

Breaking the Logjam

A Non-Malthusian Argument for Population Reduction

Great hatred, little room,
Maimed us at the start.
—Yeats, *Remorse For Intemperate Speech*

No, the reason for reducing the human population of the world is not that we cannot feed all the teeming billions already on hand, and the further billions that will appear unless we take action to forestall them. It seems likely that human ingenuity would be up to the task of increasing the supply of food and other basic necessities to match such growth of the population for some decades or even centuries to come. But what human ingenuity is already unable to do is to provide *space* — both physical and psychological space — for all the billions now on Earth, let alone those to come. Those who have debated, from Malthus on, about our ability to provide food for all the coming mouths, are neither wrong nor right; they are simply irrelevant¹. It is not feeding people that is the critical problem in our situation, it is our loyalty to our family and our way of life that is destroying us. Our plight is truly tragic, because it is caused by something that once protected us, one of our originally *good* qualities.

That quality, and one of the few traits shared by all humans, whatever their race or culture, is a devotion to The People — that is, people of one's own kind. This is perhaps the fundamental characteristic of humankind. Most of us accept the inevitability of our individual deaths, but no one accepts the extinction of one's People, one's community, one's own blood; that extinction would amount not just to one's own personal death, but to the meaninglessness of life itself. And all these forms of passion in favor of The People -- racism, nationalism, parochialism, chauvinism, patriotism, and xenophobia -- despite their bad name among enlightened people, are, so far from disappearing, more and more the dominant passions that drive human conflicts everywhere. The term 'racism' will be used here to denote this fear of and hostility to people unlike ourselves; there are fine distinctions to be made between the variant forms of that hostility that were just named, but those distinctions are negligible for present purposes.

At one time, racism was not just a defensible attitude, it was essential to survival. Some 50,000 years ago, when man was a hunter-gatherer clinging to life as best he could, never far from disaster, the people who would help you if you were temporarily disabled by injury, or starving because you hadn't found much game recently, were your immediate family; beyond them, you might be able to get some support from your tribe, your "extended family". Beyond that you could hope for nothing — you might even be attacked if you encountered a member of some other tribe while searching for food. So the rule in those days was "trust your family first, your fellow tribesmen second, and no one third" — a rule that was not just sensible, but vitally necessary to our survival. And that rule, woven into our genes by millennia of natural selection, is what we today call racism, and deplore.

Yesterday it preserved our life; today it threatens our life — circumstances have changed. The instinct to fear and distrust the stranger, manifesting itself today as racism, is like the vermiform appendix: once, scientists think, that structure served a useful purpose for its human owner; today it acts mainly as a breeding grounds for infection, and kills some of its victims. For those who live today in a secure and civilized country, the instinct is positively harmful and potentially fatal, but evolution has not bred that trait out of us, and may never do so; it can take hundreds of generations to eliminate even a trait that imposes a distinct disadvantage on its possessor — and we today may not have hundreds of generations to look forward to, nor is the instinct to fear strangers always a disadvantage.

If that trait is so dangerous today, why do we still have it? For the same reason we still have the vermiform appendix: our needs change at ever increasing speed as human civilization develops, and evolution by natural selection responds to those changes. But Darwinian evolution cannot keep up with the pace of modern technical and cultural change, and even when it does adapt us to a new reality, it usually does so not by extirpating an undesirable feature, but by covering it up with a new one, as if applying a fresh coat of paint over the old. In this process of accretion, the older layers of our brain, as we evolve, are overlaid by new ones, but the old ones remain, ready to assert themselves if their successors weaken or disappear.

So modern Western civilized man is stuck, for the foreseeable future, with an instinct that many wish we didn't have, and unfortunately our reaction to that predicament is generally irrational and self-destructive. Instead of regarding the unwanted

vestigial instinct as a practical problem about which we need to think clearly and calmly, so that we can find the best possible solution, many of us regard it as a shameful sin, something we don't want to think about, something to deny we're guilty of. Many people who feel that instinct alive within themselves hate it, or at least hate to have to acknowledge it, and their revulsion is shown by the passion with which they attack anyone who can be thought of as accepting racism, or just being insufficiently militant against it. In doing so, they are trying to cast out the devil within themselves, a devil whose existence they cannot in many cases even acknowledge, much less free themselves of. By turning their furious guilt-engendered feelings into an attack on someone else, they are trying, consciously or unconsciously, to cleanse and absolve themselves.

