

18. The Population Syndrome

“Agricultural development in the poor nations involves complex social, political and economic changes; and without a strong commitment to these changes on the part of the governments of these countries, the needed agricultural progress will not occur.”

Lester R. Brown, in *By Bread Alone*¹

“Today it is now rather tardily being recognised that hunger, the worst evil of poverty, is the fundamental cause of the revolt of the Asiatics against economic domination by European powers — a revolt which cannot be stopped by guns so long as these people believe that their hunger and poverty are unnecessary evils.”

Lord Boyd-Orr, in his foreword to *The Geography of Hunger*, by Josué de Castro.

“If we look closely at the social structure of this region (South America) we find that most of its ills have their roots in the terrible biological misfortune of chronic under-nourishment. The fact that a territory of such great potential wealth is occupied by economically second-rate nations is not a result of either racial inferiority or disintegrating influences in the environment. The evil is neither race nor climate, but hunger. All through history it has been hunger that has hobbled Latin-American progress.”

Josué de Castro: *The Geography of Hunger*²

“Overpopulation does not cause starvation in various parts of the world; starvation is the cause of overpopulation.”

Josué de Castro: *The Geography of Hunger*³

Nothing illustrates man's crab-like approach to truth so much as the credence given to the various international campaigns of the mid and late 20th century devoted to the dubious and defeatist cause of artificially reducing his numbers around the world.

That the general aim of these campaigns is directed to the so-called *poor* nations has cynical overtones for the inhabitants of the latter. And this should induce the more thoughtful among 'reformers' to look deeper than the fear-distorted gloss on the claims of the 'zero-growthers'; it could raise such questions as: is the object to reduce the numbers of the *poor*? And: Is this motivated by the fact that the hungry will be driven to adopt the desperate weapon of bloody revolution and thus bring down the shaky edifice of Western civilization?

What is needed to counter the hysteria of the neo-Malthusians is a calm examination of the facts, a fresh look at the long history of mankind, and a re-appraisal of some fallacious assumptions embedded in present-day

economic philosophy.

For instance, a fact of significance is, as stated in the foreword to *The Limits to Growth* report to the Club of Rome,⁴ "The universality of these problems: poverty in the midst of plenty; degradation of the environment; loss of faith in institutions; uncontrolled urban spread; insecurity of employment; alienation of youth; rejection of traditional values; inflation and other monetary and economic disruptions."

It is indisputable that, in the present state of the world, the alternatives facing mankind are (a) to find a *permanent* solution to the chronic poverty of two-thirds of the human race, or (b) bloody uprising culminating in a universal Marxist-type totalitarianism, or (c) nuclear war and the end of this civilization.

It is a fact that the world food crisis is *not* due to population pressure. (See the *End of the World* report by Professor Barraclough⁵.)

It is a fact, mathematically provable, that 'zero growth', even if possible of attainment, which is highly unlikely, would end in the depopulation of the earth.⁶

It is a well-documented fact that, as economic conditions approach a condition of general affluence, birthrates tend to drop.⁷

It is a logically demonstrable fact that every human being born, with normal capacities, is equipped to provide at least the equivalent of his own sustenance.

To revert to the fact of the 'universality of problems', recognition of this at least had the admirable effect of setting up the costly inquiry instituted by the Club of Rome. What the world now awaits is a conclusion as to the inter-relationship of these problems leading to a universal solution more scientific and less hopeless than that offered by the neo-Malthusians.

The Barraclough report provides some valuable pointers to a more reliable assessment and a deeper understanding of the inter-relationship of the problems, and gives a strong lead in the direction of the desired solution.

Among the publications examined by Barraclough in this report is *By Bread Alone*, by Lester R. Brown (see note 1). This is a remarkably readable, well-researched and well-argued book which performs the important task of marshalling essential facts, even if it fails to correctly interpret them and leaves us with inadequate conclusions, or at best conclusions limited by the failure fully to recognise this inter-relationship of world-wide problems and, therefore, to provide only short-term or 'breathing-space' solutions.

