. As with many developing countries today, this outflow of Irish people reinforced the popular view, shaped by over a century and a half of Malthusian thinking, that the country was perennially characterised by excess population.

- i Ó Gráda, C., "Irish Agricultural Output Before and After the Famine", *Journal of European Economic History*, 1972, p.154.
- ii Anon, *Thoughts on Ireland*, James Ridgway, London, 1847, p.37.
- iii Sadler, M., *Ireland; Its Evils, and Their Remedies: Being a Refutation of the Errors of the Emigration Committee and Others, Touching That Country*, John Murray, London, 1829, p.9.
- iv Owen, R., *Statements Showing the Power that Ireland Possesses to Create Wealth Beyond the Most Ample Supply of the Wants of its Inhabitants*, A. Applegath, London, 1823, p.22.
- v O'Rourke, J., *The History of the Great Irish Famine of 1847, with Notices of Earlier Famines*, James Duffy and Co., Dublin, 1902, p.46.
- vi Andrew Kettle, testimony to Royal Commissioners on Agriculture, *Preliminary Report, with Minutes of Evidence (Part I)*, British Parliamentary Papers, Vol. 5, Irish University Press, Shannon, 1881, p.422.

over poor-law policy which preceded it.¹⁴ It was thus partly responsible for what E. P. Thompson has called “perhaps the most sustained attempt to impose an ideological dogma, in defiance of the evidence of human need, in English history”.¹⁵ The irony, of course, is that, in order to create a so-called free labour market, employers had to force workers to compete.

Eugenics

It is not surprising that Malthusianism found an intellectual ally a century later in eugenics. Malthus’s theory had always presumed that the poor were not the equals of the more privileged – that one of the reasons they had “too many” children was that they lacked the middle-class virtues of “moral restraint” such as prudence, foresight, self-discipline and the capacity to manage their affairs in a rational manner.¹⁶

In the second half of the 19th century, eugenics took this thinking a step further by arguing that the overpopulous poor’s moral deficiencies were innate. The poor became a threat to the social order not just because they were too numerous, but also because their excessive fertility was thought to be causing the deterioration of national “racial stocks”.

It was not workers who used birth control the most, after all, but the middle- and upper-classes. While working-class women were often desperate to limit their child-bearing,¹⁷ this aspiration often had to be compromised because children made an invaluable contribution to the survival of working-class households. Thus Neo-Malthusians who favoured curbing the fertility of the poor came to regard voluntary contraception as dysgenic, since it seemed to result in a reduced proportion of “better types”.¹⁸ Fertility control had to be targeted more systematically.

It was proposed at first that birth control, including sterilisation, be used to prevent certain categories of the ill or disabled from polluting the so-called national gene pool. But it rapidly came to be viewed as a way of dealing with a broader spectrum of social ills. By the turn of the 20th century, control of the population of the “feeble-minded” was seen as a remedy for a wide variety of social problems, including prostitution, vagrancy and petty crime.¹⁹ An investigation at London’s Pentonville Prison, after all, deemed that 18 per cent of adult prisoners and 40 per cent of juvenile offenders were feeble-minded. Another contemporary researcher claimed that only four to five per cent of criminals had parents who were “really sound”. Inspired by eugenic and Malthusian thinking, policymakers were increasingly entranced by the belief that science had demonstrated that poverty, too, was primarily the result of physical and moral debility.²⁰

One of those who subscribed to this view was Winston Churchill. As Home Secretary in 1910, Churchill endorsed and circulated among the cabinet an article published in the *Eugenics Review* the previous year entitled “The Feeble-Minded — A Social Danger”. A cabinet colleague, W.S. Blunt, described Churchill as “a strong eugenicist” who “had himself drafted the Bill which is to give power of shutting up people of weak intellect and so prevent their breeding. He thought it might be arranged to sterilise them.”²¹

Once it became fashionable to think that diseases were generally the result of hereditary factors and that many social problems were actually “medical”, unacceptable political beliefs could easily be described as symptoms of mental disorder. It required little, for example, for the phrase “people of weak intellect” to include socialists against

14. Digby, A., “Malthus and Reform of the Poor Laws” in Dupaquier, J. and Vauve-Chamous, A., (eds.) *Malthus Past and Present*, Academic Press, London, 1983, p.104.

15. Thompson, E.P., op. cit. 12, 1963, p.267. The economic philosophy of Malthusianism argued that the poor had no claim on society, even in the face of starvation. Malthus wrote “A man who is born into a world already possessed, if he cannot get subsistence from his parents on who 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. At nature’s mighty feast there is no vacant cover for him. She tells him to be gone.” Of course, it was not Nature which said “be gone”, but Malthus, landlords and Parliament. See Meek, R., (ed.) *Marx and Engels on the Population Bomb*, Ramparts Press, Berkeley, 1971, p.8.

16. Edwin Chadwick’s 1842 *Report on the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population of Great Britain* (which is still regarded uncritically as the high point of the 19th century public health movement) attributes disease – cholera and typhoid were rife in the crowded, dark and insanitary housing of the burgeoning factory towns – not to inadequate income or poverty or destitution, but to “intemperance” and other immoral forms of behaviour. One of the principal symptoms and causes of such immorality was the way the poor were densely packed together. The reference to “overcrowding”, prevalent in much of today’s writings about slum conditions in Third World countries, ignored the fact that the poor simply could not afford accommodation in less populated and healthier surroundings. See Treble, J., *Urban Poverty in Britain 1830-1914*, Batsford Academic, London, 1979, pp.174-5, Ross, E.B., “The Origins of Public Health: Concepts and Contradictions” in Draper, P., (ed.) *Health Through Public Policy: The Greening of Public Health*, Green Print, London, 1991, pp.26-40.

17. Davies, M.L., *Maternity: Letters from Working Women*, Virago, London, 1915.

18. Neo-Malthusianism was not just a campaign for birth control. The Malthusian League, which endorsed the term, was founded in 1877 explicitly to spread knowledge about “the law of population, of its consequences and of its bearing upon human conduct and morals”. Most eugenicists at the time regarded birth control with ambivalence because it was widely advocated by the socialist movement. After the 1917 Russian Revolution, the birth control movement distanced itself from its socialist allies, aligning itself more closely with the eugenics movement. See D’Arcy, F., “The Malthusian League and the Resistance to Birth Control Propaganda in Late Victorian Britain”, *Population Studies*, 31 (2), 1977, pp.429-48; Ledbetter, R., “The Organization that Delayed Birth Control: A History of the Malthusian League, 1877-1927”, PhD thesis, Northern Illinois University, Ann Arbor, 1972.

19. Searle, G.R., *Eugenics and Politics in Britain, 1900-1914*, Noordhoff International Publishing, Leyden, 1976, p.31.

20. Simmons, H., “Explaining Social Policy: The English Mental Deficiency Act of 1913”, *Journal of Social History* 11 (3), 1978, pp.394-5.

21. quoted in Searle, G.R., op. cit. 19, 1976, p.108.

Malthusian thinking usefully obscured the fact that the increasing numbers of dependent poor had been largely made, not born.

Malthus argued that poverty was the “natural” product of the fertility of the poor, rather than of the social or economic system.

22. Kirk, R., *The Conservative Mind*, Faber and Faber, London, 1954, p.171. Macaulay also argued that Malthusian pressures required undemocratic institutions to guarantee social stability. In England, he asserted that “The supreme power is in the hands of a class, numerous indeed, but select; of an educated class, of a class which is, and knows itself to be, deeply interested in the security of property and the maintenance of order. Accordingly, the malcontents are firmly, yet gently restrained.” Quoted in Schuster, M.L., *A Treasury of the World’s Great Letters*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1940, p.332.

23. Stoddard, L., *The Revolt Against Civilization: The Menace of the Under Man*, C. Scribner’s Sons, New York, 1922 (Chapman and Hall, London, 1925), p.45.

24. Gordon, L., *Woman’s Body, Woman’s Right: A Social History of Birth Control in America*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1976, p.283.

25. quoted in Chase, A., *The Legacy of Malthus: The Social Costs of the New Scientific Racism*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1977, p.172.

26. Landman, J., “Current Status of Human Sterilization in the United States”, *Eugenical News* 16 (7) 1931, p.111.

whom Churchill had strong political prejudices.

What most united the thinking of Malthus and of the eugenicists (beyond the appearance of having scientific “laws of nature” on their side) was their anti-democratic stance and their scarcely-concealed contempt for and fear of the poor. For “excess population”, one can always simply read “the majority”. In 1831, the English historian and Member of Parliament, Thomas Macaulay, spoke against universal suffrage. Acknowledging that many working people lived in misery, he expressed fear that giving them the vote would render them a danger to social order and private property rights.²² Protecting those rights against demagogues and discontents meant keeping political power in the hands of the few. Nearly a century later, the 1920 annual report of the Malthusian League claimed that “the harassed taxpaying and employing classes and all who wish to avert revolution would be well advised to support the Malthusian League to the utmost of their powers and means”.

