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Retrieved on 20 March 2010 from dwardmac.pitzer.edu &
dwardmac.pitzer.edu
From *Green Perspectives* #8 & 15

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Murray Bookchin

to be shielded from the impacts of "civilization." We have long since left behind the remote world in which purely biological factors determined evolution and the destiny of most species on the planet.

Until these problematic areas that influence modern thinking on demographics are clarified and their social implications — indeed, underpinnings — are fully explored, the Malthusians are operating in a theoretical vacuum and filling it with extremely perilous ideas. Indeed it is a short step from writing anti-Semitic letters to Jewish furriers in the name of "animal rights" to scrawling swastikas on Jewish temples and synagogues.

Eco-mystics, eco-theists, and deep ecologists create a very troubling situation when they introduce completely arbitrary factors into discussions on demographics. "Gaia" is whatever one chooses to make of "Her": demonic avenger or a loving mother, a homeostatic mechanism or a mystical spirit; a personified deity or a pantheistic principle. In all of these roles, "She" can easily be used to advance a misanthropic message of species self-hatred — or worse, a hatred of specific ethnic groups and cultures — with consequences that cannot be foreseen by even "Her" most loving, well-meaning, and pacific acolytes. It is this utterly arbitrary feature of eco- mystical and eco-theistic thinking, often divested of social content, that makes most New Age or "new paradigm" discussions of the population issue not only very troubling but potentially very sinister.

Contents

Demography and Society

The importance of viewing demography in social terms becomes even more apparent when we ask: would the grow-or-die economy called capitalism really cease to plunder the planet even if the world's population were reduced to a tenth of its present numbers? Would lumber companies, mining concerns, oil cartels, and agribusiness render redwood and Douglas fir forests safer for grizzly bears if — given capitalism's need to accumulate and produce for their own sake — California's population were reduced to one million people?

The answer to these questions is a categorical no. Vast bison herds were exerminated on the westem plains long before the plains were settled by farmers or used extensively by ranchers — indeed, when the American population barely exceeded some sixty million people. These great herds were not crowded out by human settlements, least of all by excessive population. We have yet to answer what constitutes the "carrying capacity" of the planet, just as we lack any certainty, given the present predatory economy, of what constitutes a strictly numerical balance between reduced human numbers and a given ecological area.

All the statistics that are projected by demographers today are heavily conditioned by various unspoken values, such as a desire for pristine "wilderness" or for mere open land, a pastoral concept of nature, or a love of cultivated land. Indeed, human taste has varied so widely over the centuries with respect to what constitutes "nature" that we may well ask whether it is ever "natural" to exclude the human species — a distinct product of natural evolution — from our conceptions of the natural world, including so-called "pristine" wilderness areas.

This much seems reasonably clear: a "wilderness" that has to be protected from human intervention is already a product of human intervention. It is no more "wild" if it has to be guarded than an aboriginal culture is truly authentic if it has

"It is high time, therefore, that business cease looking upon the stork as a bird of good omen."

The Population Bomb, climaxes with a favorable description of what is now known as "the ethics of triage." Drawn from warfare, as Ehrlich explains, "The idea briefly is this: When casualties crowd a dressing station to the point where all cannot be cared for by the limited medical staff, some decisions must be made on who will be treated. For this purpose the triage system of classification was developed. All incoming casualites are placed in one of three classes. In the first class are those who will die regardless of treatment. In the second are those who will survive regardless of treatment. The third contains those who can be saved only if they are given prompt treatment." The presumption here is that the medical staff is "limited" and that diagnoses are free of political considerations like the alignment of a patient's country in the Cold War.

Among New Age Malthusians, hardly any attempt is made to think out premises, indeed, to ask what follows from a given statement. If we begin with the premise that all life forms have the same "intrinsic worth," as deep ecologists contend, what follows is that we can accord to malarial mosquitoes and tsetse flies the same "right" to exist that we accord to whales and grizzly bears. But complications arise: Can a bacterium that could threaten to exterminate chimpanzees be left to do so because it too has "intrinsic worth"? Should human beings who can control lethal diseases of chimps refrain from "interfering" with the mystical workings of "Gaia"? Who is to decide what constitutes "valid" and "invalid" interference by human beings in nature? To what extent can conscious, rational, and moral human intervention in nature be seriously regarded as "unnatural," especially if one considers the vast evolution of life toward greater subjectivity and ultimately human intellectuality? To what extent can humanity itself be viewed simply as a single species when social life is riddled by hierarchy and domination, gender biases, class exploitation, and ethnic discrimination?

Part I

The "population problem" has a Phoenix-like existence: it rises from the ashes at least every generation and sometimes every decade or so. The prophecies are usually the same namely, that human beings are populating the earth in "unprecedented numbers" and "devouring" its resources like a locust plague.