An example of the latter is the suggestion that small farm cultivation should be encouraged in countries classified as 'developing' for the solution this offers of "several acute problems. It can help to improve income-distribution patterns, reduce unemployment, check the swelling flow of people from the countryside to the cities and greatly expand national and world food supplies." (He earlier states that small farm cultivation

“produces considerably higher yields of food per acre than do farms on large estates.”) A “further important benefit” is that “by spreading the benefits of economic progress among the poorer groups (it) can create a special environment that greatly increases the motivation to limit family size.”⁸ Here is excellent argument for solving problems which are in themselves the consequence of a greater and more fundamental one which is either not seen or is ignored as possibly ‘too difficult’ — the problem of that ‘poverty amidst plenty’ referred to in the Club of Rome report.

Another example is in a succeeding passage⁹ which begins by saying: “Over the past two decades, nations have devised numerous means for managing commercial *abundance* — including special farm-subsidy programmes and the withholding of croplands from production. It has now become essential to develop the policies and institutions, both national and international, for managing *scarcity*.” (Author’s italics) Various means are then advocated for coping with the alleged scarcity, and the passage ends with the conclusion that “the extreme price volatility that is likely in the absence of an effective reserve system will not serve the interests of producers, consumers or government policy-makers attempting to cope with inflation.” Here, again, is an almost defeatist acceptance of the fact of inflation as an imponderable which must be ‘got around’ rather than removed. Here, also, is the basic error of accepting the artificial scarcity created by political action as a natural phenomenon, just as the artificial ‘abundance’ referred to is accepted uncritically instead of being shown to be the consequence of, not over-production but of under-consumption, the lack of *effective demand* — in other words, the poverty amidst the plenty.

When it comes to exposing some of the consequences of ignorant or unwise practices in the field of food production, the book presents some alarming evidence. Chapter 4: ‘Ecological Undermining of Food Systems’, describes the ecological damage resulting from the expansion of human and livestock population “beyond the basic carrying capacity of the land, and from land mismanagement.” And it refers to the “massive destruction of vegetable cover and the erosion of topsoil apparent in the spreading deserts of Africa, Asia and Latin America,” the silting of irrigation reservoirs and canals and the recurring disastrous floods in some regions. These are, as the author acknowledges, “not a new development”. Evidence pointing to the existence of such phenomena throughout history abounds in the existence of the great deserts, in the barren, de-forested terrain of vast areas of southern Europe and North Africa and in the flood-prone areas of the Indian sub-continent.

How much these disasters are the consequence of natural phenomena or of human ignorance and greed is open to debate. What is certain, however, is that much of the damage being done in this century can be charged to the perpetuation of the practice, especially in those countries erroneously described in modern economic jargon as ‘poor’, of the virtual enslavement

of the landless peasantry in the interests of minorities living, like leeches, on the rack-rents they extort from the producers. De Castro, in *The Géography of Hunger*, offers innumerable examples of this infamous system and its consequences, and in a more recent book, *Death in the North-East* (1965), he describes in detail its operation in the north-eastern areas of Brazil, where "fifty per cent of the land is owned by three per cent of the local landlords, only twenty per cent of the local residents own any land and eighty per cent are tenants, share-croppers or squatters". Obviously, the advantages of higher yields per acre from small farms are enjoyed only by those who skim off the excess yield in increased rent, thus tending to discourage the producer from improving the yield — just as taxation in industrial operations discourages 'overtime'.

Thus are the results of such magnificent products of modern research and practice as the 'Green Revolution', in India for instance, stultified by the malignant cancers of the zamindari and riotwary systems of land tenancy. A classic story was told by those who participated in a pilot scheme for intensive agriculture under the Colombo Plan, some years ago, in an Indian village. For three years the instructors lived with the villagers and brought them to a reasonable degree of proficiency, and left them with high hopes of the eventual success of a self-supporting village co-operative. After some years' absence, the pilot team returned to check progress, only to find the scheme abandoned. The reason? As soon as the scheme had reached the point of successful production the owners of the land raised the rent to absorb the difference in the tenants' income.

De Castro's theme is that hunger is the real enemy of production throughout the areas where agriculture is still in a state of relative primitiveness. He gives example after example of the peasantry of various countries throughout Asia, Africa and Latin America where malnutrition reduces the ability to work and production is therefore a fraction of what it could be, given well-nourished workers. Thus he shows that certain countries which, in the past, were self-supporting in food production, even exporters of it, have been reduced to importing it.