The Rational Solution

Given these truths, the solution to our problems, insofar as human problems have solutions, lies in physically separating hostile groups from each other; something that can be done only if the number of people on earth is drastically reduced. Reduced by how much? Auden proposed² that human population should be one tenth of its present size, and we can take that as a first approximation³. To achieve that, we would have to institute a strictly enforced policy of a maximum of two children per family – and far more stringent measures may well be necessary.

This solution will be unwelcome to many people, including some of the best educated and well intentioned, and they will reject it because it conflicts with their desperate hope that hostility between human groups is virtually always caused by *misunderstanding*, and is hence completely eradicable: there is no such thing, they believe, as a *real* or *fundamental* or *irreconcilable* conflict. There are many *apparent* conflicts, of course, but that's all they are—apparent. If the people involved would only sit down over coffee and Danish, show each other pictures of the children, and talk to each other—have a dialogue, try to communicate—they would find that their differences were resolvable with a little application of good will and some old-fashioned give-and-take.¹ So deep is this delusion embedded in the hearts of some of our most public-spirited citizens that for many of them the standard word for a conflict is *misunderstanding*.

This usage undoubtedly began life as a deliberate euphemism, an attempt to placate the Furies by calling them the Kindly Ones. If so, it has met the fate that awaits all euphemisms: it has lost its placatory powers, and become merely a neutral term for the unpleasantness it once tried to shield us from. Would-be spreaders of oil on troubled waters have called so many conflicts *misunderstandings* where the combatants had a perfect understanding of each other's positions (as when two dogs fight over a bone) that the term has lost all its emollient properties, and is now, for many, just the ordinary term for a quarrel⁴.

But this hope, which under such rubrics as “co-existence” and “diversity” and “the peace process” now rules much of our social thought, lives on because, no matter how often its falsity is demonstrated, it answers a need felt in many hearts for comfort and assurance that all will yet be well – a need that must be satisfied, no matter at what cost in failure to deal with reality. Even in normal times it may be unwise to indulge the tender-hearted and fuzzy-minded in this fantasy, and these are not normal times. We are facing too many real conflicts between cultures, none of them just misunderstandings; many of them are seen by those involved as existentially threatening – and many *are*.

As the world effectively shrinks, with its human population growing uncontrollably, every square mile of land, quite literally from the Arctic to the Antarctic, is becoming the subject of exclusive claims by one country or group or another. Every one of these claimants, linguistic or religious or racial, feels itself in danger of being swamped, and is fighting for its continued existence and independence, usually to include possession of some odd-shaped chunk of land that it regards as its homeland and rightful property. The Basques and Catalans threaten to secede from Spain, the Scots to undo the Union of 1707, the Kurds to carve a state of their own out of Iraq and Turkey, the Bretons to separate from France, Canadians to break up into Francophone and Anglophone nations—the list goes on and on⁵, and the process of fragmentation will accelerate and spread as more and more groups come to feel that they will perish as peoples unless they get a homeland and all that goes with it. (Many politically correct citizens of the Western world, although opposed in principle to racism, seen here in the form of nationalism, feel obliged to support these claims—after all, they are made by *minorities*—even though the states that would be born if these groups had their way would not be viable, and would quickly

fall under the suzerainty of some larger, established country if they survived at all.) But unfortunately, the aspirations of almost all these minorities are doomed; there is simply no room on earth for them.