In the days of the Industrial Revolution, Thomas Malthus, a craven English parson, formulated his notorious "law of population" which asserts that while food supplies expand only arithmetically, population soars geometrically. Only by wars, famines, and disease (Malthus essentially argued) can a "balance" be struck between population and food supplies. Malthus did not mean this to be an argument to foster human welfare; it was an unfeeling justification for the inhuman miseries inflicted on the mass of English people by land grabbing aristocrats and exploitative "industrialists." True to the mean-spirited atmosphere of the times, Malthus opposed attempts to alleviate poverty because they would remove the limits imposed on "population growth" by prolonging the lives of the poor.

Malthus' "law" entered into Darwin's explanation of evolution and re-emerged from biology as "social-Darwinism." Propounded vigorously in the U.S. and England a generation later, this theory reduced society to a "jungle," in effect, in which a "law of survival of the fittest" justified the wanton plundering of the world by the wealthy or the "fittest," while the laboring classes, dispossessed farmers, and Third World "savages" were reduced to penury, presumably because they were "unfit" to survive. The arrogance of bankers, industrialists, and colonial-

ists in the "Gilded Age" at the turn of the century who dined on lavish dishes, while starved bodies were collected regularly in the city streets of the western world — all testified to a harsh class system that invoked "natural law" to justify the opulence enjoyed by the ruling few and the hunger suffered by the ruled many.

Barely a generation later, Malthusianism acquired an explicitly racist character. During the early twenties, when "Anglo Saxon" racism peaked in the U.S. against "darker" peoples like Italians, Jews, and so-called "Eastern Europeans" the notion of "biological inferiority" led to explicitly exclusionary immigration laws that favored "northern Europeans" over other, presumably "subhuman" peoples. Malthusianism, now prefixed with a "neo" to render it more contemporary, thoroughly permeated this legislation. Population in the U.S. had to be "controlled" and American "cultural" (read: racial) purity had to be rescued — be it from the "Yellow Peril" of Asia or the "Dark Peril" of the Latin and Semitic worlds.

Nazism did not have to invent its racial imagery of sturdy "Aryans" who are beleaguered by "subhuman" dark people, particularly Jews. Hitler saw himself as the protector of a "northern European culture" from "Hebraic superstitions," to use the juicy language of a contemporary well-known Arizona writer — a "cultural" issue that was riddled by fascist sociobiology. From Hitler's "northern European" viewpoint, Europe was "over populated" and the continent's ethnic groups had to be sifted out according to their racial background. Hence the gas chambers and crematoriums of Auschwitz, the execution squads that followed the German army into Russia in the summer of 1941, and the systematic and mechanized slaughter of millions in a span of three or four years.

open almost every sentence on the first page) are seen as "visiting, arguing, and screaming," as "thrusting their hands through the taxi windows, begging … defecating and urinating," Ehrlich and family seem to swoon with disgust over "people, people, people, people, people." We have a sense — one that was by no means felt by most of the book's American readers — that we have entered another world from Ehrlich's sublime campus at Stanford University. Thus it was, we are told, that Ehrlich came to know "the *feel* of overpopulation," that is, the sense of disgust that pervades the entire work.

Thereafter, our "radical ecologist" runs riot with his misanthropy. The Third World is depersonalized into computer-age abbreviations like "UDCs" (underdeveloped countries); medical advances are described as forms of "death control"; and pollution problems "all can be traced to *too many people*" (Ehrlich's emphasis). Terrifying scenarios engage in a ballet with each other that is strangely lacking in noticeable references to capitalism or to the impact of an ever-expanding grow-or-die market economy on all social questions. Along with the usual demand for increased tax burdens on those who "breed" excessively, the need for contraception, and educational work on family planning, a centerpiece of the book is Ehrlich's demand for a "powerful governmental agency." Accordingly: "A federal Department of Population and Environment (DPE) should be set up with the power to take *whatever steps are necessary* to establish a reasonable population size in the United States and to put an end to the steady deterioration of our environment." (The book enjoyed a great vogue, incidentally, during the Nixon Administration.) Lest we waver in our resolve, Ehrlich reminds us: "The *policemen* against environmental deterioration must be the powerful Department of Population and Environment mentioned above" (my emphasis in both quotations). Happily for the "business community," Ehrlich quotes one J. J. Spengler to the effect that

Will Ecology Become a Cruel Discipline?

Divested of its social core, ecology can easily become a cruel discipline. Malthusians — contemporary no less than earlier ones — often exhibited a meanness of spirit that completely fits into the "me-too" Yuppie atmosphere of the eighties. Consider the following excerpts from William Vogt's *The Road to Survival*, the work of an eminent biologist, that was published a generation ago. Anticipating more recent prescriptions, he avowed, "Large scale bacterial warfare would be an effective, if drastic, means of bringing back the earth's forests and grasslands." And in a more thumping passage, he adds well on into the book that the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations" should not ship food to keep alive ten million Indians and Chinese this year, so that fifty million may die five years hence" — a gothic form of "generosity" that recurs throughout the Malthusian literature of the eighties. (That this kind of prediction, like so many others uttered by older Malthusians, was utterly fallacious and irresponsible seems never to affect new generations of Malthusians.)