The major problem, therefore, is clearly seen to be that of poverty. While in the industrialised countries a degree of malnutrition exists even with comparative affluence, through wrong choices in the type of food taken, especially through over-refinement and unbalanced diet, the malnutrition of the 'under-developed' countries is almost entirely due to the poverty of the masses at the base of the production pyramid. And this poverty is the responsibility of those who exercise political power in those countries — who are content to demand 'aid' from the allegedly wealthy nations to sustain their tottering economies, instead of correcting the evils perpetrated by their own regimes.

'Aid', of course, has developed into one of the worst international rackets of modern times. On the one hand, the mendicant nations blackmail the

highly industrialised ones with the threat of imminent 'communist' revolution while, on the other hand, the 'donor' nations bargain with their food surpluses and their money to secure rights in the suppliants' territories to exploit natural resources. This is political exploitation of the helpless poor at its cynical worst.

Examples of this form of mutual blackmail are quoted by the author of *By Bread Alone*¹⁰ in his section 'Global Politics of Food Scarcity': for instance, deliberate withholding of food shipments to Chile in 1973 which, says Brown, "undoubtedly contributed to the downfall of the Allende Government." Although Americans decry the use of petroleum as a political weapon, he says, "calling it 'political blackmail', the United States has been using food aid for political purposes for twenty years — and describing this as 'enlightened diplomacy'."

Another contribution to this perpetuation of poverty amidst plenty is the use of controls of one kind and another in the interests of domestic politics, the classic case of which is the U.S. 'soil bank' policy which kept fifty million acres of potential food producing acreage out of production, by which \$3 billion was paid to U.S. farmers as late as 1973 *not* to grow crops.

While the 'zero-growth' zealots are putting the whole weight of their argument on a proposition which is as wrong in principle and impossible of achievement, as it is socially offensive, unnatural and economically stupid — a purely *negative* proposal, in fact — it is obvious that *positive* action leading to the solution of what the Club of Rome calls 'The Predicament of Man', continue to be ignored or, at best, attempted in an ineffective, half-hearted and piecemeal fashion, while the main need is for an overall vision of the fundamentals of the problem.

De Castro describes in detail the conclusions of scientific research into the relationship of fertility to diet in both animals and man and shows that high fertility is found where the consumption of protein is low. He provides a table comprising fourteen countries with a range of birthrates from the highest to the lowest, showing that the birthrate is in inverse relationship to the intake of protein. Formosa, with a birthrate of 45.6, had a daily consumption of 4.7 grams of animal protein per head. At the other end of the scale is Sweden with a birthrate of 15.0 and a daily intake per head of animal protein of 62.6 grams.¹¹

Later, in the same book¹² he says: "It is no longer necessary to imagine that by some obscure and mysterious process Mother Nature speeds up reproduction when the species seems threatened with extinction. The mechanism of animal metabolism which maintains this functional equilibrium is complex but not at all mysterious; protein deficiency leads to a loss of the liver's ability to inactivate oestrogens; excess of oestrogens increases the woman's fertility. Then, too, we have examined the psychological mechanisms by which chronic hunger intensifies the sexual

appetite at the same time as it lowers the appetite for food, and the assistance this gives in maintaining a high birthrate among the hungry peoples of the world.”

Lester Brown, in *By Bread Alone*, on the other hand, stresses the importance of overall improvement of the social environment in its relation to lower birthrates. “There is increasing evidence” he says “that the very strategies that cause the greatest improvements in the welfare of the entire population also have the greatest effect on reducing population growth.”¹³ Again, he shows that, in such disparate countries as China, Barbados, Sri Lanka, Uruguay, Taiwan, Cuba and South Korea, as well as some regions within countries, such as the Indian Punjab, “birthrates have dropped sharply despite relatively low per capita income and the absence, or relative newness, of family planning programmes. In all these countries a large proportion of the population has gained access to modern social and economic benefits, such as education, health, employment and farm credit systems — to a far greater degree than the citizens of most poor countries or most Western countries during comparable periods of development.”¹⁴ He quotes in support from a book by William Rich, an Overseas Development Council monograph: *Smaller Families Through Social and Economic Progress*, and adds a further note on the relationship of female education and fertility: “As education levels rise fertility levels fall.” Finally, he says: “It is no coincidence that virtually all well-fed societies have low fertility and all poorly-fed societies have high fertility.”¹⁵