Because of the gross overpopulation of the world, and the consequent intolerable jamming together of peoples, racism, so far from being diminished, is more than ever the dominant passion that drive conflicts everywhere. Everywhere on Earth peoples are being forced into living alongside others they feel to be so alien to themselves that prolonged close contact is intolerable. The peoples who can't abide each other may seem to outsiders so alike as to be indistinguishable, and their superficial similarity often leads observers into optimistic predictions of reconciliation between the two. But that superficial similarity is a reason for optimism only in the eyes of outsiders; to the parties involved, it only exacerbates their differences — that people so like themselves outwardly should differ so sharply from them in religion, language, politics, or culture seems to them not merely the hostility to be expected from outsiders, but treason from within. To be forced to live cheek-by-jowl with those they regard as alien creatures, or even traitors, has had the natural effect on many of them of increasing their fear and distrust of the Other — and if the Others resemble themselves, they are that much more dangerous, because so much harder to spot — and because their very similarity in superficial matters is felt as mockery and taunting.

Every history of the modern world tells us that the growth of human knowledge and mastery of nature has been accompanied by the progressive surrender of our supposed uniquely lofty status: first, Copernicus taught us that our world was not the center of the universe, but just one planet circling a rather ordinary star; then Darwin convinced us that we were not the product of special creation, but just evolved from more primitive species, like all the rest of earth's fauna. Now it is time for the human race to accept its next beneficial demotion: we must stop flattering ourselves that we are fundamentally both rational and peaceful, and that we can trust those traits to save us from destroying ourselves. We must accept instead that we have a nature, and that that nature puts limits on how far we can bear each other. The deepest and most essential element of our nature forbids us to accept a threat to our way of life; we may be able to accept our individual deaths, but our people -- The People -- must live, and anything or anyone that threatens them must be destroyed.

We will have to recognize, if we are to survive, that the best way, often the only way, to deal with groups that hate and fear each other is to separate them; to put substantial distance between them. Apostates, infidels, heretics, schismatics, unbelievers, barbarians, sub-humans, and hateful people generally can usually be tolerated when across the sea or on the other side of an ocean, a mountain range or a desert; shoved into one's face, they are insufferable, and must be killed. But even when the truth that peace often depends on separation is acknowledged, it cannot be put into practice if there is no space to put between hostile parties, as is increasingly the case today.

Political & Social Problems

Of the problems caused or exacerbated by overpopulation, some are natural -- that is, due to physical limitations such as the size of the earth -- and some are due to human traits. It is the latter that are the main subject here, but only because the former are far better known and agreed upon; the natural problems are themselves sufficient to demand depopulation. (The natural problems will later be listed and briefly summarized just for the convenience of having both sorts collected in one place.)

Political & Social Problem 1: Overpopulation is the principal cause of war

Hitler's quest for *lebensraum*, as expressed in the quotation below, is typical of the territorial demands made by those who feel themselves being squeezed out of existence; such demands are the single greatest cause of war today.

In an era when the earth is gradually being divided up among states, some of which embrace almost entire continents, we cannot speak of a world power in connection with a formation whose political mother country is limited to the absurd area of five hundred thousand square kilometers.⁶

Hitler was obsessed by two thoughts: that Germany must have room to grow, and that the Jews were a disease that needed eradication. The horrors caused by the

second of these obsessions have understandably engaged the civilized world's attention almost exclusively in thinking about Nazism, but the first must not be ignored; it is one of the evil side effects of the Holocaust that it has caused us to largely overlook the widespread demand for *lebensraum* and the preservation of The People, which caused World War 2, and will cause wars forever unless dealt with.

Political & Social Problem 2: democracy made impossible

Among the major problems caused by overpopulation: it makes democracy impossible. Democracy works reasonably well in modest-sized communities of fundamentally like-minded people; it quickly becomes impossible as population grows and spreads, even without the further complication of new and often incompatible interests, points of view, and beliefs. Huge masses of people, scattered over large territories, cannot be provided with full information on critical issues, time to digest it, and a chance to vote on them. They can only be managed like herds of cattle; overpopulation leads to heavily authoritarian regimes, even to despotism. The notions of personal freedom, privacy, and civil rights become increasingly unworkable as crowding grows; with densely packed masses, governments believe they must step in to control more and more of our lives, even in the absence of any intention of violating the rights of individuals. Even if our rulers were so many John Stuart Mills, they would be forced by the exigencies of time and space to treat us as abstract masses, to be managed as quickly and cheaply as possible.