Recipes like Vogt's essentially faded from fashion in the sixties, as social unrest in the Third World began to surge up and render them untenable and as the Cold War demanded new political alignments abroad. The year 1968, however, was not only a climactic one in radical politics but an initiating one in reactionary politics. In that year, an early manifestation of the move to the right was the publication and staggering popularity of Paul R. Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb*, which ran through thirteen printings in only two years and gave birth to an army of Malthusian population-bombers.

That deep ecologists George Sessions and Bill Devall call Ehrlich a "radical ecologist" verges on black humor. The book still reads like a hurricane on the loose, a maddening blowout of spleen and venom. Beginning with a sketch of human misery in Delhi in which "people" (the word is used sneeringly to

The Phoenix Rises Again

One would have thought that the Second World War and the ugly traditions that fed into it might have created a deeper sense of humanity and a more sensitive regard for life — nonhuman as well as human.

Judging from the way the "population problem" has surfaced again, however, we seem even more brutalized than ever. By the late 1940s, before the wartime dead had fully decayed, the "neo Malthusians" were back at work — this time over the use of newly developed pesticides for eradicating malaria and antibiotics to control killing infections in the Third World. Even eminent biologists like William Vogt entered the fray with books and articles, directing their attacks at modern medicine for preserving human life and predicting famines in Britain between 1948 and 1978 and imminent famine in Germany and Japan. The debate, which often took an ugly turn, was overshadowed by the Korean War and the blandly optimistic Eisenhower era, followed by the stormy sixties period with its message of idealism, public service, and, if you please, "humanism." But the decade barely came to a close when neo-Malthusianism surfaced again — this time with grim books that warned of a "population bomb" and advocated an "ethics" of "triage" in which the nations that were recommended for U.S. aid seemed uncannily to fall on the American side of the "Cold War," irrespective of their population growth-rates.

Viewed from a distance of two decades later, the predictions made by many neo-Malthusians seem almost insanely ridiculous. We were warned, often in the mass media, that by the 1980s, for example, artificial islands in the oceans would be needed to accomodate the growing population densities on the continents. Our oil supplies, we were told with supreme certainty, would be completely depleted by the end of the century. Wars between starving peoples would ravage the planet, each

nation seeking to plunder the hidden food stores of the others. By the late seventies, this "debate" took a welcome breather — but it has returned again in full bloom in the biological verbiage of ecology. Given the hysteria and the exaggerated "predictions" of earlier such "debates," the tone today is a little calmer. But in some respects it is even more sinister. We have not been forced to turn our oceans into real estate, nor have we run out of oil, food, material resources — or neo-Malthusian prophets. But we are acquiring certain bad intellectual habits and we are being rendered more gullible by a new kind of religiosity that goes under the name of "spirituality" with a new-styled paganism and primitivism.

First of all, we are thinking more quantitatively than qualitatively — all talk about "wholeness," "oneness," and "interconectedness" to the contrary notwithstanding. For example, when we are told that the "population issue" is merely a "matter of numbers," as one Zero Population Growth writer put it, then the vast complexity of population growth and diminution is reduced to a mere numbers game, like the fluctuations of Dow stock-market averages. Human beings, turned into digits, can thus be equated to fruitflies and their numbers narrowly correlated with food supply. This is "following the Dow" with a vengeance. Social research, as distinguished from the Voodoo ecology that passes under the name of "deep ecology" these days, reveals that human beings are highly social beings, not simply a species of mammals. Their behavior is profoundly conditioned by their social status, as people who belong to a particular gender, hierarchy, class group, ethnic tradition, community, historical era, or adhere to a variety of ideologies. They also have at their disposable powerful technologies, material resources, science, and a naturally endowed capacity for conceptual thought that provides them with a flexibility that few, if any, nonhuman beings possess, not to speak of evolving institutions and capacities for systematic group cooperation. Nothing, here, is more illusory than to "follow the Dow." The bad

(as a population-bomber like David Brower has suggested), it is largely because semifeudal elites, military satraps, and a pernicious domestic bourgeoisie have harshly repressed movements for social change. It is evidence of the incredible myopia and intellectual crudity of deep ecology, eco-mystical, and eco-theistic acolytes that the notion of demographic transition has recently been written off as operative, with no attempt to account for the festering shantytowns that surround some of the largest Third World cities.