Immigrants and Radicals

After the 1917 Russian Revolution, eugenicists, particularly those in the United States, tended, like Churchill, to conflate political radicals with the genetically inferior, both of which groups seemed to be disproportionately comprised of people of immigrant origins. Harvard University professor Lothrop Stoddard, for example, wrote in 1922 of evolution as a process of “ever-increasing inequality”. Hence, the idea of social and political equality was “one of the most pernicious delusions that has even afflicted mankind”.²³ That it “should have been actually attempted in Bolshevik Russia” was an unforgivable offence against nature as well as his class. Stoddard later became a director of the American Birth Control League.²⁴

The introduction to Stoddard’s 1920 book, *The Rising Tide of Color Against White World Supremacy* was written by a member of New York’s upper-class, Madison Grant. Grant was treasurer of the second and third international congresses of eugenics in 1921 and 1932, a co-founder of the Galton Society (named after the scientist Francis Galton, who had coined the term “eugenics” in 1883), a president of the American Eugenics Society and a member of the Immigration Restriction League. In his own book, *The Passing of the Great Race*, published in 1918, Grant had written of the threat to Nordic peoples from what he called the “inferior races”, in particular the Jews and the Irish, and of the need to curb their reproductive urges by virtually any means, including sterilisation and castration. These methods could eventually:

“be applied to an ever widening circle of social discards, beginning always with the criminal, the diseased and the insane, and extending gradually to types which may be called weaklings, rather than defectives, and perhaps ultimately to worthless race types.”²⁵

By 1931, an article in the *Eugenical News* stated unequivocally that:

“There are 10,000,000 or more of socially inadequate people in the United States who are a constant menace to our country and race. They are the mentally diseased such as the maniacs and the dementia praecoxes, the dependants such as the deaf, the blind and the deformed, the delinquents such as the wayward and the criminals, the mentally deficient such as the morons and the idiots, the degenerates such as the sadists and the drug fiends, and the infectious such as the tuberculous and the syphilitics.”²⁶

Malthusian thinking also helped underpin proposals to close the US border to keep out the majority of immigrants who were representatives of a “degraded peasantry . . . beaten men from beaten races; representing the worst failures in the struggle for existence”.²⁷ These deficient individuals were held to be depressing the general standard of living in the United States and thereby having a negative impact on the birthrate of the white native-born population. Immigrants also became increasingly regarded as threats to the economic and political security of the class whose income was derived from their labour.²⁸

The Rise of Demography

The discipline of demography — which problematised “overpopulation” largely as a question of women’s fertility — arose in the United States after the First World War within a largely eugenic framework.²⁹ Most of the “real professionals” in the new field, according to John

27. Walker, F., “Restriction of Immigration”, *The Atlantic Monthly* 77 (464), 1896, pp.822-829. Internet site: <http://www.theatlantic.com/atlantic/atlweb/flashbks/immigr/walke/htm>. Accessed on 26/08/97.

28. Folbre, N., *Who Pays for the Kids? Gender and the Structures of Constraint*, Routledge, London, 1994, p.184.

29. Caldwell, J. and Caldwell, P., op cit. 6, 1986, pp.4ff.

Vaccination Against Population?

Neo-Malthusian thinking has framed not just population control programmes but also the very design and development of modern contraceptive techniques. The birth control pill, which was so enthusiastically embraced by many Westerners in the 1960s, was in fact first developed for use in the South. Anti-fertility “vaccines”, which scientists have been working on for the past 30 years or so with support from the Population Council and other organisations, constitute another case in point.

Such “immuno-contraceptives” aim to trick the body’s immune system into turning against cells or molecules essential to reproduction, such as certain hormones. Inexpensive and easy to administer, they would be a technological godsend for any agency seeking to control births “efficiently” without costly follow-up measures.

They are also attractive to populationists who employ images of pregnancy “epidemics” or see birth control as a weapon of war against the “teeming multitudes”. Unlike oral contraceptives, anti-fertility vaccines cannot be discontinued at will, since no “antidote” injection is available. Unlike condoms, in addition, they can be applied without a person’s knowledge or consent – for example, under cover of a “tuberculosis shot” or ordinary vaccination. Comments health researcher

and activist Judith Richter: “These are contraceptives with an unprecedented potential for abuse.”

Statements from some of the scientists involved in researching immuno-contraceptives suggest how easily such a potential could be realized. “Fertility-regulating vaccines offer the most practical way of controlling the birth rate, particularly in developing countries”, declares one. “Population stress is expressing itself in many walks of life,” opines another:

“I would even say that the terrorist problem is related in a way to the population problem . . . you just have to go, for example, to Bombay, or to any other metropolis . . . at the time that the offices close; see this sea of humanity that flows; trains are overloaded, buses are overloaded, everything is overloaded. ”

But couldn’t anti-pregnancy vaccines at least increase women’s contraceptive choice? The question is a complicated one from which considerations of power cannot be excluded. As community health researchers Rani and Abjay Bang report from India:

“In reality, the choice of contraceptive methods is not made by women. The decision is actually often made by government health programme officials and workers.”

“The introduction of one more family planning method does not give

people more or less freedom to choose,” adds Annette Will of the Women’s Global Network for Reproductive Rights, “but only more or less things to choose from:

“What is important is: more choice of what? . . . Reproductive self-determination . . . is not a question of developing another control device, but a complex social and political issue that affects men and women differently . . . There is no such thing as a neutral technology. Why are immunological contraceptives being developed? For whom are they meant? By whom are they researched? Who has which interest in the development of immunological contraceptives? What will they do to women and men? How are they going to influence people’s health, dignity and integrity?”

Anti-pregnancy “vaccines” are still some years away from being approved by drug regulatory authorities. Many questions have been raised about their effectiveness and about possible health risks for both users and any children born if the method fails.

Source: Richter, J., *Vaccination Against Pregnancy: Miracle or Menace?*, Zed Books, London and New Jersey, 1996; ‘Stop Anti-Fertility “Vaccines” Campaign’, WGNRR, NZ Voorburgwal 32, 1012 RZ Amsterdam, THE NETHERLANDS. Fax: +31 (20) 622 2450; Email <office@wgnrr.nl>

30. Ibid., p.7.
31. Gordon, L., op. cit. 24, 1976, p.396.
32. Hartmann, B., *Reproductive Rights and Wrongs: The Global Politics of Population Control and Contraceptive Choice*, Harper and Row, New York, 1987, (revised edition South End Press, Boston, 1995) pp.196-200.
33. Meehan, M., "A Secret War Against the Poor", *Our Sunday Visitor*, 21 January 1996. Internet site: <http://www.catholic.net/rcc.Periodicals/OSV/96jan21.html>. Accessed on 26/08/97.
34. This shift was not surprising. Stoddard and Grant both had environmentalist credentials: Stoddard was a director of the Save the Redwoods League, while Grant was a founder of the New York Zoological Society which ran the Bronx Zoo, and Osborn one of his disciples. The Osborn family, moreover, had established the American Museum of Natural History which was a major focal point of the American eugenics movement, was home of the Galton Society, and had sponsored the 1921 Second International Congress of Eugenics. See Chase, A., op. cit. 25, 1977; Osborn, F., "History of the American Eugenics Society", *Social Biology* 21 (2), 1974, pp.115-26.
35. Sierra Club, "Sierra Club's Conservation Policies on Population", 1997. Internet site: <http://www.sierraclub.org/population/PPOLICY.HTML>. Accessed on 06/10/97.
36. Colinvaux, P., *Why Big Fierce Animals are Rare: An Ecologist's Perspective*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1978, p.222.
37. Hardin, G., "The Tragedy of the Commons", *Science* 162, 1968, pp.1243-8.
Research into the nature of common property resources and systems has demonstrated that, as in 18th century England, such systems are capable of maintaining local resources in a way which tends to balance individual rights against collective needs, according to complex regulations and requirements which curb the kind of excesses which private ownership tends to favour. See McCay, B. and Acheson, J., *The Question of the Commons: The Culture and Ecology of Communal Resources*, University of Arizona Press, Tucson, 1987; Gonner, E., *Common Land and Enclosure*, Frank Cass, London, 1966; Blomquist, W., *Dividing the Waters: Governing Groundwater in Southern California*, International Center for Self-Governance, San Francisco, 1992; Ostrom E., *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1990.
Hardin himself has been forced to concede that he was not talking about any particular historical or material reality, but about the commons as a hypothetical model unmanaged under conditions of scarcity. This is a major, almost fatal, concession. See Hardin, G., *Living Within Limits: Ecology, Economics, and Population Taboos*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1993, pp.178-9.
38. Hardin, G., "The Tragedy of the Commons" in Reining, P. and Tinker, I., (eds.) *Population: Dynamics, Ethics and Policy*, American Association for the Advancement of Science, Washington, DC, 1975, p.14.

