

Tunnel Vision Dooms America's Future

Population study ignores everything that counts

by B. Meredith Burke

Whom you seek advice from reveals what you want to hear. This observation by Jean-Paul Sartre best explains the diametrically opposite conclusions reached in 1972 by the President's Commission on Population Growth and the American Future and the report that has just been issued by the National Academy of Science panel at the behest of the U.S. Commission on Immigration Reform.

The bipartisan 1972 panel, headed by John D. Rockefeller III, founder of The Population Council, had a diverse membership. It included lay people, politicians and scientists. Its five-volume report examined the role of population in every facet of American life. The effects of population level and growth on both the individual and community levels were thoroughly examined.

The Commission observed the high value Americans place upon low-density, compact communities, and easy access to uncrowded open space as well as to political representatives. It concluded there was no value in American life that could be furthered by additional population growth. It condemned our pro-growth ideology, recommending population stabilization (then at 200 million) as fast as possible. Immigration policy would necessarily have to respect this reality.

This year's report was produced by a panel of social scientists led by a Rand Corporation economist. They favor econometric computer models that utilize readily quantifiable monetary and demographic data. The methodology rules the kinds of questions that are asked, rather than vice versa. Societal values and quality-of-life

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considerations which produce preference rankings do not fit this model.

Moreover, the Commission expressly enjoined the NAS panel from addressing the issue of optimum population. Therefore, the NAS report evaded the implications of doubling by mid-21st century (and more likely sooner) a population the earlier panel found already excessive. It ignored two decades of national surveys showing an American consensus on the need to stop population growth — e.g. a 1992 Roper poll found that only 27 percent nationally and 11 percent in California, home to half the new immigrants, believed their state could handle an increase in population. It was oblivious to the assessment by some leading ecologists that the United States' long-term sustainable population is 150 million, a total we have exceeded ever since 1950.

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Instead, the panel endorsed the perpetual motion model of population. Rather than hailing the “Baby Bust” as a welcome corrective to the previous baby boom, it condemned the resultant temporary shift upwards in the age distribution of our population. Thus it recommended continuing the pace of immigration that has already nullified the benefits of the low fertility of the boomers themselves.

Most culpably, the panel's restrictive definition of immigration's “costs” excludes dozens of

categories. It excludes all environmental costs considered by the 1972 Commission, including the pressure upon our exiguous remaining wetlands, our threatened loss of flora and fauna from sprawl fueled by population growth, our drained aquifers. It excludes “congestion costs”: swollen commute times; elevated coliform counts at popular beaches; access, parking and litter problems at recreational areas; housing market tightness and inflation due to sheer population increase. It excludes the costs of our projected loss of food self-sufficiency by 2040 in a world which had relied on our surpluses.

The panel even denies that immigration policy is population policy — despite the fact that immigrants after 1970 and their descendants account for three-quarters of current American population growth and *all* of our projected population growth in the 21st century.

What Congress as well as the public needs to know is that there is a battle going on in the population/ environment/ immigration arena. Political correctness now deems “selfish” the anti-growth view. Enthusiastic cornucopians dominate

both liberal and conservative think tanks as well as the traditional academic journals. They share a love of narrow disciplines, computer models, neoclassical economics’ assumptions of infinite resource substitutability and waste absorption capacity, and an accounting method that accords zero present value to any resource more than seven years out.

But there is still a small (and growing) number of scholars, including myself, who stubbornly cling to an interdisciplinary view of the world. Though quantitatively trained, we do not elevate dollar transactions above nature’s resource accounting nor the normative values of society. We publish in low-profile journals: *Population and Environment*, the *Journal of Ecological Economics*, and *BioScience*.

Had the Immigration Commission consulted us and some of the rank-and-file citizens fleeing cities swelling toward 30 million population, it would have heard a story very different from the one delivered by the National Academy last May. But ours was not the conclusion it wanted to hear. **TSC**

The Malthus Bicentennial

Landmark essay continues to stir debate

by John F. Rohe

Next year marks the bicentennial anniversary of one of the most controversial essays in Western thought. In 1798, the Industrial Revolution was dawning. Prospects of more people producing more merchandise led to a prevalent sense of optimism. In this setting, Thomas Robert Malthus predicted human populations could not grow perpetually on a finite planet. “Misery and vice” would, according to Malthus, eventually bring the number of people into balance with available resources. Amid the enthusiasm for more people, Malthus saw distress as inevitable. The essay could forever change our view of nature and of ourselves, yet there would have been little reason to expect an enduringly clairvoyant forecast from 1798.

Mobility was still on horseback or by foot. Medical cures often entailed greater risks than the underlying disease. In this pre-scientific era,

Malthus cracked the door to one of nature’s best kept and most formidable secrets. He observed excess reproduction among all flora and fauna in the biological kingdom. Some thrive; many perish. We now recognize excess production as a universal law of nature, but in 1798, this law had to be pried from nature’s firm clutch. Malthus extended these laws of nature to human populations. Accordingly, he anticipated the affinity for growth would lead to our demise. He was labeled a heretic and became the inspiration for Dickens’ “grasping, squeezing,

covetous old sinner," Ebenezer Scrooge.

Unbounded optimism now accompanies stock market surges. Economic growth abounds, surplus food swells in our breakfast nook and more comforts of life are enjoyed by ever more people. We are feeling good about ourselves. If everything

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is right, Malthus must have been wrong. Right?

Maybe these 200-year-old ideas are obsolete. And maybe they explain whatever ails you today. Name it. Road rage. Urban sprawl. Loss of farmland and open space. National parks loved to death. Congestion. Violence. Incivility. Biodiversity losses. Endangered species. Pollution. Ozone depletion. Greenhouse effect. Carnage on the highways. Hunger. Malnutrition. Food shortages. Unbounded immigration. Landfill expansions. Radioactive waste disposal. Pick your cause and you will find Malthus had a finger on the pulse of your discontent. Malthusian predictions are quietly unfolding amid blind economic optimism.

Confidence in perpetual growth has become the unexamined conviction of the 20th century. It governs our business affairs and every economic report. Were Malthus our conscience today, we would be reminded that economic optimism only temporarily liberates us from the rigors of biological reality.

The planet now experiences a daily net population gain of 250,000 people (total births minus deaths), and over one billion of us go to bed hungry every night. Several hundred thousand slip

beyond the brink of malnutrition every year while per capita food production continues to dwindle day by day.

Our economic experience resembles the optimism prevalent at the dawn of the Industrial Revolution. Malthus found it necessary to publish his essay anonymously. Did he spoil the party for some? Or did he hope to keep it going for others? Was he truly a Scrooge-like figure? Or might he have been the most misunderstood humanitarian of all time?

The lofty perch we seemingly occupy at the top of the food chain is a mere illusion. We remain perilously embedded in the ecosystem. Forty percent of Americans breathe air unfit for human consumption by federal standards. Ground waters are contaminated, endangered species are dislodged, and natural habitats are eclipsed by our cultural priorities. The feverish affinity for growth compels dispiriting urban sprawl and the construction of places not worthy of our affection. Yet we mindlessly maintain faith in growth while clinging to the frontier's romantic mystique. Is there truly no limit whatever to the earth's horizons and natural resources?

The Malthusian message about limits becomes particularly poignant when optimism clouds our sense of reality, as it did in 1798. And as it does now. We remain indifferent to limits at our peril. Implicit in our present optimism is an abiding faith that laws of nature do not apply to the human experiment. We were not exempt from the laws of nature unveiled by Thomas Robert Malthus in 1798. And we are not exempt now. **TSC**

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