Political & Social Problem 3: virtue made impossible

We Americans, by and large, want to be good, but we are finding it harder and harder to do so. The major reason is that we are forced to interact with many other countries and cultures whose practices we find distasteful, even horrible – and since we must interact with them, we are forced at the very least to connive at such practices, even sometimes to accept them and become openly complicit in them. There is for our aspirations to morality a lesson to be learned from an unexpected quarter, that of real-estate marketing. As the real estate people tell us, the three principal considerations in determining the price of a house or parcel of land are location, location, and location. It doesn't much matter, for sales purposes, that your house is superior to its neighbors; it will not fetch much more than they will, simply because

it and they are in the same neighborhood. And when it comes to driving in heavy traffic, the motorist soon learns that you cannot drive much faster than that traffic.

The same is true of national morality: a society cannot rise much above the average level of the other societies that it has to interact with. Of course an individual can strive to be a saint, a hero, or a martyr, and exhibit in his own behavior a level of morality far superior to those he lives among, but a nation cannot do this. We in the United States are now compelled to interact with many different societies, and doing so means that we cannot observe the level of virtue that we could at least aspire to when we were effectively insulated from the world, as we were until World War II. If it is important to us to be good, we had better not try to interact with all the cultures in the world — and the only way to accomplish selective isolationism is to diminish the world population sharply, so that effective buffer zones can be maintained between us and those cultures whose practices we cannot accept.

Political & Social Problem 4: feelings of personal insignificance

Even if the human race were thoroughly homogeneous, with no one feeling that he was being compelled to share space with those he detested or feared, the sheer density of humans on the earth constitutes for many a source of severe strain. Many of the mass shootings that newspapers and television regularly report are caused, at least in part, by the desperate desire of their perpetrators to assert their existence, to make some breathing room for themselves among the hordes of human beings they feel themselves overwhelmed by. The news media regularly report such crimes as instances of “senseless” or “motiveless” violence, and tell us that the “authorities” and the families of the victims are “searching for answers” in an attempt to understand what has happened. The families, at least, are not in fact seeking answers, they are just grieving, but if an answer or motive *were* being sought, it would very often turn out to be self-assertion, a cry for attention.

The simple desire to get one’s fifteen minutes of fame, to get some attention paid to oneself, some acknowledgement that one exists, is enough to get many to perform atrocious acts. If one kills enough people, one will be noticed and remembered — not remembered kindly perhaps, but at least remembered, and not sunk namelessly into the ocean of those who might as well never have lived⁷. The hunger for personal distinction is not now, if it ever was, just the last infirmity of noble mind, it is the

increasingly common characteristic of ordinary minds, and its cause is the feeling that one is being buried alive by the sheer masses of humans that one is sharing the world with; if I cannot get the world to acknowledge that I exist, do I exist?

Political & Social Problem 5: loss of privacy

On the other side of the coin, our desire for privacy cannot be gratified in the present, let alone the predictable, state of crowding. With conflict between badly situated peoples always imminent, no government can afford to let any of us engage in mysterious activities, or have possibly sinister secrets; the government must, for our own protection, know everything about us. Millions must be searched and scanned at every turn in an attempt to detect and thwart the one terrorist among us.