Caldwell and Pat Caldwell, were drawn to the study of fertility by their concerns about "the differential rate of reproduction by social class and supposedly related inherent characteristics of intelligence and even character"³⁰

This background was still in evidence 30 years later. The Population Council, established in 1952 by John D. Rockefeller III out of concern about the potential impact of population growth in developing countries, showed unmistakable signs of eugenic sympathies during its first decade. It provided funding for the American Eugenics Society and offered to support the *Eugenics Quarterly*.³¹ The first head of the Population Council, Frederick Osborn, was an officer of the American Eugenics Society. The Population Council has since played a critical role in theoretical research on "population questions" and in the development of contraceptive techniques. Some of these, such as Norplant, were intended for use in Western-sponsored population control programmes which provided means for Third World women to limit their fertility under circumstances that were rarely fully voluntary (see Box, p.7).³² While some individuals associated with the Population Council saw birth control technologies as a way of defending the political and economic interests of the West in an age of decolonisation and revolution, others maintained that devices such as Norplant would contribute to eugenic ends.³³

From Eugenics to Environmentalism

In the shadow of Nazism and revelations about the Holocaust, eugenic ideas had to go underground. The principal vehicle for Malthusian fears became, instead, the threat of environmental catastrophe. The publication of Fairfield Osborn's *Our Plundered Planet* in 1948 marked the beginning of this new shift,³⁴ which culminated in 1968 when the Sierra Club commissioned and published Stanford biologist Paul Ehrlich's book *The Population Bomb*.³⁵ By 1978, an eminent biologist was claiming that "ecology's first social law should be written: 'All poverty is caused by the continued growth of population'"³⁶

One of the most influential ventures into social commentary of Malthus's new biologist allies was Garrett Hardin's essay, "The Tragedy of the Commons". Hardin's 1968 broadside embodied all the cardinal qualities of Cold War Malthusian thinking: it was anti-socialist, anti-democratic and eugenic. So congenial was its message to its time that, despite being devoid of any empirical evidence, it was published in *Science*.³⁷

Hardin argued that if people are allowed to breed freely, yet their children are all given equal rights to a limited commons, the world will be locked "into a tragic course of action" leading to environmental destruction.³⁸ Only private ownership of crucial resources and an inegalitarian distribution of the right to reproduce could prevent the "tragedy" which Hardin envisaged as the inevitable outcome of a democratic and egalitarian society. Such projects as the welfare state and land reform in developing countries, Hardin implied, were pointless.

Hardin's message was that some people have special powers and privileges, but we do not need to ask by what means, fair or foul, they acquired them. It is enough to point out that redistribution is impossible: those who seek equity must understand that "our" collective future security depends, not on social or economic justice, but on reducing their numbers, through coercion if necessary. The central argument of

“The Tragedy of the Commons” was thus simultaneously an ingenious defence of private property and an argument against the “welfare state”, phrased in terms of the environmental and demographic concerns of the world in which it was published.

The essay embodies the way in which post-war environmentalism became a vehicle not only for the more ideological aspects of Malthusian thinking, but also for eugenic convictions. The problem with what Hardin called “a commons in breeding” was that the poor had too many children and made excessive claims on public resources:

“If each human family were dependent only on its own resources; if the children of improvident parents starved to death; if, thus, overbreeding brought its own ‘punishment’ to the germ line — then there would be no public interest in controlling the breeding of families.”³⁹

Precisely what Hardin had in mind when he spoke of “controlling the breeding of families” can only properly be appreciated in terms of his earlier writings. In 1949, he had published a textbook entitled *Biology: Its Human Implications* in which he staked out an unambiguously eugenic position. He asserted that the problem of population was as much qualitative as quantitative, and that people with superior IQs were unfortunately having fewer children than those with lower IQs. Like others who had made this claim before him, Hardin attributed the problem to a democratic system which made insufficient allowance for what he regarded as intrinsic and heritable differences. Hardin was concerned that the survival of too many of the genes of the wrong people would degrade the genetic commons.

The central point in “The Tragedy of the Commons” was that only private property could protect the environment against over-population, an argument which has become a cardinal tenet of contemporary neo-liberal dogma. The passion with which this conviction has been embraced by conservative policy institutes and multinational corporations is evidence that it is not really an argument to conserve nature or even, in the end, to limit population, but a means of legitimising an unrelenting process of privatisation and enclosure.

Cold War Warriors

Hardin’s thinking was saturated with Cold War passions. He regarded “commonism” and “communism” as more or less equivalent.⁴⁰ Unsurprisingly, the kind of Malthusian and eugenic thinking typified by Hardin’s writings quickly became enshrined in Cold War “containment” policies from the late 1940s onward. Population growth, rather than social injustice or inequalities in resource distribution, was seen as the ultimate source of the conditions that attracted peasants to communism.⁴¹

Population control thus became part of national security planning.⁴² The first official body of the US government to advocate neo-Malthusian policies⁴³ was the President’s Committee to Study the United States Military Assistance Program.⁴⁴ This Committee, chaired by General William Draper, Jr, had been constituted primarily “to appraise the military assistance program and the relative emphasis the United States should place on economic aid”⁴⁵ but was now enjoined to include “the population problem” within its terms of reference.⁴⁶

The Draper Committee recommended government financing of population research as part of security planning. In 1964, the Alliance

39. Hardin, G., op. cit. 38, p.14.

40. Hardin, G., 1993, op. cit. 37, pp.214ff.

41. Staley, E., *The Future of Underdeveloped Countries: Political Implications of Economic Development*, Council on Foreign Relations, New York, 1954, p.284.

42. It was Italy, however, rather than any Third World country which was one of the first targets of the assumption that “over-population creates a breeding ground for communism . . . [because] Communist propaganda thrives on poverty and discontent”. (A 1951 article, quoted in Wilmoth, J. and Ball, P., “The Population Debate in American Popular Magazines, 1946-90”, *Population and Development Review*, 18 (4), 1992, p.646.) High levels of unemployment and a post-war baby boom (such as many European countries experienced) fuelled the argument that Italy was over-populated. US foreign assistance encouraged Italian emigration. See Phillips, J., “Too Many People”, *Newsweek*, 27 September 1948, p.37.

43. Mass, B., *Population Target: The Political Economy of Population Control in Latin America*, Charters Publishing, Brampton, Ontario, 1976, p.41.

44. Zlotnick, J., “Population Pressure and Political Indecision”, *Foreign Affairs* 39 (4), 1961, p.685. See also Piotrow, P., *World Population Crisis: The United States Response*, Praeger, New York, 1973, pp.36ff; Caldwell, J. and Caldwell, P., op. cit. 6, 1986.

45. Packenham, R., *Liberal America and the Third World: Political Development Ideas in Foreign Aid and Social Science*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1973, pp.57-58.

46. Piotrow, P., op. cit. 44, 1973, pp 37-38. The Draper committee, and similar appointed groups, were “almost without exception headed by members of the power elite and staffed by the employees and scholars of . . . foundations, associations and institutes” such as the Rockefeller Foundation, Ford Foundation, Carnegie Foundation, RAND and the Council on Foreign Relations. In this way, the views of certain economic interests within US society were recast as the recommendations of special committees. Collectively, the ten members of the Draper Committee were the supreme embodiment of the major forces that directed the course of US foreign policy and revived the anti-Soviet posture of the West. Draper himself played a conspicuous role in national and international population policymaking and later became the head of fund-raising at Planned Parenthood. He was an investment banker at Dillon, Read and Co., which in the 1930s had helped to finance the Third Reich in Germany. See Domhoff, W.G., *The Higher Circles: The Governing Class in America*, Vintage, New York, 1970, pp.134-5; Chase, A., op. cit. 25, 1977, p.383; Kolko, G., *The Politics of War: The World and United States Foreign Policy 1943-1945*, Random House, New York, 1968; Kolko, J. and Kolko, G., *The Limits of Power: The World and United States Foreign Policy, 1945-1954*, 1972, p.113; Simpson, C., *The Splendid Blond Beast: Money, Law, and Genocide in the Twentieth Century*, Common Courage Press, Monroe, Maine, 1995.

for Progress (created in 1961 by the US administration under President John F. Kennedy to forestall further Cuba-style revolutions in Latin America) duly opened an Office of Population. It was funded by the US Agency for International Development (USAID), whose missions in Latin America were formally advised in 1965 that population control was “a priority area”.⁴⁷ The establishment view was that “Time is not with us in Latin America. The pressures of population and revolution are increasing”.⁴⁸

Three years later, in 1969, having become the national chair of the Population Crisis Committee,⁴⁹ General Draper stated that “unless and until the population explosion now erupting in Asia, Africa and Latin America is brought under control, our entire aid program is doomed to failure”.⁵⁰ The US Foreign Assistance Act quickly earmarked \$35 million for population programmes. By 1971, USAID’s annual allocation for population had risen to \$100 million, far more than was allocated for healthcare. Much of the population budget was channelled through the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) in various countries.⁵¹

Towards the end of the 1960s, in part through the efforts of General Draper and John D. Rockefeller III,⁵² population control became pivotal to development strategies designed to address poverty, hunger and low wages. By 1968, curbing population growth had become central to World Bank development policy, and has remained so ever since. In 1967, the UN established its Population Trust Fund, with most of its financial support coming from the United States. The Fund was reorganised in 1969 as the United Nations Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA), supervised by the UN Development Programme (UNDP), and advised by a special panel which included John D. Rockefeller III.⁵³

UNFPA has consistently adhered at the highest levels and in most of its official publications to a neo-Malthusian position.⁵⁴ When, for example, a cyclone wreaked havoc in south-eastern Bangladesh in April 1991, the headline of UNFPA’s bulletin, *Population*, declared “Bangladesh cyclone a Malthusian nightmare”.⁵⁵ From these respectable heights, Malthusianism came to justify one of the most influential Western development strategies of the post-war period: the commercialisation of Third World agriculture — the “Green Revolution”. It thus also played a central role in subduing demands for land reform which, as the victory of the Chinese communists in 1949 had shown, could be a major impetus for systemic social change.

The Life and Death of Land Reform

In the decades after the end of the Second World War, peasants everywhere were demanding land. They sought access to unused and under-utilised lands in the hands of large landowners. And they sought to reclaim precious cultivable lands that colonialist powers and their descendants had appropriated over the centuries for non-subsistence agricultural production of crops such as sugar, cotton and coffee.