In the meantime, relative improvements in the material conditions of life in the First World have produced not the soaring population growth rates one would expect to find among fruit flies and lemmings but rather negative rates. In Western Europe, where Malthusians of several decades ago predicted soaring populations and accompanying famines — particularly in England and Germany — the bulk of the populations are far from starving. Birth rates in Germany, Denmark, Austria, Hungary, and even Catholic Italy have either fallen below the national replacement rate or are approaching zero population growth. Food production, in turn, has equaled or exceeded the needs of growing populations. Cereal production since 1975 rose 12 percent. Even India, the so-called "worst case example," tripled its production of grain between 1950 and 1984.

Much of the correlation between population growth and harsh living conditions is due to patterns of land ownership. In southern Asia, where population growth rates are high, 30 million rural house holds own no land or very little. These figures encompass nearly 40 percent of all the households in the region. Similar conditions can be cited for Africa and Latin America. Land distribution is so heavily weighted in the Third World toward commercial farming and elite owners (who have reduced rural populations to virtual peonage) that one can no longer talk of a "population problem" in purely numerical terms without providing an apologia for terribly harsh class and social disparities.

traditional culture — its values, beliefs, and sense of identity — and population increases may outpace even soaring preindustrial death rates. Life expectancy may even decline while absolute numbers of people rise significantly. This occurred during the worst years of the Industrial Revolution amidst major tuberculosis and cholera pandemics, not to speak of monstrous working conditions that repeatedly thinned out the ranks of the newly emerging proletariat. Ecology, the "carrying capacity" of a region, and least of all "Gaia" have very little to do with social demoralization and the breakdown of cultural restraints to reproduction in periods of demographic transition. Economics and the exploitation of displaced agrarian folk are the really decisive factors, mundane as they may seem in the "cosmic" world of eco-mysticism and deep ecology.

But conditions can stabilize and, given a higher quality of life, yield a relatively stable demographic situation. Entirely new factors emerge that may give rise to negative population growth. I refer not only to a desire for small families and more cultivated lifestyles, and concern for the development of the individual child rather than a large number of siblings, but, above all, women's liberation movements and the aspirations of young women to be more than reproductive factories.

In demographic transition, changes from traditional agrarian economies to modern industrial and urbanized ones involve a change from conditions of high fertility and mortality to conditions of low fertility and mortality. Demographic transition has been called by George J. Stolnitz, a serious demographer, "the most sweeping and best-documented historical trend of modern times." What should be added to his characterization is a crucial provision: the need to improve the living conditions of people who make this transition — an improvement that has generally been brought about by labor movements and socially concerned educators, sanitarians, health workers, and radical organizations. If demographic transition has not occurred in the Third World

intellectual habits of thinking out demographic — or even "resource" — issues in a linear, asocial, and ahistorical manner tends to enter into all ecological problems, thanks very much to the neo-Malthusians and to a "biocentrism" that equates people to nonhuman life-forms.

Secondly, by reducing us to studies of line graphs, bar graphs, and statistical tables, the neo-Malthusians literally freeze reality as it is. Their numerical extrapolations do not construct any reality that is new; they mere extend, statistic by statistic, what is basically old and given. They are "futurists" in the most shallow sense of the word, not "utopians" in the best sense. We are taught to accept society, behavior, and values as they are, not as they should be or even could be. This procedure places us under the tyranny of the status quo and divests us of any ability to think about radically changing the world. I have encountered very few books or articles written by neo-Malthusians that question whether we should live under any kind of money economy at all, any statist system of society, or be guided by profit oriented behavior. There are books and articles aplenty that explain "how to" become a "morally responsible" banker, entrepreneur, landowner, "developer," or, for all I know, arms merchant. But whether the whole system called capitalism (forgive me!), be it corporate in the west or bureaucratic in the east, must be abandoned if we are to achieve an ecological society is rarely discussed. Thousands may rally around "Earth First!"'s idiotic slogan — "Back to the Pleistocene!" — but few, if they are conditioned by neo-MaIalthusian thinking, will rally around the cry of the Left Greens — "Forward to an Ecological Society!"

Lastly, neo-Malthusian thinking is the most backward in thinking out the implications of its demands. If we are concerned, today, and rightly so, about registering AIDS victims, what are the totalitarian consequences about creating a Bureau of Population Control, as some Zero Population Growth wits suggested in the early 1970s? Imagine what

consequences would follow from increasing the state's power over reproduction? Indeed, what areas of personal life would not be invaded by slowly enlarging the state's authority over our most intimate kinds of human relations? Yet such demands in one form or another have been raised by neo Malthusians on grounds that hardly require the mental level to examine the Statistical Abstract of the United States.

