

National security & the Cornucopian enchantment

If Paul Ehrlich can be regarded as the quintessential neo-Malthusian of recent times, then the late Julian Simon was surely the leading anti-Malthusian, arguing that no limits at all existed to human carrying capacity. Simon claimed that humans were “an ultimate resource,” able to “bootstrap” their own escape from poverty. His arguments, together with a shift towards user-pays philosophy, contributed to both reduced US family planning assistance and global reduction in foreign aid.

Simon's views also appear to have influenced the African Academy of Sciences, which argued in 1993: “Whether or not the Earth is finite will depend on the extent to which science and technology is able to transform the resources available for humanity. There is only one earth—yes, but the potential for transforming it is not necessarily finite.” Lawrence Summers, US Treasury Under Secretary in the Clinton administration, held a similar opinion. While working as a senior economist for the World Bank, he claimed: “There are no ... limits to the carrying capacity of the earth that are likely to bind any time in the foreseeable future. There isn't a risk of an apocalypse due to global warming or anything else. The idea that we should put limits on growth, because of some natural limit, is a profound error and one that, were it ever to prove influential, would have staggering social costs.”

Modern demographers have rejected the laissez faire extremism exemplified by Simon, but nonetheless appear to have been influenced by his optimism, perhaps due to the lucrative nature of a less confrontational position. For example, Paul Demeny, editor of the *Population and Development Review*, published a long article in 1988 discussing the Limits to Growth debate. He described a well-known children's riddle, originally used to illustrate the concept of exponential growth and later to warn of human over-population. Demeny asked: “How is it to be ascertained that we are on the 29th day and face the last chance “to save the pond?” On what basis can we discard the conjecture that the present corresponds, say, to the 24th day, when the global pond would be 1/64th full?”

Supporting Demeny's scepticism is the fact that some of the fears expressed in the original Limits to Growth debate were recognised as overstated. On the other hand, Norman Borlaug, when awarded the Nobel Prize in 1970 for his role in fostering the Green Revolution, warned that this would only provide a little time. Vitousek et al's argument that further doubling of the human appropriation of terrestrial photosynthesis was unlikely had also appeared two years prior to Demeny's paper.

Though rarely surfacing visibly, recognition of limited human carrying capacity also exists in conservative politics. Both Virginia Abernethy and George Kennan used carrying-capacity arguments to lobby against foreign aid by and immigration to the US, other than to maintain US zero population growth. These policies have now become mainstream; the underlying carrying-capacity rationale remains tacit.

The extremist taint that clouds the carrying-capacity discussion has inhibited consideration of the role of “overpopulation” and resource scarcity by most analysts of the Rwandan genocide, who instead attribute primary causation to ethnic hatred. Maurice King argues that a taboo prevents explicit discussion of carrying capacity by UNICEF and the US State Department. King's views have been severely criticised and even misrepresented, including by writers arguing that such discussions are code for infanticide.

Is discussion of carrying capacity pointless?

Critics may ask whether examination of refugees, war and environmental degradation in terms of carrying capacity is more useful than scolding naughty children. Such views risk justifying selfish behaviour by “full” countries and victim-blaming in “overpopulated” ones. This risk must be taken if we are to prevent ongoing and future conflict, environmental change and human refugees. As King says, it is better to have benign than malignant uproar.

The benefits of limiting population growth were better recognised in the early post-WWII decades than today. Though scarred by the Cold War, many populations adopted at least the rhetoric of reducing global inequality. Advocacy of reduced population growth rates united the South and the North and radical and conservative politicians. For example George Bush, Senior wrote in 1973 (when the annual population global increase was nearly 80 million per annum, as it still is): “In a world of nearly 4 billion people ... [with] major world problems like population and environmental protection ... Success in the population field, under United Nations leadership, may, in turn, determine whether we can resolve successfully the other great problems of peace, prosperity, and individual rights that face the world.”

Though Mao initially spoke against family planning, by the late 1950s Chou En-Lai advocated accelerated demographic transition in China. Subsequent decades saw ambitious Chinese family planning targets. Today, China's population is far lower than it might have been. This resulted in part from forced sterilisation and was undoubtedly bought at a substantial human rights cost. Would not

the terrible human rights abuse of many in the South in recent decades, especially in Africa, have been less had their birth rates been lower?

Increasing wealth, education, contraceptive availability and the media all foster smaller family size more humanely than does coercion. Much of the responsibility for the comparatively slow rate of demographic transition in Africa lies with the selfish trade, aid and debt policies that high-income countries have followed in recent decades. We in the rich countries have a significant responsibility for this.

Self-interest and carrying capacity

The powerful act to protect or improve their perceived security. But gross inequality, which the futile US strategic missile defence program exemplifies, is also a clear cause of the current anti-US terrorism campaign. Greenhouse gas emissions in the South, though still low on a per capita basis, also pose a major future security threat to the North.

Northern policy makers, enchanted by the Cornucopian mirage presented by Simon and his supporters (such as Bjørn Lomborg), have recently exhibited a general indifference to both the reality of the global environmental crisis and the eventual size of populations in the South. This has resulted in low-income populations possessing a strategic lever that, at best, could force wealthy populations to adopt a less exploitative position.

What can be done? Climate change and other erosions of global public goods (including international justice) could be recognised as global security threats. The North could resurrect some of its post-WWII policies and rhetoric, expressed for example by the emerging UN institutions, and recognise that a world with reduced national and international inequality is likely to be both safer and more humane. Such policies could aim to dramatically accelerate the sustainability transition. At best, this may engage and inspire the world's youth and create hope. Franker discussion of the limits to regional and global carrying capacity is vital to the success of such a campaign.

UK Prime Minister Tony Blair hints at a recognition that a fairer world is safer, but has not stopped British forces bombing Afghans; new US Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill warns repeatedly that climate change threatens civilisation, but so did Al Gore; and former Australian prime minister Paul Keating has warned that Australia's hard-line anti-refugee policy buys short-term popularity but long-term risk. Some leaders are waking up, but there is a long way to go.

References on request; see also website.