For a brief period, an argument was made for land reform as part of the West’s Cold War strategy: to pre-empt discontented rural and impoverished peasants from turning to communism and its programme of agrarian change. “The only way to thwart Communist designs on Asia”, wrote agricultural economist Wolf Ladejinsky, who was variously employed by the Ford Foundation and the World Bank, “is to preclude

Project RAND (Research And Development) was created by Douglas Aircraft for the US Air Force in 1946, and re-established as a non-profit independent corporation with Ford Foundation assistance in 1947. It developed into a crucial link “between the military services and the intellectual community in the name of national security”. By the 1960s, it was run by trustees who represented major US corporations such as Mobil, Standard Oil and Citicorp and who were often members of the Council on Foreign Relations. It had become one of the few select organisational mechanisms through which the US elite helped to define and operationalise US foreign policy. See Yergin, D., *Shattered Peace: The Origins of the Cold War and the National Security State*, Houghton Mifflin, Boston, MA, 1978, p.361; Freedman, L., *The Price of Peace: Living with the Nuclear Dilemma*, Macmillan, New York, 1986; Domhoff, W.G., op. cit. 46, 1970, pp.123-7.

47. Colby, G. and Dennett, C., *Thy Will Be Done: The Conquest of the Amazon: Nelson Rockefeller and Evangelism in the Age of Oil*, Harper Collins, New York, 1995, p.475; Mass, B., op. cit. 43, 1976, pp.43-46.

48. Lodge, G., “Revolution in Latin America”, *Foreign Affairs*, 44 (2), 1966, p.197.

49. Lader, L., *Breeding Ourselves to Death*, Ballantine Books, New York, 1971, p.44.

50. Testimony before the US House of Representatives’ Committee on Banking and Currency, quoted in Mass, B., op. cit. 43, 1976, p.46.

51. Mass, B., op. cit. 43, 1976, p.49; Lader, L., OP. CIT. 49, 1971, pp.44-45. The IPPF had been formed at an international conference of birth control organisations held in Bombay, India, in 1952. See Caldwell, J. and Caldwell, P., op. cit. 6, p.41, Gordon, L., op. cit. 24 pp.344, 397.

52. Green, M., “The Evolution of US International Population Policy, 1965-92: A Chronological Account”, *Population and Development Review* 19 (2), 1993, pp.308-9.

53. Mass, B., op. cit. 43, 1976, p.62.

54. For example, UNFPA, *Population, Resources and the Environment: The Critical Challenges*, United Nations Population Fund, New York, 1991.

55. “Bangladesh Cyclone a Malthusian Nightmare”, *Population* 17 (6) 1991, p.1.

such revolutionary outbursts through timely reforms, peacefully before the peasants take the law into their own hands and set the countryside ablaze”.⁵⁶ He attributed the “age-old wretchedness of the Asiatic peasant” to the Malthusian problem of “too many people, too little land”⁵⁷ and emphasised “the urgency of taking the wind out of the Communist sails in a peasant ocean”.⁵⁸ Arguing that “land reform was a crucial element in the fight against Asian communists”,⁵⁹ his advocacy of it was not based on a sense of social justice, but reflected political expediency.

In 1949, shortly after the Chinese communists came to power, the highest levels of the US government began to commend land reform as the least unacceptable option. But such reform, if left to those allied to the West or those who had inherited colonial regimes, could never be effective enough to contain the resentments of the dispossessed. The fate of land reform in Vietnam, the Philippines and Guatemala provides insights into the complex relationship of ends and means which characterised US foreign policy thinking in the decade after the Second World War.

Vietnam

In the mid- to late-1950s, land reform was attempted in the south of Vietnam under the influence of the US aid mission as part of its campaign to defeat the communists in the north. The French colonialists had bequeathed the southern part of Vietnam a legacy of being a “landlords’ country” with a high degree of landlessness and rural poverty.⁶⁰ A study by Ladejinsky in the Mekong Delta area found that 2.5 per cent of the population owned half the cultivated land, while 70 per cent owned less than 12.5 per cent.

When land reform was instituted in the south, however, it worsened conditions for many peasants. Many landlords ignored upper limits set on rents, for instance. The Vietnamese prime minister, moreover, was more reluctant to alienate the landowning class than to create a bulwark against communism.⁶¹ By the end of 1967, less than one-eighth of South Vietnam’s cultivated land had been redistributed to barely one-tenth of those who had been wholly or substantially dependent on farming land as tenants.⁶² As a result, “the mass of South Vietnamese peasants saw the [Communist] Vietminh and Vietcong land reforms as dealing far more effectively with their basic needs and basic grievances than anything the [south Vietnamese government in Saigon] had to offer.”⁶³

In the early 1960s, the USA gave up “championing the cause of agrarian reform and placed its efforts primarily on developing a military response to ‘communist insurgency’ and economic and technical aid, without challenging the status quo in rural power structures.”⁶⁴

The Philippines

In the Philippines, also regarded as strategic to US interests, “the land-ownership issue has been central to episodes of large-scale violence.”⁶⁵ Half-hearted attempts at land reform began in the 1950s as part of the campaign to suppress the Huk communist insurgency, which had originated during the Japanese occupation (Huk was short for “Hukbalahap or People’s Anti-Japanese Army) and had continued after the country’s independence in 1946 to wage a guerrilla war against landowners. Huk influence predominated in the rice- and sugar-growing areas of Central Luzon, not far from Manila, where the pattern of tenancies since the turn of the century had caused mounting tensions between absentee

The Malthusian fears which propelled the Green Revolution put land reform on hold, and even reversed it, in many parts of the world.

56. Walinsky, L. (ed.) *The Selected Papers of Wolf Ladejinsky: Agrarian Reform as Unfinished Business*, World Bank, Washington, DC, 1977, p.132.

The Ford Foundation was established in 1936 with resources that dwarfed those of Rockefeller. It began to take a global perspective in the aftermath of the 1949 Chinese Revolution. At this time, it was directed by Paul Hoffman, former head of the Marshall aid plan to Europe, and had such notables as World Bank President John J. McCloy on its board. When McCloy succeeded Hoffman, he was also the chair of the Rockefeller’s Chase Manhattan Bank and of the Council on Foreign Relations. See Mattelart, A., *Multinational Corporations and the Control of Culture: Ideological Apparatuses of Imperialism*, Harvester Press, Brighton, 1979, p.156; Bird, K., *The Chairman: John J. McCloy — The Making of the American Establishment*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1992; Rosen, G., *Western Economists and Eastern Societies: Agents of Change in South Asia, 1950-1970*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, pp.7-8.

57. Walinsky, L., op. cit. 56, 1977, p.131.

58. Ibid., p.134.

59. Putzel, J., *A Captive Land: The Politics of Agrarian Reform in the Philippines*, Ateneo de Manila University Press, Manila, 1992, p.75.

60. Hodgkin, T., *Vietnam: The Revolutionary Path*, Macmillan, London, 1981, p.179.

61. Post, K., *Revolution, Socialism and Nationalism in Viet Nam*, Vol. 3., Aldershot, Dartmouth, 1989, p.107.

62. Prosterman, R. and Riedinger, J., *Land Reform and Democratic Development*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1987, p.126.

63. Ibid., p.127.

64. Putzel, J., op. cit. 59, 1992, pp.98-99.

65. Prosterman, R. and Riedinger, J., op. cit. 62, 1987, p.11.

landlords and a growing population of sharecroppers.⁶⁶

Once again, however, the power of Philippine landlords remained deeply entrenched, thwarting any meaningful process of land redistribution, even if the government supported it. Moreover, as soon as the Huk movement was suppressed, landlords who had been willing to allow some change in the land tenure system rapidly reversed their position.⁶⁷

As the limited land reforms promoted by the US in the 1950s and 1960s failed to amount to anything — partly because of who was in control of them — and as rural unrest continued, two new strategies evolved in tandem, both sponsored by the Ford and Rockefeller Foundations.⁶⁸ These were, again, population control and Green Revolution agriculture.

The Ford Foundation established an International Population Program at Cornell University which included “research and training in the field of population, with particular emphasis on human fertility and migration, two factors of political as well as social importance to the countries of Latin America and the Far East”.⁶⁹ In 1964, Ford approved funding to develop a Population Institute in Manila.⁷⁰

By the time Philippines President Ferdinand Marcos declared martial law in 1972, it was being commonly argued that, as a result of

66. McMillan, R., “Land Tenure in the Philippines”, *Rural Sociology* 20 (1), 1955, p.27.

67. *Ibid.*, p.32.

68. The Rockefeller Foundation was set up in 1913 by John D. Rockefeller, owner of the Standard Oil Company. The Foundation was involved from the outset in developing countries, agricultural and rural development, Westernisation and Christianisation. Its work was continued by his son, John D. Rockefeller, Jr, and then his grandson, John D. Rockefeller III, who set up the Population Council.

69. Cornell University News Bureau, press release, 28 January 1962.

70. Caldwell, J. and Caldwell, P., *op. cit.* 6, 1986, pp.107-8.

Green Revolution and “Surplus” Population in the Philippines

Birth control programmes in the Philippines had the ostensible purpose of tackling one side of the population-resource equation. The Green Revolution was designed to deal with the other. Together the two represented an integrated programme for a systematic restructuring of rural food production. The idea was not only to grow food without peasants, using higher-yielding rice, but to do so on less land, making more land available for commercial crops for export.