The Social Roots of Hunger

This arithmetic mentality which disregards the social context of demographics is incredibly short-sighted. Once we accept without any reflection or criticism that we live in a "grow-or-die" capitalistic society in which accumulation is literally a law of economic survival and competition is the motor of "progress," anything we have to say about population is basically meaningless. The biosphere will eventually be destroyed whether five billion or fifty million live on the planet. Competing firms in a "dog-eat-dog" market must outproduce each other if they are to remain in existence. They must plunder the soil, remove the earth's forests, kill off its wildlife, pollute its air and waterways not because their intentions are necessarily bad, although they usually are — hence the absurdity of the spiritualistic pablum in which Americans are currently immersed — but because they must simply survive. Only a radical restructuring of society as a whole, including its anti-ecological sensibilities, can remove this all commanding social compulsion — not rituals, yoga, or encounter groups, valuable as some of these practices may be (including "improving" our earning capacity and "power" to command).

But the most sinister feature about neo-Malthusianism is the extent to which it actively deflects us from dealing with the social origins of our ecological problems — indeed, the extent to

a British colonialist legacy of commitment to the cultivation of cotton and to World Bank loans for the development of agribusiness. Pressure by the Bank for increased cotton production in the late 1970s to offset balance-of-payment problems, the impact of rising oil prices on highly mechanized agricultural practices, and a considerable decline in home-grown food reserves — all combined to produce one of the most ghastly famines in northern Africa. The interaction of declining world prices for cotton, interference by the World Bank, and attempts to promote the sale of American wheat — a cereal that could have been grown in the Sudan if the country had not been forced into the cultivation of crops for the world market — claimed countless lives from hunger and produced massive social demoralization at home.

This drama, usually explained by the Malthusians as "evidence" of population growth or by eco-mystics as an apocalyptic visitation by "Gaia" for presumably sinful acts of abuse to the earth, is played out throughout much of the Third World. Class conflicts, which may very well lie at the root of the problems that face hungry people, are transmuted by the Malthusians into demographic ones in which starving country folk are pitted against almost equally impoverished townspeople, and landless refugees against nearly landless cultivators of small plots — all of which immunizes the World Bank, American agribusiness, and a compradore bourgeoisie from criticism.

Even in the First World, with its growing proportion of older people over younger ones, lobbies like Americans for Generational Equity (AGE) threaten to open a divide between recipients of social security and the young adults who presumably "pay the bill." Such lobbies say almost nothing about the economic system, the corporations, or the madcap expenditures for armaments and research into "life control" that devour vast revenues and invaluable resources.

Population may soar for reasons that have less to do with reproductive biology than with capitalist economics. Destroy a

man life became increasingly "sacred" and the death penalty was increasingly reserved for homicidal acts. Before then, a woman in Boston was actually hanged merely for stealing a pair of shoes. In an era of automatic and automated devices, human life again tends to become cheap — all pieties about the horrors of war to the contrary notwithstanding. A social logic that involved depopulation, mingled with a pathological anti-Semitism, guided Hitler even more than his mystical "naturism." Demographic policy is always an expression of social policy and the type of society in which a given population lives.

The most disquieting feature of deep ecology theorists, Earth First! leaders, eco-mystics, and eco-theists is the extent to which they nullify the importance of social factors in dealing with ecological and demographic issues — even as they embody them in some of their most mystified middle-class forms. This is convenient, both in terms of the ease with which their views are accepted in a period of social reaction and in the stark simplicity of their views in a period of naivete and social illiteracy.

William Petersen, a serious demographer, has carefully nuanced what he calls "Some Home Truths About Population" in a recent issue of *The American Scholar*. Political factors, he points out, may play a larger role in recent famines than economic or even environmental ones. "Mozambique, recently named the poorest country in the world, has a fertile soil, valuable ores, and a fine coastline," Petersen observes. "That its GNP has fallen by half over the past five years and its foreign debt has risen hy $2.3 billion, one must ascribe to its Communist government and the destabilizing efforts of neighboring South Africa. Of the population of roughly fourteen million, more than one person in ten is a would-be refugee, on the road fleeing civil war but finding no refuge anywhere."

Even more striking is the case of the Sudan, a land once celebrated for its agricultural fecundity. The Sudan is now an appalling example of mismanagement, largely as a result of

which it places the blame for them on the victims of hunger rather than those who victimize them. Presumably, if there is a "population problem" and famine in Africa, it is the ordinary people who are to blame for having too many children or insisting on living too long — an argument advanced by Malthus nearly two centuries ago with respect to England's poor. The viewpoint not only justifies privilege; it fosters brutalization and degrades the neo-Malthusians even more than it degrades the victims of privilege.