But, instead of using this conclusion as a basis for insisting that the real problem to be faced is the political one of overcoming the mal-distribution of wealth and the elimination of the shocking imbalance in per capita incomes, Brown advocates such palliatives as the manipulation of income tax rates and deductions, “limiting subsidised maternity leaves and benefits”, limitation of government-subsidised housing and scholarships after the second child, special tax bonuses to those who remain single, and “special pension payments to those who opt to remain childless or to limit the number of their children to one or two.”¹⁶ All such proposals are made under the acknowledged shadow of *inflation*, the great unsolved universal problem which is capable of nullifying all such efforts.

Brown’s only really constructive contribution is at best the unsatisfactory one of ‘land reform’ and the “mobilisation of unused or inadequately used rural labour” in the boosting of agriculture in ‘poor’ countries.¹⁷ And China is quoted as a classic case of both propositions.

The obvious comment which this inspires is that unless more fundamental action is taken to break the deadly nexus of hunger and poverty alongside politically protected excessive affluence, the authoritarian system by which China achieves these goals will be the pattern for the whole world, of which the countries of South-East Asia have already given warning. Violent revolution will be the only remaining solution if the way of commonsense

and justice is too long ignored. History has given ample examples of this convulsive process of relieving intolerable situations.

The two books which have served as the basis of the critique of the world situation in this chapter represent invaluable contributions to the understanding of the problem confronting mankind in the latter years of the 20th century. De Castro's work will stand for all time for its scientific portrayal of the facts, while falling short of a grasp of the economic wisdom indispensable to a permanent solution of the problem. Brown's book, on the other hand, while offering a brilliant exposition of fact and of those partially effective palliatives available and being applied here and there, also fails to indicate in any precise fashion the only potentially successful way of reaching the desired goal; that is, he is content to concentrate on the short-term situation, in the manner of the neo-Malthusian approach, instead of stressing and enlarging on the politically created anarchy which dominates the world scene and of which he gives merely a hint or two.

In neither book is there any clear indication of a grasp of the principles of political economy indispensable to a proper understanding of the basic problems. No thought appears to have been given to so vital a factor as the necessity to release international trade from its present throttling shackles. Nowhere is it suggested that the man who produces most is the free man who is assured the full reward of his labour.

(It is significant of the dominance of neo-Malthusian fanaticism over the thought of otherwise intelligent men that de Castro is given no mention in the extensive bibliography of *By Bread Alone*, despite his book having been translated into 24 languages; and that the death in 1973 of this brilliant and inspired humanitarian was virtually ignored by the world's press.)

NOTES TO CHAPTER 18

1. *By Bread Alone* by Lester R. Brown; Praeger Publishers, New York (for the Overseas Development Council) 1974.
2. *The Geography of Hunger* by Josué de Castro; Victor Gollancez Ltd., London, 1952. p. 72.
3. *Ibid.* p.31.
4. *The Limits to Growth*, Report to the Club of Rome, by Dennis L. Meadows & Ors.; published by Earth Island Ltd., London, 1972.
5. *The End of the World (as we know it)*, report by Professor Geoffrey Barraclough; published in *The National Times* (Australia), March 17, 1975.
6. See the two articles: *The Two-Child Family Limit Proposal* and *Poverty and Population*, by A. R. Hutchinson, B.Sc., M.I.E. Aust., in *Good Government* (Australia), on February, 1972 and June, 1974 respectively.
7. See *The Geography of Hunger*: Chapter II, pp.66/69.
8. *By Bread Alone*: pp.14/15.
9. *Ibid.* p.15.
10. *Ibid.* p.69.
11. *The Geography of Hunger*: p.67 (these figures relate to circa 1954/5).
12. *Ibid.* pp.14/2.
13. *By Bread Alone*: p.184.
14. *Ibid.*
15. *Ibid.* p.187.
16. *Ibid.* p.189.
17. *Ibid.* pp.222/3.