By 1958, the Philippines was regarded by senior Ford and Rockefeller Foundation officers as the best location for an Asian international rice research centre which would “help solve the world food problem” and allay their economic and political concerns about Asia at the same time.ⁱ The two foundations set up the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) in 1960.

At the same time, the World Bank made credit available to the Philippine government for large irrigation projects. Cultivated land devoted to rice declined, however, from 3.2 million hectares in 1960 to 3.1 million hectares in 1970.ⁱⁱ For a long time, the country continued to import the staple.

The Philippine countryside became a place of increasing

political insurgency and resistance during the late 1960s and 1970s. Marcos declared martial law in 1972 and attempted a new agrarian reform, largely in order to stabilise the countryside at the expense of small-scale cultivators.ⁱⁱⁱ The reform was closely linked to World Bank funding of about \$1 billion over the next eight years, almost half of which went into irrigation. New irrigation, new seeds and more fertiliser use increased national rice production for a while, but by the mid-1980s rice output was in decline because most peasants could not keep up with the increasing costs of requisite inputs.^{iv} The large dams which the Bank funded in Central and Northern Luzon displaced thousands of peasants, forcing many into upland areas. Increasing mechanisation, spearheaded by technical innovations developed by IRRI, marginalised many landless agricultural workers, who then left the countryside.

It was not just that the cultivation of new rice varieties offered few opportunities for poor farmers. The principal thrust of Philippine agrarian development over 25 years has been export crop production dominated by large landowners and multinationals. As a result, the Philippines now imports vast quantities of rice from Thailand, Japan and China,^v while it exports labour that could contribute to food self-sufficiency. At the end

of 1994, there were 6.21 million overseas Filipino workers, of whom 2.56 million were contract workers, 1.83 million were permanent residents abroad and 1.8 million were undocumented.^{vi} This population appears “surplus” only if one ignores the political dynamics of the Green Revolution and the intransigence of the landed interests against which peasants have struggled for half a century.

i Anderson, R., Levy, E. and Morrison, B., *Rice Science and Development Politics: Research Strategies and IRRI's Technologies Confront Asia Diversity (1950-1980)*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1991, p.1.

ii Bello, W. et al., *Development Debacle: The World Bank in the Philippines*, Institute for Food and Development Policy, San Francisco, 1982, p.67, 69.

iii *Ibid.*, p.77.

iv Putzel, J. and Cunnington, J., *Gaining Ground: Agrarian Reform in the Philippines*, War on Want, London, 1989, p.30.

v Japanese Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, A Weekly Update of News No. 134, 21 July 1995. Internet site: <http://www.maff.go.jp/mud/134.html>. accessed 18/08/98

vi Philippine Reporter/Philippine News. “6.21 Million Pinoy Work Overseas”, 1995. Internet site: http://www.mabuhay.com/phil_reporter/news/X0002_621MILL.html. accessed 23/08/97

population growth, the Philippines had run out of reasonably cultivable land. Although this argument side-stepped the question of how such land was actually being used, and by whom, it eventually became the principal explanation for environmental degradation, including soil erosion and deforestation.

Guatemala

In 1952, the Guatemalan government, committed to capitalist development and enjoying popular support, introduced successful but modest agrarian reforms. The land reform was thoughtful, workable but cautious: only uncultivated land could be expropriated and then only from large farms.⁷¹ The land reform decree stated that it aimed to replace “feudalist modes and relations of production with capitalist ones”.⁷²

Among the uncultivated holdings expropriated by the government were 146,000 hectares belonging to United Fruit. This US banana company, which was the country’s largest landowner, worked just 15 per cent of its holdings while thousands of peasant families had little or no land.⁷³

The takeover of this idle land enraged private US corporate interests but could hardly be cited as a justification for US military intervention. Thus the argument was developed that Guatemala had come under Soviet influence. United Fruit directed a public relations campaign against the “communist government in Guatemala”.⁷⁴ The Council on Foreign Relations, which reflects the establishment views of US policymakers, held that the Guatemalan administration was “a Russian-controlled dictatorship”; the US government was called upon to address “the precise problem of how to clear out the Communists”.⁷⁵ The US government also had to try to convince international observers that it was the “acknowledged successful symbolic leader” of those seeking “to achieve social justice and improved economic conditions”⁷⁶ rather than, say, merely following the lead of United Fruit.

In June 1954, a US-backed insurgent force entered Guatemala from neighbouring Honduras in order to trigger a coup. The overthrow of the government reversed the process of land reform,⁷⁷ reestablished the dominant role of the US banana industry⁷⁸ and inaugurated an era of increased foreign investment directed towards industrialisation. By the late 1970s, Guatemala was being opened up still further for the development of cash crops (cotton, sugar, coffee, fruits and flowers), cattle and mineral exploitation⁷⁹ which put further pressure on a land-hungry rural population. As in the Philippines, when peasant farmers starting tilling land further up the hillsides and further into the jungle, soil erosion and deforestation were attributed to their fertility, not to the pressures of commercial agriculture or denial of access to productive land. In 1991, Guatemala had:

“the most unequal land tenure in all of Latin America, with less than two percent of the landowners controlling 65 percent of the farmland. At the other end of the scale, approximately 27 percent of the total population is landless and forced to work as part-time wage laborers.”⁸⁰

Moreover, Guatemalans lived under one of the most repressive governments in the world,⁸¹ which employed ever more terrorist-like measures to remove peasants from their land. Repression and the unresolved lack of access to land or productive employment has impelled many Guatemalans to see refuge and work in Mexico, the United States or elsewhere⁸² – but true to Malthusian form, such emigration is invariably said to be due to peasant overfertility.

71. Thiesenhusen, W., *Broken Promises: Agrarian Reform and the Latin American Campesino*, Westview Press, Boulder, CO, 1995, p.76.

72. quoted in Berger, S., *Political and Agrarian Development in Guatemala*, Westview Press, Boulder, CO, 1992, p.64.

73. Thiesenhusen, W., op. cit. 71, 1995, p.79; Mason, D.T., “Population Growth and the Struggle for the Hearts and Minds of Rural Populations in Central America” in Saunders, J., (ed.) *Population Growth in Latin America and US National Security*, Allen and Unwin, Boston, MA, 1986, pp.212-213.

74. Landau, S., *The Dangerous Doctrine: National Security and US Foreign Policy*, Westview Press, Boulder, CO, 1988, p.65.

The Council on Foreign Relations was established in 1921. One of its roles has been “to provide a revolving door through which candidate members of future and present establishments may circulate, and a fish tank of talent from which incoming Presidents and Secretaries of State may select”. By the mid-1950s, it was well funded by major US corporations and the Ford and Rockefeller Foundations. It thus reflects the views of the US policymaking establishment and is one of the most crucial club-like links between major corporate and financial interests and government. See Hitchens, C., *Blood, Class and Nostalgia: Anglo-American Ironies*, Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, New York, 1990, (Vintage, London, 1991) p.306; Horowitz, D., “Politics and Knowledge: An Unorthodox History of Modern China Studies”, *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 9 (3-4) 1971, pp.144-146.

75. quoted in Trevorton, G., *Covert Action: The CIA and the Limits of American Intervention in the Postwar World*, I.B.Tauris, London, 1987, p.59.

76. Berle, A., “The Cuban Crisis: Failure of American Foreign Policy”, *Foreign Affairs*, 39 (1) 1960, p.54.

77. Dunkerley, J., *Power in the Isthmus: A Political History of Modern Central America*, Verso, London, 1988, pp. pp.144-50, 43ff.

78. Gardner, F., “Guatemala’s Deadly Harvest”, *Multinational Monitor* 12 (1 and 2), Jan-Feb 1991; Jonas, S. and Tobis, D., *Guatemala*, NACLA, New York, 1974, p.131.

79. Mason, D.T., op. cit. 73, 1986, p.214.

80. Gardner, F., op. cit. 78, 1991. See also Brockett, C., *Land, Power and Poverty: Agrarian Transformation and Political Conflict in Central America*, Unwin Hyman, Boston, 1988, pp.72-3.

81. See Berger, S., op. cit. 72, 1992, pp.1-2; Black, G., *Garrison Guatemala*, Zed Books, London, 1984.

82. Faber, D., *Environment Under Fire: Imperialism and the Ecological Crisis in Central America*, Monthly Review Press, New York, 1993, p.73.

The argument that rising populations had occupied all the agricultural land in the South rationalised the emergence of Green Revolution agriculture.