And frankly — they often lie. Consider the issue of population and food supply in terms of mere numbers and we step on a wild merry-go-round that does not support neo-Malthusian predictions of a decade ago, much less a generation ago. Such typically neo Malthusian stunts as determining the "per capita consumption" of steel, oil, paper, chemicals, and the like of a nation by dividing the total tonnage of the latter by the national population, such that every man, woman, and child is said to "consume" a resultant quantity, gives us a picture that is blatantly false and functions as a sheer apologia for the upper classes. The steel that goes into a battleship, the oil that is used to fuel a tank, and the paper that is covered by ads hardly depicts the human consumption of materials. Rather, it is stuff consumed by all the Pentagons of the world that help keep a "grow-or-die" economy in operation — goods, I may add, whose function is to destroy and whose destiny is to be destroyed. The shower of such "data" that descends upon us by neo-Malthusian writers is worse than obscurantist; it is vicious. The same goes for the shopping malls that are constructed that dump their toxic "consumer goods" on us and the costly highways that converge upon them. To ignore the fact that we are the victims of a vast, completely entrapping social order which only a few can either control or escape from, is to literally deaden the political insight of ordinary people — whose "wants," of course, are always blamed for every dislocation in our ecological dislocations. On the demographic merry-

do-round, the actual facts advanced by many neo-Malthusians is no less misleading. In the West, particularly in countries like Germany which the neo-Malthusian prophets of the late 1940s warned would soar in population well beyond food supplies, birth rates have fallen beyond the national replacement rate. This is true of Denmark, Austria, Hungary, indeed, much of Europe generally, including Catholic Italy and Ireland — where tradition, one would expect, would make for huge families. So traditions that foster the emergence of large, predominantly male families by which the high birth rates of India and China were explained, are not frozen in stone. The U.S., which the more hysterical neo-Malthusians of some two decades ago predicted would be obliged to live on oceanic rafts, is approaching zero population growth and, by now, it may be lower.

Nor is food supply lagging behind overall population growth. Cereal production rose by 12 percent since 1975, making it possible recently for even Bangladesh to drastically reduce its grain imports. The markets of western Asia are being flooded by Chinese corn. Even "barren" Saudi Arabia is selling off its accumulations of wheat, and, in Finland, farmers are so over loaded with surplus wheat that they are turning it into mink fodder and glue. India, the so-called "worst case example," tripled its production of grain between 1950 and 1984. Its greatest problem at present is not population growth but trans portation from grain-surplus areas to grain-shortage ones — a major source of many Indian famines in the past.

Although Lester R. Brown of Worldwatch Institute divides the world "into countries where population growth is slow or nonexistent and where living conditions are improving, and those where population growth is rapid and living conditions are deteriorating or in imminent danger of doing so" one might easily conclude by the mere juxtaposition of Brown's phrases that declining living conditions are due solely to increasing population. Not so — if one closely looks at even Brown's data as well as other sources. How much of the disparity be-

one Felix Kersten, "How can you find pleasure, Herr Kersten, in shooting from behind cover at poor creatures browsing on the edge of a wood, innocent, defenseless, and unsuspecting? It's really pure murder. Nature is so marvelously beautiful and every animal has a right to live." Such a passion for animal "rights" is often the flip side of the misanthropic coin. Indeed, hatred of humanity has often reinforced adulation of animals, just as hatred of civilization has often reinforced hypersentimental "naturalism."

I have adduced the shadowy world of suprahuman "naturism" to suggest the perilous ground on which many eco-mystics, eco-theists, and deep ecologists are walking and the dangers raised when desensitizing an already "minimalized" public, to use Christopher Lasch's term. As the late Edward Abbey's denunciations of Latin "genetic inferiority" and even "Hebraic superstitions" suggest, they are not immunized from the dangerous brew in its own right. The brew becomes highly explosive when it is mixed with a mysticism that supplants humanity's potentiality as a rational voice of nature with an all-presiding "Gaia," an eco-theism that denies human beings their special place in nature.

Reverence for nature is no guarantee that the congregant will revere the world of life generally, and reverence for nonhuman life is no guarantee that human life will receive the respect it deserves. This is especially true when reverence is rooted in deification — and a supine reverence — in any form whatever, particularly when it becomes a substitute for social critique and social action.

Demography and Society

It was Marx who made the firm observation that every society has its own "law of population." When the bourgeoisie needed labor in its early years to operate its industrial innovations, hu-

in general but a desensitization of the mind to human agony, consciousness, personality, and the potentiality of human beings to know and to understand that no other life form can approximate. In an era of sweeping depersonalization and irrationalism, the value of human personality and human rationality ceases to matter.

Reverence for nature, even respect for nonhuman life, provides no guarantee that humans will be included in the orbit of a "life-oriented" mythos, the present crop of eco-mystics and eco-theists to the contrary notwithstanding. The classical example of this is what Robert A. Pois has called an "ingenuous permutation of mysticism" in the Nazi movement. Nazism, alas, was more than ingenuous. Hitler's *Mein Kampf* registered a stern, indeed "cosmic" view "that this planet once moved through the ether for millions of years without human beings, and it can do so again someday if men forget that they owe their higher existence, not to the ideas of a few crazy ideologists, but to the knowledge and ruthless application of Nature's stern and rigid laws." Alfred Rosenberg, the ideologist par excellence of Nazism, railed against Jewish "dualism" and avowed a neopagan pantheism "for a bridging of the gap between spirit and matter through deification of nature," to cite Pois's summary. This kind of language can be found at varying levels of intensity in the writings of deep ecologists, eco-mystics, and eco-theists today, who would certainly eschew any association with Nazism and who would avow their innocence in fostering the cultural legacy they are creating.