Political & Social Problem 6: ethnic cleansing

Even more consequentially, the crowdedness of the Earth makes for one of the ugliest phenomena of our time: ethnic cleansing. It is obvious that virtually everyone wants to live among his own sort of people; minorities who have clamored to be admitted to mainstream society nevertheless choose, when they have won that admittance, to congregate with others of their own race, religion, or culture. That tendency is sometimes deplored by social theorists who would like to see such characteristics high-mindedly ignored, have all of us accept our neighbors all the more gladly for their differences, and choose our partners exclusively for their inner worth; in practice, a peaceful and moderate parochialism is for the most part accepted and taken for granted. But because of crowding, the normal solutions to maintaining the ethnic integrity of a neighborhood, such as subtly discouraging people who would not fit in, or, as a last resort, moving away from a neighborhood into which people of the wrong sort are moving, is increasingly difficult, sometimes impossible; when this occurs, the kind of murderous population adjustment now called ethnic cleansing can be the result. When it becomes that ugly and savage, sometimes approaching the genocidal, it turns from being merely deplorable to being horrifically shocking, and all right-thinking folks agree that Something Must Be Done — though just what isn't clear. Ethnic cleansing is another phenomenon caused by crowding, and there will be no ending it except by relieving the crowding.

Political & Social Problem 7: group judgement, bigotry

Another unhappy consequence of human crowding: it forces us to fall back on racial, sexual, ethnic, and other such generalizations in making decisions about people. We are forever being urged to overcome stereotypes and prejudices in our thinking about and reactions toward others, but the sheer number of unknown people and groups we have to deal with precludes the close study of each individual we encounter, and the forming of our view of him on the basis of that study. More and more we are forced to rely on generalizations ranging from folk tales to statistical studies, and to deal with the person before us at the moment as if he were Mr Typical-of-his-kind rather than a unique and, like most of us, untypical-of-his-kind individual. As crowding robs us of the space that could let us maintain the peace by separating hostile groups, so it also deprives us of the time that is required if we are to treat each person as an individual rather than a member of some group or other. If Blake's "To generalize is to be an idiot" is right, crowding is forcing us to be idiots.

Political & Social Problem 8: Impossibility of rational actions and decisions

Even worse, the overcrowding of the planet, and the consequent exponential increase in complexity of all social and political problems, makes it often impossible to predict the full consequences of any proposed action — and when we can no longer accurately estimate the consequences of our actions, wise or even simply rational decision-making is impossible. We have long been accustomed to the idea of trade-offs in making our plans; we know that almost any imaginable action, however benevolent in intention — planting a tree, widening a road, stocking a stream with fish — will hurt someone somehow; every move we make steps on someone's toes. And we long ago accepted that the best we can do is take actions whose unavoidable bad effects are outweighed by their good ones; now we are increasingly faced with making decisions whose consequences we understand so little that we cannot even be sure of such imperfect compromises. Our immediate problems are too complex and exigent, and the time available to conceive of and test solutions for them too short, to allow us to understand any but the most immediate and local consequences of any proposed action. We act more and more blindly, and find ourselves taking actions that have effects quite different from the wanted ones, sometimes even their direct opposite. Our wise men are forever telling us that "there are no simple answers" to any of our problems: if they are right, that is very bad news, because for

the human race in general, if there are no simple answers, there are no answers at all.

Political & Social Problem 9: All steps are near-paralyzed by valid objections

Crowding leads to civic breakdown: even today's relatively mild crowding in U.S. cities makes just about any development so difficult and expensive as almost to produce paralysis. As noted above, try to put up a building, a road, a bridge, even a hospital or school, and immediately it turns out that the proposed development would harm some interest group that must be taken seriously; it would increase local traffic congestion, prevent residents from finding parking space near their homes, create noise that would assault the ears of babies and night workers trying to get some rest, cut off the view that home owners had paid to enjoy, divide some ethnic community into two mutually inaccessible parts, and so on and on interminably. The complaints are often valid and to be respected, but they nevertheless prevent needed developments, decrease public amenities, and can cause a community to choke to death as it tries, futilely, to satisfy all interests. This near-paralysis will grow worse and worse as crowding increases.

Political & Social Problem 10: Breeding magical explanations, bigotry, hatreds, massacres

The frustrations of life in such conditions, in which seemingly sensible measures can have consequences very different from our intentions, and nothing seems to work as common sense and intuition lead us to expect, spawn the most irrational and vicious explanations of our failures; we are being attacked by conspiracies, by traitors, even by supernatural or extraterrestrial creatures posing as humans. It's the bankers! It's the Papists! It's the Jews! It's the lawyers! Let's expel them from the country; no, let's bomb their churches!