Selling Chemicals: False Premises, False Promises

The Western tenet that rising populations had occupied all the land in the South suitable for agriculture rationalised the emergence of the Green Revolution. It was said that the only solution to the Malthusian spectre of famine was to enhance output per unit of available land through technological means and that only large commercial farms, moreover, could provide the necessary food fast enough. As US Secretary of Agriculture Orville Freeman wrote in 1967:

“If we are ever to solve the world food problem, we must now begin concentrating in earnest on increasing food production in the less developed nations. We have a pretty good idea of what is needed. In varying proportion according to particular situations, the hungry countries need: increased quantities of fertilizer and other farm chemicals, improved varieties of seeds, increased availability of water, added credit, productive price policies, improved marketing facilities and expanded research and education.”⁸³

The argument conveniently sidestepped the fact that large farmers frequently underutilised land which peasants could have brought into food production. In reality, the Green Revolution simultaneously denied the yield-raising potential of land redistribution and reoriented production to world markets rather than to local subsistence needs. It was never aimed at producing more food for the needy so much as at creating a global food system in which peasant agriculture, widely regarded as backward and unproductive from the point of view of a modern market economy, was subordinated to or replaced by a more commercial and capital-intensive mode of production. One of the ultimate aims of creating such a system was that local food production in developing countries would actually be reduced. In addition, Third World agriculture would be developed in favour of agricultural exports, while the United States profited as a supplier of agricultural inputs and as the principal source of food grains for the Third World. The Green Revolution thus turned out to be less about improving the food security of the poor in developing countries than about securing the economic interests of the United States and Western multinationals.⁸⁴

Malthusian thinking has it that attempts to commercialise Third World agriculture are a response to population pressures⁸⁵ – and a humanitarian one. This view of the Green Revolution was reinforced by the award of the Nobel peace prize in 1970 to Rockefeller Foundation geneticist Norman Borlaug for his role in developing hybrid wheat in Mexico. Despite 30 years of documentation on the adverse consequences of the Green Revolution, remarkably little has been done to question this conventional explanation of its origins and aims. It continues to be described mainly as a package of technological innovations unrelated to any geo-political agenda.

The danger of such naive views is that they legitimise renewed investment in the intensification of agro-technology. Organisations such as the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) – the think-tank of the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) in Washington, which has guided the course of global agricultural development since the early 1970s⁸⁶ – argue that, if countries and their peoples are still hungry, it is because they squandered the benefits of the Green Revolution and failed to curb their fertility, so that Malthusian catastrophe may therefore still be on the horizon.⁸⁷ Such

83. Freeman, O., “Malthus, Marx and the North American Breadbasket”, *Foreign Affairs* 45 (4), 1967, p.592.

84. See Galli, R., “Rural Development as Social and Economic Control: International Agencies and Class Struggle in the Colombian Countryside”, *Latin American Perspectives* 5 (4), 1978; Galli, R., *The Political Economy of Rural Development: Peasants, International Capital and the State*, State University of New York Press, Albany, NY, 1981; Fitzgerald, D., “Exporting American Agriculture: The Rockefeller Foundation in Mexico, 1943-53”, *Social Studies of Science* 16, 1986, p.463; Harrar, G., “Foreword” in The Agribusiness Council, *Agricultural Initiative in the Third World: A Report on the Conference: Science and Agribusiness in the Seventies*, Lexington Books, Lexington, MA, pp.ix-xii. 1975, p.xi.

85. The pioneering and continuing role that liberal philanthropic Foundations such as Ford and Rockefeller played in the development of the Green Revolution have aided this view, even though these organisations were in fact an intimate and influential part of the US capitalist economy.

86. See Baum, W., *Partners Against Hunger: The Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research*, World Bank, Washington, DC, 1986. See also GRAIN/RAFI, “CGIAR: Agricultural Research for Whom?”, *The Ecologist*, Vol. 26, No. 6, Nov/Dec 1996, pp.259-272.

87. See Mathews, J., “A Small Price to Pay for Proving Malthus Wrong”, opinion, *International Herald Tribune*, 9 June 1994.

Suppressing Alternatives to the Green Revolution

There have always been alternatives to the Green Revolution. As early as the 1940s, when the earliest Rockefeller research efforts were just getting underway in Mexico, Carl Sauer and many Mexican scientists were pointing out that existing horticultural techniques had enormous potential for innovation and productivity. What peasants chiefly lacked was access to cultivable land and the commitment of the state to provide the resources and incentives that smallholder production required.ⁱ

In 1960, Gunnar Myrdal argued that Asian agriculture's future lay in greater, not less labour-intensiveness. Others argued that agriculture in Kerala in the south of India could "benefit considerably from greater labour intensification" and from:

"improving irrigation channels, . . . small-scale irrigation works (building storage tanks, etc) . . . growing more short-duration green manures which would save on costly fertilisers, growing more high-protein lentils . . . greater development of small-fish cultivation, and . . . better utilisation of small pieces of garden land."ⁱⁱ

Such practices, which would harness rather than discount the potential of rural labour, and thereby subvert the illusion that "over-population" was remediable only through fertility control, could also help make local production more independent.

This approach, however, would require more general access to land than even the process of land reform under a left-wing government in Kerala had been able to provide in the face of opposition from large landowners. Such far-reaching agrarian reform is antithetical to the market dependency and intensification of corporate-dominated agro-biotechnology which the Green Revolution engenders.

Research carried out in West Bengal, India, in 1972 demonstrated how a system perceived by the West as traditional and inefficient could be defended as more ecologically rational than

the more industrialised system found in the United States, the model for agricultural development in the Third World. Where Indian cattle were reared on the by-products of crops grown for human use, there was virtually no competition between humans and animals for food or land. Cattle-food – rice, straw, rice hulls and chopped banana tree trunks – tended to be locally produced, and cattle converted it into products that humans could use, including calves, work, milk and dung (for fertiliser and fuel). In contrast, in the US, where agricultural fertiliser is based on petrochemicals, cattle manure is wasted and ends up being a major environmental liability, polluting groundwater and causing the eutrophication of rivers and lakes.ⁱⁱⁱ

Even as the Green Revolution increased output of single products, it reduced the overall efficiency of food production because it wasted potential resources in favour of costly external inputs. Conventional efficiency measures, moreover, do not take into account social, environmental and health consequences of the pesticides and herbicides required to obtain the high yields of Green Revolution grain varieties. The World Health Organization estimates that half a million acute pesticide poisonings occur every year in the South.^{iv} Such chemicals are applied not only to new grain varieties but also to many other crops that tie developing economies into an increasingly intensive global agro-food system. In Costa Rica, for example, banana plantations, which occupy five per cent of the country's cultivated land, use 30 kilogrammes of active pesticide ingredients per hectare annually and inflict considerable damage on the health of the workers and their families.^v

The long-term efficacy of such chemicals is also questionable. Despite increased use of insecticides on rice, for example, there is:

"no proof that losses due to insects . . . have been reduced. One reason for this is that more insect-susceptible varieties of rice have been planted. Further, the use of 2,4-D herbicide has increased the level of attack of insects on rice."^{vi}

Such attacks have been amplified by high fertiliser use, since higher nutrient levels in crops tend to favour

insects and disease as well.^{vii} In many areas, increasing pesticide use does not boost food grain production over the long term but, instead, leads to a resurgence of both target and secondary pests.^{viii}

These costs have to be overlooked if industrialised agriculture is to be presented as the key to global human dietary sufficiency – or if it is to foster a profitable market for chemical inputs.

The growing evidence that Green Revolution agriculture is less efficient than its predecessors has led some writers to conclude that measuring success by high yields alone is misconceived.

- i For background, see Esteva, G., "Hosting the Otherness of the Other: The Case of the Green Revolution", in Apffel-Marglin, F. and Marglin, S.A., *Decolonizing Knowledge: From Development to Dialogue*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1996, pp.249-278.
- ii Mencher, J., "Why Grow More Food? An Analysis of Some Contradictions in the 'Green Revolution' in Kerala", *Economic and Political Weekly, Review of Agriculture*, December 1978, p.A-104.
- iii Odend'hal, S., "Energetics of Indian Cattle in Their Environment", *Human Ecology* 1 (1), 1972, pp.17-19; Pimental, D. and Pimental, M., "Comment: Adverse Environmental Consequences of the Green Revolution" in Davis, K. and Bernstam, M., (eds.) *Resources, Environment and Population: Present Knowledge, Future Options*, Supplement to Vol 16 *Population and Development Review*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1991, pp.330-31.
- iv Viswanathan, A., "Pesticides: From Silent Spring to Indian Summer", *Economic and Political Weekly*, 26 (44), 1991, p.2039; Putzel, J. and Cunnington, J., *Gaining Ground: Agrarian Reform in the Philippines*, War on Want, London, 1989; Canihuante, G., "Chile-Agriculture: Pesticides Take Their Toll", *Inter Press Service World News* 1997. Internet site: <http://www.oneworld.org/textver/ips2/feb/chile.html>. accessed 16/07/97.
- v Wheat, A., "Toxic Bananas", *Multinational Monitor* 17 (9), 1996. Internet site: <http://www.essential.org/monitor/hyper/mm0996.04.html>. accessed 21/01/98.
- vi Pimental, D. and Pimental, M., op. cit. iii, pp.329-30.
- vii Ibid., p.331.
- viii Viswanathan, A., op. cit. iv, p.2039.

organisations tend to propound the view that “ultimately the only solution to the food problem will be the curbing of world population growth”⁸⁸ while at the same time pressing for an extension of the Green Revolution through genetic engineering and other means.

Such views have been highly useful to the interests of Western elites in their efforts to address crises in capitalism. Whether they have also advanced the interests of the land-hungry and nutritionally deprived rural poor is questionable.

Whose Green Revolution?