Heinrich Himmler, who deployed the entire machinery of the SS in a vast operation to systematically kill millions of people, held this view with a vengeance. "Man," he told his SS leaders in Berlin in June 1942, at the height of the Nazis' extermination operations, "is nothing special." Ironically, his icy rejection of humanism found its fervent counterpart in his passionate love of animal life. Thus Himmler complained to a hunter,

tween population growth and bad living conditions is due in Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan, for example,largely to patterns of land ownership? In southern Asia, some 30 million rural households own no land or very little, a figure that represents 40 percent of nearly all rural households in the subcontinent. Similar figures are emerging from African data and, very disastrously, Latin America. Land distribution is now so lopsided in the Third World in favor of commercial farming and a handful of elite landowners that one can no longer talk of a "population problem" without relating it to a class and social problem.

It would take several volumes to untangle the mixed threads that intertwine hunger with landownership, material improvements with declining population growth, technology with food production, the fragility of familial customs with the needs of women to achieve full personhood, internal civil wars (often financed by western imperialists) with famines — and the role of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund with patterns of food cultivation. Westerners have only recently gained a small glimpse of the role of the IMF and World Bank in producing a terrible famine in the Sudan by obliging the country to shift from the cultivation of food in areas of rich soil to the cultivation of cotton.

This much must be emphasized: if the "population issue" is indeed the "litmus test" of one's ecological outlook, as the top honcho of "Earth First!", David Foreman, has declared, then it is a wildly scrambled bundle of social threads, not a Voodoo ecology talisman. Greens, ecologically oriented people, and radicals of all kinds will have to unravel this bundle with an acute sense of the social, not by playing a numbers game with human life and clouding up that social sense with thoroughly unreliable statistical extrapolations and apologias for corporate interests.

Nor can human beings be reduced to mere digits by neo-Malthusian advocates without reducing the world of life to dig-

its — at least without replacing a decent regard for life, including human life, with a new inhuman form of eco-brutalism.

is blocked by theistic appeals to a mysticism that places a ban on logic and reason.

When a prominent ecological poet who has embraced deep ecology can claim (as he reportedly has) that for humanity to co-exist with grizzly bears and redwood trees, California's population will have to be reduced to one million people, another dilemma confronts us. It is no longer even an area's material "carrying capacity" that is to determine the human population it can sustain. "Carrying capacity" itself is literally dematerialized and redefined in an eco-mystical way as "wilderness," which acquires suprahuman, even mysterious qualities of its own. No longer do people seem to be crowding out wilderness, but rather wilderness is expected to crowd out people.

This counterposition of "primal" wilderness to humanity and to humanity's social "second nature" is completely atavistic. The view pivots on a myth that humanity is a stranger to natural evolution — indeed, that humanity's social "second nature" has no relationship to biology's presumably enchanted "first nature."

The Mystical Malthusians

To the Enlightenment of two centuries ago, humanity — at least, potentially — was the very voice of nature, and its place in nature utterly noble insofar as society was rational and humane. Today we are beginning to hear a new message. "The human race could go extinct," declares Dave Foreman, "and I, for one, would not shed any tears." Absurd as it may be, this view is not a rarity. Indeed, it is implicit in much of the thought that exists among the ecomystics and eco-theists.

What is important is that when grizzly bears can be placed on a par with human beings in the name of biocentricity — and I am surely not trying to make a case for the "extermination" of bears — we are witnessing not a greater sensitivity to life

perished due in no small part to Malthusian arguments against "intervention" in a "natural course of events."

Whether biocentrism's mystical equation of the worth of humans and lemmings will pave the way to a future Auschwitz has yet to be seen. But the "moral" grounds for letting millions of people starve to death has been established with a vengeance, and it is arrogantly being advanced in the name of "ecology."

A second conclusion that emerges from biocentric mysticism is an attempt to deprecate human intervention into nature as such. A blanket assumption exists among many biocentrists that human involvement in the natural world is generally bad and that "Gaia knows best." With this mystical assumption of a "knowing" Gaia that has a suprahuman personality of its own, the earthquake that killed tens of thousands of Armenians could easily be justified as "Gaia's response" to overpopulation.