Political & Social Problem 11: Self-censorship, silencing of investigation and conjecture, telling truth to self

But the worst of all the many bad consequences that follow on overcrowding is the effect it has on our ability to face reality and tell the truth. We all know, wherever and wherever we are, that we are living in a world full of peoples who are full of resentment at the oppression and injustice of which they feel themselves, rightly or

wrongly, to be victims, and that very little is required to offend them and even set them rioting — we feel sometimes that we are living in an explosives bunker, where the slightest spark could cause Apocalypse. And knowing that, many of us automatically censor our speech to suppress anything that could, by the farthest stretch of the imagination, offend any of these groups. This cringing self-censorship, commonly known as ‘political correctness,’ poisons the very root of thought and action in matters where what is actually needed is the greatest candor and realism. When what is needed is a willingness to speak truth even to the powerless, we have forbidden ourselves to speak truth to anyone; soon we may be unable to speak truth to ourselves.

Political and Social problem 12: loss of smaller languages & cultures

Those who value human cultural diversity, and in particular those who lament the vanishing of many of the world’s languages and dialects, should be among the strongest advocates of population decrease and the restoration of healthy buffer zones between cultures. Only so can minority cultures and languages survive; if they are forced into contact with the world’s dominant languages — English and Mandarin — they will succumb to the influence of those dominating languages, even without any such intention on the part of the English- and Mandarin-speaking groups. An elephant cannot help encroaching on the space of the mice, no matter how respectful and solicitous of them he may be. When the big rock rubs against the little, the little will be worn down before the big.

Natural Problems

The natural problems caused or exacerbated by overpopulation – those that are not the result of human nature, but simply of physical facts – are too well known to need much discussion here, but it was promised earlier that they would at least be listed, and that promise is now kept.

Natural problem 1: Extinction of many other species

The size of the present human population, let alone the population to come, is incompatible with the survival of many other species. The larger mammals in particular, both terrestrial and marine, and with them their predators, are bound to lose their habitats, and hence their existence, to the swelling human population. The

effects of this on the balance of nature are incalculable, but likely to be profound, and unlikely to be pleasant.

Natural problem 2: Destruction of ecologies by invading flora and fauna

The invasion of ecological units by the flora and fauna of other units that is made inevitable by mass travel and importing of goods between one unit and another is another evil to be laid at the door of crowding. Even when such foreign flora and fauna are not intrinsically harmful, like parasites and venomous creatures, they often do massive damage just by upsetting the balance of nature in the units they are introduced into — damage not only to native flora and fauna, but to humans as well.

Natural problem 3: Poisoning the atmosphere, soil, and sea with our waste

No matter how conscientious and abstemious we try to be, we cannot help creating a great deal of waste, both industrial and personal; it's a necessary byproduct of modern life. Insofar as global warming is the result of human activity, we can help deal with it either by giving up industrial civilization, or sharply diminishing our numbers. The only way to stop choking the planet with our waste is to stop overburdening it with people.

Natural problem 4: Every outbreak of disease, anywhere, can become pandemic

More and more, what would be local outbreaks of disease (like the 'Mexican Swine Flu' outbreak in the spring of 2009) are converted by crowding into pandemics -- epidemics of global dimensions. In 2014 we had Ebola, in 2016 we had Zika, in 2020 we have the Corona virus.

What can we do? The Impossibility of rational measures

For all these reasons, our current social, economic, and political problems are unsolvable within the solution space we currently accept; they will only grow more intractable and severe as time and population-growth proceed; and only extreme measures, measures analogous to the cutting of the Gordian knot, can save us from disaster. But how is population reduction to be achieved? Who is to be told 'You may not have more children – or even any children' and who is to do the telling, and what if those told refuse to obey? The answer is that no rational method of handling the problem is available, and therefore it is going to be handled irrationally. From a

rational point of view, the people who should be required to refrain from having so many children are those who are having the most at present, and are least able to provide for them. But these people are overwhelmingly non-white and poor — Asian, African, and South American — and it would inevitably be charged, if such an approach were proposed, that the real goal of the campaign was not to cut the size of the general human population, but to cut the size of the non-white and poor population. Whether or not there was any truth in this charge, it would be believed by billions; the impossibility of refuting it makes the rational approach impossible.