Capital-intensive inputs – including irrigation, chemical fertilisers and pesticides – were preconditions for the bountiful harvests promised from Green Revolution seeds. These inputs were often beyond the reach of smallholders. The new seeds wound up being most widely used in irrigated areas. The Green Revolution thus accentuated pre-existing differences between regions. In India, for example, “gains in productivity have remained confined to select areas which have emerged as enclaves of high growth amidst stagnating, backward, and low-yield unproductive agriculture in the rest of the country”.⁸⁹

Reaping the greatest benefits in the countryside were larger landowners and more substantial peasants.⁹⁰ Green Revolution apologists covered up this fact by claiming that richer farmers’ ability to exploit the new technologies was due to the fact that they were more “innovative” or “progressive”, not to their preexisting material advantages.⁹¹

Reaping large benefits in the North, meanwhile, were fertiliser and chemical manufacturers closely linked to Ford and Rockefeller family interests. Major oil companies had consistently shown a keen interest in agricultural developments that could create demand for petroleum-based fertilisers and other agrochemicals.⁹² Selling fertilisers, moreover, helped alleviate the US’s non-agricultural trade deficit,⁹³ and Western agribusinesses had been eager to invest in fertiliser-producing capacity in developing countries such as India since the 1960s.⁹⁴

The Green Revolution not only created a lucrative global market for the industrial products on which “modernised” agriculture depended. It also helped ensure that any country committed to industrialised agriculture was unlikely ever to disengage itself from that market.

In the 1970s, rising oil prices became one of the most important external causes of mounting debt in the Third World,⁹⁵ particularly where commercial agriculture had created a dependence on oil imports. Using this debt to justify the imposition of programmes of “structural adjustment” in the 1980s, the World Bank and International Monetary Fund worked to transform Third World economies still more thoroughly into what Michael Chossudovsky calls “open economic territories and ‘reserves’ of cheap labour and natural resources”.⁹⁶ Instead of addressing the “unequal structure of trade, production and credit which defines the role and position of developing countries in the global economy”,⁹⁷ this move merely pushed Southern countries toward further agricultural “modernisation” under the influence of foreign agribusiness. It was a process which generated more exports – filling the supermarket shelves of the developed countries – at the cost of rising domestic food poverty in developing regions.

Despite this history, the growing nutritional crisis in the Third World is usually attributed today to “over-population” or “environmental stress”. Hence the current neo-Malthusian calls for a renewal of the

88. Brown, L., “Population and Affluence: Growing Pressures on World Food Resources” in Stevens, R.D. (ed.) *Tradition and Dynamics in Small-Farm Agriculture: Economic Studies in Asia, Africa, and Latin America*, Iowa State University Press, Ames, 1977, p.35.
89. Bhatia, B.M., *Indian Agriculture: A Policy Perspective*, Sage Publications, New Delhi, 1988, p.14.
90. Vallianatos, E.G., *Fear in the Countryside: The Control of Agricultural Resources in the Poor Countries by Nonpeasant Elites*, Ballinger Publishing Company, Cambridge, MA, 1976, p.56.
91. Borlaug, N., “The Green Revolution: Peace and Humanity”, speech given at the Nobel Peace Prize award ceremony, Oslo, Norway 11 December 1970. Internet site: <http://www.theatlantic.com/atlantic/issues/97jan/borlaug/speech.htm>. Accessed 08/08/97.
92. Lundberg, F., *The Rich and the Super-Rich: A Study in the Power of Money Today*, Bantam Books, New York, 1968, p.317. The oil companies include Esso Chemical Co., Amoco Chemicals Corp., Mobil Chemical International, Phillips’s American Fertilizer and Chemical Co., and chemical companies such as DuPont and Union Carbide. The Rockefellers have had significant interests in many of these. Chase Manhattan, the Rockefeller bank, for instance, was the third largest shareholder in Mobil Corporation, ranked 17th among shareholders of Phillips Petroleum Company and ninth for Union Carbide. This, however, barely begins to account for Rockefeller investments in agro-chemicals, since Chase or the Rockefeller Family Group have significant and influential holdings in other major banks which are themselves major shareholders in such companies. It is not surprising that the Rockefeller and Ford Foundations “played an active part” in the Fertiliser Seminar in India in 1965. See Ranganathan, C.R., “Foreword” in Alexander, T.M., and Giroti, R.S., (eds.) *National Seminar on Fertilisers*, Fertiliser Association of India, New Delhi, 1966.
93. Doyle, J., “US Foreign Agricultural Policy and the Less Developed Countries”, in Yesilada, B., et al, *Agrarian Reform in Reverse: The Food Crisis in the Third World*, Westview Press, Boulder, CO, 1987, p.317.
94. See, for example, Parker, F., “Fertilisers in Indian Economic Development” in Alexander, T.M. and Giroti, R.S., op. cit. 91, 1966, p.33.
95. Avery, W., “The Origins of Debt Accumulation among LDCs in the World Political Economy”, *The Journal of Developing Areas*, 24 (4), 1990, p.507.
96. Chossudovsky, M., “Global Poverty and New World Economic Order”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 26 (44), 2 November 1991, p.2527.
97. *Ibid.*, p.2527.

Green Revolution. As former US Assistant Secretary of State for Global Affairs Timothy Wirth – for whom the issue of population is “at the top of the agenda”⁹⁸ – recently declared: “we would be very fortunate if we had another Green Revolution”.⁹⁹ But, as ever, the question is: who is “we”?

Malthusianism Today

The Cold War is assumed to have ended with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the triumph of the capitalist market. Malthusian thinking, however, shows no signs of dying out.

The recent experience of developing countries suggests an explanation for this paradox. As policies of “free trade”, open capital markets, and unrestricted and unregulated investment are implemented, the contradictions of capitalist development become more acute. An unprecedented rise in the international flow of capital¹⁰⁰ has been accompanied by a dramatic increase in the instability of the world capitalist economy, growing inequalities throughout the South and much of the North, and new forms of resistance.

The new rhetoric of “sustainable development” and “globalisation” cannot entirely obscure how the new economic regime is exacerbating, rather than resolving, social and environmental problems in the South, while also accelerating economic and ideological polarisation. The end of the Cold War, instead of diverting resources toward making capitalism more equitable, has seen only increased fragility and volatility in the global capitalist economy, resulting in new popular struggles for equity and social justice. Whether these take the form of renewed claims for land, concerted opposition to neo-liberal trade policies, or assertions of the right to emigrate to seek work in an internationalised economy, they are provoking defensive reactions in the North. These include immigration restrictions and enforcement of the right of unimpeded capital investment. And once again, Malthusian thinking is being enlisted to defend inequality and justify, defend or enlarge the rights of private property.

One representative instance comes from the pen of Virginia Abernethy, former editor of the *Population and Environment* journal. Abernethy has recently defended the “legitimacy of unevenly distributed wealth” on the ground that it is crucial to the conservation of scarce resources and to the “legitimacy of ownership” itself.¹⁰¹ Resuscitating Garrett Hardin’s “tragedy of the commons” ideology, she maintains that only a system of inequality can forestall global resource depletion. This argument has enormous appeal for transnational corporations who want to represent profits as evidence of profound environmental concerns. It is also an expression of an emergent development perspective which can no longer explicitly identify the defence of private interest with resistance to communism, but which remains hostile to any communitarian or redistributive ethic or to economic democracy of any kind.

Abernethy and other neo-Malthusians have tried to ensure that environmental policies focus above all on the destructive role of overpopulation in developing countries. They do not, however, devote serious effort to analysing in detail either the fertility of the poor or the nature of resource use in the historical context of underdevelopment. Thus, Abernethy’s central tenet is that a “one-world redistributive ideology obscures the reality that resources are finite” and only

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98. Stilkind, J., “US Official Gives Population Stability Highest Priority”, The United States Mission to Italy, 1995. Internet site: <http://www.usis.it/wireless/wf951218/95121813.htm>. Accessed on 28/01/98.
99. Ggedda, G., “Official Says 1 Billion Suffer Hunger”, San Diego Source, 3 April 1997. Internet site: http://www.sddt.com/files/Librarywire/97...es/04_97/DN97_04_03/DN97_04_03_faaa.html. Accessed on 29/01/98.
100. Gomez, B., “Private Capital Flows To Developing Countries to Remain High”, The United States Mission to Italy, 1997. Internet site: <http://www.usis.it/wireless/wf970529/97052916.htm>. Accessed on 08/01/98.
101. Abernethy, V., “Comment: The ‘One World’ Thesis as an Obstacle to Environmental Preservation” in Davis, K. and Bernstam, M., (eds.) *Resources, Environment, and Population: Present Knowledge, Future Options*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1991, p.323.

The prosperity of the North is today portrayed as under threat from waves of immigration from “over-peopled” poorer countries.

Attributing environmental conflicts to over-population obscures the historical roots of resource depletion, including structural adjustment and free trade policies.

102. Ibid., p.326.

103. Hardin, G., 1993, op. cit. 37, p.283.

104. Abernethy, V., “Optimism and Overpopulation”, *The Atlantic Monthly* 274 (6), 1994, pp.84-91.

105. Ibid.

106. Homer-Dixon, T., “The Ingenuity Gap: Can Poor Countries Adapt to Resource Scarcity?”, *Population and Development Review* 21 (3), 1995, pp.598ff, 605.

encourages “overpopulated countries to tolerate further growth”.¹⁰² A compelling counter-argument could easily be made that capitalist monopoly also obscures the reality that resources are finite. But Abernethy’s point is that only inequality and the miseries it entails can motivate the irrational and improvident poor to curb their fertility.