Not surprisingly, assorted environmental groups who have made biocentricity a focal point in their philosophies tend toward a passive-receptive mysticism. Heidegger's numbing "openness to Being," Spinoza's fatalism, and various Asian theologies that enjoin us to yield to a mindless quietism have attained a trendy quality that beclouds ecological issues with mystical overtones. We thus spin in an orbit of circular reasoning that subordinates human action to a supernatural world of largely mythic activity. The result is that action as such becomes suspect irrespective of the social conditions in which it occurs.

Exactly at a time when we need the greatest clarity of thought and rational guidance to resolve the massive environmental dislocations that threaten the very stability of the planet, we are asked to bend before a completely mysterious "will" of "Gaia" that serves to paralyze human will and that darkens human perception with theistic chimeras. The ability to clearly think out the contradictions this mentality produces

Part II

Before the 1970s, Malthusianism in its various historical forms claimed to rest on a statistically verifiable formula: that population increases geometrically while food supply increases merely arithmetically. At the same time, anti-Malthusians could refute it using factual data. Arguments between Malthusians and their opponents were thus based on empirical studies and rational explorations of the proliferation of human beings (despite the failure of Malthusians to introduce social factors that could either promote or inhibit population growth). Anti-Malthusians could empirically inventory the food that is available to us and take practical measures to increase the supply; food production could be assessed in terms of technological innovations that enhanced productivity. Land available for cultivation could be explored and put into production, often with minimal ecological damage. In short, pro- and anti-Malthusian arguments occurred within a rational arena of discourse and were subject to factual verification or refutation.

Today this situation seems to be changing radically. In an era of aggressive irrationalism and mysticism, earlier empirical assessments are becoming increasingly irrelevant. The 1980s have seen the emergence of a New Age, indeed a mystical Malthusianism that does not draw on rationality to justify its own amorality and indifference to human suffering. The relationship between population and food is being thoroughly mystified. Herein lies a major problem in contemporary discussions on demographics.

Often this view surfaces as a pious concern about the human suffering that could be alleviated in presumably "overpopulated" areas through population control measures. This view can be as sincere as it is naive. But taken still further — as it commonly is it can shade into a more sinister demographic ethos that argues for the need to keep those populations that are sinking into chronic famine from climbing into and overloading the human "lifeboat."

Biocentrism and the New Age Malthusians

If earlier discussions on population were anchored in rational discourse, the current crop of Malthusians tend to mystify the relationship between population and the availability of food. Human beings are often seen as a "cancer" on the biosphere, a force for ecological dislocation and planetary destruction. The earth, in turn, is deified into an all-presiding "Gaia." "Gaia" is imparted with a mystical "will" and with divine powers that countervail a socially abstract "humanity," bereft of any gender, class, ethnicity, or social status. "Gaia" can then visit upon this socially undifferentiated "Us" retributive acts like famine, war, and, more currently in the Malthusian repertoire of vengeance, the AIDS epidemic. This view is not arguable; it is totally irrational.

Cast in this sinister form, the eco-mystical Malthusians of the post-sixties era tend to reduce human misfortune and its social sources to an ecotheistic apocalypse. The traditional Malthusian numbers game tends to give way to a New Age morality drama in which the social sources of hunger are eclipsed by ineffable supernaturalistic ones. All this is done in the name of a theistic version of ecology — one that ironically is grounded in a crudely anthropomorphic personification of the earth as a divinity.

In principle, Malthusianism and most of its later variations have argued that people breed indefinitely, like lemmings, until they come up against "natural limits" imposed by the food supply. "Biocentricity" has provided a new wrinkle; the biocentric notion that human beings are "intrinsically" no different in "worth" from other animals lends a helping hand to Malthusianism. For after these "natural limits" are reached, "Gaia" dictates in some strange voice of "Her" own that starvation and death must ensue until population is reduced to the "carrying capacity" of a particular region.

By reducing the need for social sophistication to biological simplemindedness, biocentrism's broad identification of the "worth" of human beings and the "worth" of nonhumans denies to our species the enormous role that conceptual thought, values, culture, economic relationships, technology, and political institutions play in literally determining the "carrying capacity", of the planet on the one hand and in influencing human behavior in all its forms on the other. With startling mindlessness, socioeconomic factors are once again erased and their place taken by a crude biologism that equates human "intrinsic worth" with that of lemmings, or — to use the animals of choice in the firmament of biocentrism — wolves, grizzly bears, cougars, and the like.

Two very important conclusions emerge from such one-dimensional thinking. The first is the equatability of human with nonhuman beings in terms of their "intrinsic worth." But if human beings are no better "intrinsically" than lemmings, their premature death is at least morally acceptable. Indeed, their death may even be biologically desirable in the "cosmic" scheme of things — that is, in order to keep "Gaia" on course and happy. Population control can then go beyond mere contraceptive advice to calculated neglect, fostering a "permissible" degree of famine and welcoming mass death from starvation. Such a situation occurred in Europe in the terrible Irish potato famine of the 1840s, when entire families