Undesirability of natural measures

This being the case, the only path to reduced population lies in war, epidemics, famine, and other such disasters, and these will be increasingly destructive and lethal as the industrialized nations, already under great economic pressure, refuse to make heroic efforts at relieving the victims of these disasters. The citizens of those nations that have traditionally mounted substantial relief efforts in cases of foreign disaster are already showing signs of unwillingness to spend substantial resources on distant, largely unknown peoples when all sorts of domestic needs are clamoring for those resources. This is a saddening development, but it is unavoidable, and it will have the unintended effect of diminishing the total population. That population cut will be achieved in the cruelest way possible, causing far greater misery to everyone concerned than would a rational program of limiting births to two per family, but the human race is not prepared to take the steps necessary to avoid that pain, and so must suffer it.

Studies of social problems customarily conclude with passionate urgings, or at least suggestions, about positive actions for dealing with them. But no solution will be offered here; as noted earlier, it is unlikely that there *is* a solution — a solution that is politically acceptable, that is; it may be that we can only sit by while nature takes its terrible course. The justification for offering this analysis is that if by some near-miracle there *is* a solution, it will be found only by someone who has first been thoroughly stripped of false hope — hope that the progress of science, or the efforts of the United Nations, or anything else in our standard repertoire of “forces for good” will get us out of this predicament. Only when we have abandoned all such hope can we say or do anything even slightly relevant; as the poet said, *Magnanimous Despair alone Could show me so divine a thing*

But one thing should be clear already; if we are to have any chance of dealing with our mounting difficulties, we must begin by grasping the fact that overpopulation is the main cause of half our problems, and at least an important contributing factor in the other half. We are forever being urged to seek ‘root causes’ in our investigations of social problems; here is such a root if ever there was one. But there is a better metaphor: in a log jam there is usually a key log, one that happens to occupy a blocking position that prevents all the others from moving. Over-population is the key log in the jam we are in; clearing it will not in itself solve all our problems, but it would solve many, and would make it possible for steps to be taken toward the solving of others — steps that are now impossible.

And one thing we will have to do is to convince at least the thinking part of the world that bringing a new person into the world is just as momentous a step as sending one out of the world. We are so sensitized to the moral gravity of putting someone to death, even for the most heinous crimes — or to relieve suffering invalids at their own fervent request — that the occasional rare legal execution is a news event, and evokes public protests. But any 15-year old girl who feels like it can get pregnant and have a baby, without having the slightest idea of how it is to be supported and raised. And while we may cluck our tongue and shake our head sadly, we accept her act as the exercise of a right, however unwise, and try as best we can to help her and the child. (Our best is frequently bad, and the baby through lack of a stable family and socialization becomes a criminal or addict or some other form of social misfit.) After opinion leaders throughout the world have been convinced that this is an unacceptable state of affairs, we may then find it possible to change the ways of the young. It will be very hard to do this even to our own young; to drive this lesson home in the third world will be near impossible; the only argument in favor of trying is that all imaginable alternatives are worse.

Endnotes

¹ For examples of writings based on what I think of as the Food Fallacy, see Erle C. Ellis, “Overpopulation is Not the Problem,” *The New York Times* (9/14/2013), p. A17; an attempted refutation of Malthus whose argument is that we’ve come up with many tricks to improve food productivity in the past, so it’s obvious that we will continue to do so indefinitely. Another example: David J. Craig, “Can we talk about

Overpopulation,” *Columbia* (Summer 2009), 28-37, which also assumes that the main, if not only, problem posed by the world’s growing population is providing enough food. And the entire June 2013 issue of *IEEE Spectrum* is devoted to rebutting the idea that we will soon be short of food; see in particular Keith Fuglie, “Why the Pessimists are Wrong,” pp. 26-32. I have made no attempt to keep up with the torrent of anti-Malthusian writings, just noted a few particularly egregious examples as I came across them. For systematic attempts to collect that literature, see Wikipedia under such headings as “Malthusianism”.