A corollary of this Malthusian view is that immigration, too, is a form of redistribution, and as such, also prevents the poor of the South from understanding the “reality” of finite resources. According to Hardin, immigration only “prolongs the reign of poverty in poor [countries]”¹⁰³ by subsidising maladaptive behaviour. Implicit in this argument is the claim that the profits of capital are global (and should move freely), while poverty is strictly local (and should not migrate).

The implications go even further. Abernethy has suggested that “economic expansion . . . encourages the belief that formerly recognised limits can be discounted”.¹⁰⁴ She proceeds to warn against “large transfers of technology and funds to the Third World” which would, like the poor laws a century and a half ago, ameliorate worsening livelihoods and therefore stimulate fertility.¹⁰⁵ (As it happens, such transfers of funds are not actually occurring; the flow goes mainly in the other direction.)

But it is not enough, on this view, to deny aid or to rule out migration. Land redistribution must also be resisted because it favours increases in family size. In this endorsement of structural injustice, “overpopulation” is once again regarded as a given, inequality is simply a historical accident, the rich owe nothing to the poor, and generosity, however tempting, would be misguided and counterproductive. This is Malthus’s original vision, reinforced by a view of a world of dramatically declining resources in which the future prosperity and well-being of capitalism, especially in the North, are under immediate threat from “over-peopled” developing countries, particularly in the form of potential waves of immigration from poorer to richer countries.

The idea that the wealth of the developed countries is “ours”, resourced by nothing more than Western genius – a parallel of the entrepreneur’s idea that workers do not create wealth, but only enjoy jobs created for them by the wealthy – is one of the oldest myths of capitalism.

The Malthusian Ecology of Global Conflicts

Increasingly prevalent in Northern development thinking is the view that regional conflicts arise chiefly from environmental crises in which Malthusian pressures play a paramount role. While this idea is reminiscent of the US national security analyses of the 1950s, it has acquired a gloss of up-to-date academic respectability through the work of Thomas Homer-Dixon and others.

Writing in *Population and Development Review*, the journal of the Population Council, Homer-Dixon represents the growing scarcity of natural resources as principally the product of local or regional population growth. He suggests that societies may adapt to this scarcity through “ingenuity”. Southern countries, however, because of their “underdeveloped economic institutions”, “social friction”, or lack of capital investment in research, are likely to suffer from a “serious and chronic ingenuity gap”, which brings about “a downward and self-reinforcing spiral of crisis and decay”.¹⁰⁶

Homer-Dixon’s claim that the South “lacks ingenuity” is recognisable as a version of the colonialist’s disdain for the limited capacity

of the colonised; he declines to mention the historical roots of resource depletion and the way structural adjustment and neo-liberal trade policies result in pressures on resources. The bland phrase “underdeveloped economic institutions” obliquely blames the victims for economic underdevelopment without trying to comprehend “how their past economic and social history gave rise to their present underdevelopment”.¹⁰⁷

Attributing conflicts arising from resource scarcity to Malthusian pressures rather than, say, neo-colonialism or neo-liberalism, meanwhile, serves the function of making Western interventions appear more benign. This function is especially important given that the injunction of neo-Malthusians that “we” must learn to live within limits does not embrace the field of defence expenditure, the linchpin of postwar capitalist political economy. Such spending can only be justified by fostering the general impression that the world remains a threatening place despite the end of the Cold War.

Today even global warming – which is principally a result of digging up of fossil fuels to drive a century and a half of industrial capitalism – has become an argument for population control in the developing world.¹⁰⁸ British biologist Norman Myers, for example, while conceding that the industrialised world currently produces 70 per cent of worldwide emissions of carbon dioxide, frets that “Medium-level population projections to the year 2025 indicate that developing countries could then be accounting for 64 per cent of all emissions (which would then be much larger in total).”¹⁰⁹ The Population Council (on whose Board of Trustees the president of the World Bank, James Wolfensohn, currently sits), also attempts to transform climate change into an issue centred on future population growth in the South. Respected scientist David Pimental, meanwhile, claims that controlling the “rapid growth in the US and the world population” is more important in combatting global warming than “sound ecological practices in agriculture”.¹¹⁰

New Malthusian Fears of Immigration

It is in this environmental language that most Malthusian or dysgenic fears about immigration are now expressed. Pimental, for instance, in the course of claiming that even the US’s modest population growth rate of 0.7 per cent per year is too high to maintain the country’s current standard of living, notes with alarm that “one-quarter of this rate of increase is due to immigration”.¹¹¹ Disregarding both the US’s dramatic national disparities in income and opportunity and its mode of production, Pimental’s argument calls up the oversimplified image of a national resource base faced with a demographic menace from outside its borders. Once again, the causes of the rise in international migration — including the pressures which the globalisation of capitalism is placing on Southern resources in the service of Northern economies — are disregarded.

Others have taken this Malthusian imagery to extremes. The Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR) and Negative Population Growth (NPG), two US organisations, claim that virtually all degradation of environmental resources in the United States can be attributed, not to the nature of the capitalist economy, but either to reproductive pressures in the Third World, or to the reproductive tendencies of immigrants and their descendants.¹¹² In the view of FAIR, nearly all US population growth in the 21st century “will be attributable to immigration that occurred after 1990”,¹¹³ this immigration in

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107. Frank, A.G., *Latin America: Underdevelopment or Revolution: Essays on the Development of Underdevelopment and the Immediate Enemy*, Monthly Review Press, New York, 1969, p.3.

108. Ehrlich, P., Erhlich, A. and Daily, G., “Food Security, Population and Environment”, *Population and Development Review*, 19 (1), 1993, pp.1-32; Myers, N., “Population and Environment: The Vital Linkages” in Department for Economic and Social Information and Policy Analysis, *Population, Environment and Development, 1992*, United Nations, New York, 1994, pp.55-63..

109. Myers, N., *ibid.*, p.61.

110. Pimental, D., “Global Warming, Population Growth, and Natural Resources for Food Production”, *Society and Natural Resources* 4, 1991, p.358.

111. *Ibid.*, p.349.

112. Nowak, M., *Immigration and US Population Growth: An Environmental Perspective*, Negative Population Growth, Washington, 1997.

113. FAIR, “Immigration and Population Growth-Fair Statement”, 7 December 1995. Internet site: <http://www.rahul.net/iti/kzpg/Archive/Broadcasts/Opinion/US-OpEd/msg00028.html>. Accessed on 04/11/97.

turn stemming from “population pressures” which are creating “unsustainable strains on our environment and resources”. FAIR, NPG and others have called for the US to devise a policy of immigration restriction in the name of “environmental sustainability”.

Beyond Malthus

The reason peasants are on the move now as never before is not because they have had too many children. It is in large part because the interests of commercial agricultural development have made them redundant. In almost every instance, the population movements that have become one of the most dramatic features of contemporary global life are the consequence of people being denied or deprived of secure access to fundamental productive resources.

These resources increasingly are being developed by transnational corporations for the use and profit of industrial nations. Many developing countries are meanwhile being transformed into little more than labour reserves. To suggest that there is much security or hope in such an economy is an illusion. The Malthusian argument that migration must be constrained in the interest of maintaining the lifestyles of the affluent ignores the fact that both the migration and the lifestyles share a single origin. The alternative is systemic change. Only in a society in which resources are more equitably apportioned will we be able to move beyond the Malthusian politics of population to a consideration of human reproductive rights and needs. In the meantime, the ideas of a “population problem” and a “tragedy of the commons” will be constantly mobilised to obscure the nature of capitalist exploitation — and, along with it, the role of reproduction within capitalist economy. The illusion that the poor’s economic and reproductive behaviour is the source of most of their misery, and that capitalism and private resource ownership is their only source of hope, will continue to be propagated. The claim that their reproductive behaviour is largely irrational will meanwhile continue to obscure the actual determinants of fertility.

Malthus’s critics are frequently charged with refusing to believe unwelcome “truths”. In fact, however, since the very first decades after the publication of Malthus’s first *Essay*, there has been an outpouring of important critical work effectively disposing of his arguments. These arguments’ persistence is primarily attributable to the ideological advantages they offer to powerful political and economic interests, not to their intrinsic merit.

Criticism of Malthusian arguments must nevertheless be as unrelenting as the arguments themselves. But in the end, the strongest resistance to them will come from the victims of the policies which Malthusianism rationalises. Such opposition, predating Malthus himself, is of long standing. It runs from the battles of the 17th century English Diggers, who proclaimed the land to be the birthright of the dispossessed and their posterity,¹¹⁴ right up to the struggles of today’s Zapatistas in southern Mexico, who have joined their cause to the wider fights against the predations of neo-liberalism. In the end, the main tasks of reversing the dehumanising course of capitalist development will fall not to the intellectual critics of Malthus, but to the poor themselves. Because no one else has so much to gain and so little to lose.

114. Beer, M, *A History of British Socialism*, Spokesman, Nottingham, 1984 (first published in 1919) pp.58-9.

This briefing is an edited extract of *The Malthus Factor: Poverty, Politics and Population in Capitalist Development* by Eric B Ross, published by Zed Books, London (St. Martin’s Press, New York), 1998. Eric Ross is an anthropologist at the Institute of Social Studies in The Hague, The Netherlands.

The CornerHouse is a research and solidarity group which aims to support the growth of a democratic, equitable and non-discriminatory civil society in which communities have control over the resources and decisions which affect their lives and means of livelihood, as well as the power to define themselves rather than be defined only by others. CornerHouse contact details on page 1.