Robert D. Kaplan, in *The Coming Anarchy* (Random House, 2000) – a book I admire – lists overpopulation on the Contents page as one of our major problems, but only third among them, after scarcity and crime. He might have noted in ranking these problems that scarcity and crime do not cause overpopulation, while overpopulation certainly causes *them*.

² “How can we contemplate the not so distant future with anything but alarm when no method both morally tolerable and politically effective has yet been discovered for reducing the population of the world to a tenth of its present size and keeping it there?” --W. H. Auden, “As It Seemed to Us,” *The New Yorker*, 3 April 1965; reprinted in *Forewords & Afterwords* (Random House, 1973), 524.

³ It should go without saying, but like many such truths, it needs to be said: my urging the partial depopulation of the world has nothing to do with the absolute number of people alive. It is based on the ratio between that number and the number of viable and sustainable independent homelands demanded by those people. If the number of such homelands could be multiplied by a factor of ten, that would be as good as diminishing the present population by the same factor.

⁴ During an interview about his movie *Munich*, Steven Spielberg offered his solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: “The only thing that’s going to solve this is rational minds, a lot of sitting down and talking until you’re blue in the gills.” He had not heard, apparently, of people who refuse to sit down to a kaffeeklatsch with their enemies, nor had he considered the possibility that as we get to know our enemy better, we will only become more certain that he *is* our enemy.

⁵ A further list of a dozen or so potential or imminent breakaways by minority groups was presented by Frank Jacobs and Parag Khanna, “The New World”, *The New York Times* (September 23, 2012) p. SR 6. That list could now be extended.

⁶ Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1971), page 644.

And Frank Jacobs predicted in “Why China Will Reclaim Siberia”, *The New York Times* (July 5, 2014), as he did in his earlier article (see Note 5), that China would seize all of Siberia up to the Urals in a quest for *lebensraum* and natural resources.

⁷ Carol Ann Duffy (sometime British Poet Laureate), in her *Education for Leisure*: “Today I am going to kill something. Anything. I have had enough of being ignored and today I am going to play God. ...”

The same urgent need to be recognized and acknowledged is to be seen in the popular obsession with celebrities. (Celebrity worship is not a major social problem, like most of the phenomena discussed here; it is mentioned only because it is a blatant symptom of what underlies all of them.) Celebrities are sometimes derided as people “well-known for being well known,” which carries the implication that if those who idolize celebrities knew how unworthy of such regard they were, they would cease to treat them so. The critics seem to think that fans are deluded about celebrities, that they suppose that celebrities possess deep and precious qualities that merit such adulation, and that they, the fans, need to be disillusioned. But celebrity-worshippers are not mistaken, at least not in the way the critics suppose. It is precisely for being well known that their fans adore celebrities: they are unquestionably *real* — they have been seen on TV and on the covers of magazines, *ergo* they exist — and if I can touch one of them, get close to one of them, that reality will rub off on me; I will be real too. By the same token, not to recognize and honor celebrity and celebrities is to cast doubt on your own ontological status; as the greatest celebrity of all is quoted as saying, “Know ye not me? ... Not to know me argues yourselves unknown.”

When I asked the editor who had rejected the essay for his reasons, he replied, saying “Of course, I can say a brief word about our rejection of the piece (as we do for anyone who asks). We find the argument fundamentally unpersuasive, morally fraught, and, frankly, misanthropic. Neither the diagnosis of racism as a function of people living too closely together, nor its cure of reducing the population seems right to us, or historically defensible.” and so did the editor-in-chief, in a long message

that summed up his feelings in these words: “[*We are*] under no obligation to publish what any student of history and world affairs will correctly recognize as a puerile regurgitation of apologia for tyranny and genocide.” The two editors quoted are normally intelligent and close readers of texts; the weird interpretations they put on the submitted essay are the mark of badly frightened men.