

The new book by Malcolm W. Browne, Muddy Boots and Red Socks (New York: Times Books, a division of Random House, Inc. © 1993 by Malcolm W. Browne, 366 pages, \$23.00) is the memoir of a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, a correspondent for The New York Times. With permission we reprint chapter 18.

Beware the Third World

By Malcolm W. Browne

I have seen the future and it doesn't work. It's the Third World, and it's coming our way, as inexorably as the Africanized killer bees from Brazil.

When I lived in South Asia I discovered that a Bengali or Indian or Sri Lankan could fetch more money chopped into pieces and sold as laboratory specimens than he or she could as a live person. The reason for this horrible reality is that medical specimens are always in demand, while there is always a surplus of people in places like the Indian subcontinent.

In just a few months in 1971, war and monsoon floods combined to kill about one million people in East Pakistan, and the Bengali landscape in 1971 looked like a medieval allegory of the Apocalypse. But though death seemed to reign supreme, birth swiftly overtook it. United Nations demographers I knew, whose detailed census produced the first really reliable estimate of population growth in Bengal, computed that another one million people were being created every eighty-four days. Put another way; in less than three months, Bangla Desh replaced all the million human beings whose corpses choked its rivers, floodplains, villages and wells. And since then, the time needed to grow a million Bengalis has been cut in half.

The brutal fact is that most of the people of Bangladesh — indeed, most of the people living in the Third World — are unneeded and unwanted by the rest of the human race, and living in lands that simply cannot sustain them. Chronic optimists cluck and say, well, all we need do is teach the benighted people of South Asia, Africa and Latin America to produce more and to limit their consumption.

Produce what? And limit what consumption? Hordes are starving already. And are we to tell the Indians and Bengalis and Chinese and Somalis and Andean peoples that they must curb their appetites for refrigerators, cars and television. Have we the right?

To me, Bengal is the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come, for it shows what can happen anywhere in the creeping Third World.

Bengal once supplied the world's jute market, but today's producers of grain ship their products in bags made mostly of synthetic fibers, and the market for Bengali jute has largely dried up. The country sells its only other major crop, Basmati rice, to China. This brings in some badly needed foreign exchange, but in

return, Bengal often imports inferior Chinese rice to feed its own people. Bangla Desh and China, in effect trade rice for rice.

With neither any industry worthy of the name nor a profitable agricultural base, Bangladesh has few jobs, and the poverty of its people is beyond belief. The average person is a liability to his or her community, not an asset. The only consolation is that most people die young.

But there has long been a brisk market for human skeletons, skulls, brains, livers and other odds and ends. Human parts are used in the West by medical schools, laboratories and pharmaceutical manufacturers for a variety of purposes, and the cadaver trade has been largely supplied by India, Sri Lanka and Bengal. (These countries have all outlawed the export of human remains and reduced the flow — unwisely, in my opinion — but a living can still be made from the human flesh market.)

It's hardly surprising, then, that a lot of poor people have come to value the contents of their nation's graves and rivers more than their own living kin. The price of a human skull in America can feed a Bengali family for a year!

When I speak of the Third World, I mean something more than a range of latitudes or distinctive colors on a map, something that goes beyond the numbers describing gross national product, literacy, infant mortality and the other indices of good fortune. I mean a collective state of mind.

The label "Third World" is a euphemism for a domain embracing the urine-drenched sidewalks of New York City and Los Angeles slums, as well as the villages of the Nile Delta, the festering hamlets of Africa, Latin America and Asia, and all the other places where cruelty, intolerance and superstition rule. The Third World is not a "developing" culture. It is a putrefying state of existence perpetually in the grip of a plague deadlier than anthrax: the burgeoning human race.

For the last dozen years I have devoted most of my reporting to science, including the sciences applied to environmental problems. I have become convinced that until population growth can be controlled, all other environmental problems will remain insoluble.

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We hear and read quite a lot about these problems — acid rain, depletion of the ozone layer, "greenhouse" planetary warming, the fouling of the seas and the proliferation of waste of all kinds.

Meanwhile, biologists tell us that as we chop away at the wilderness we are killing thousands of species a year simply depriving them of habitat, and that the greatest mass extinction in the planet's history is now taking place, not because of the impact of an asteroid or the drying up of inland seas, but because of unchecked human reproduction. We are destroying the global gene pool, a resource that might not only have made our planet more interesting but which has given us some potent defenses against disease and starvation.

Some world leaders have begun to worry particularly about the torrent of carbon dioxide we pour into the atmosphere, which may end up warming the whole earth, with devastating effects on agriculture and life.

But rarely do the politicians mention that all human beings exhale carbon dioxide from their own lungs, not just from their chimneys and the tail pipes of their car. We each foul the global nest merely by breathing.

Moreover, every human being consumes energy, resources and food. We all also produce vast amounts of waste, and something physicists call entropy, an entity that reflects the disorder of systems. Scientists who study environmental problems are in wide agreement that until we do something about unchecked human reproduction, piecemeal attacks on chloro-fluorocarbons and carbon dioxide and desertification and all the other man-made scourges will always be inadequate. Our biggest problem is people.

That simple and seemingly obvious fact is indigestible. News directors don't like it much more than does the Vatican, or the mullahs of Saudi Arabia, or any who believe that more is better when it comes to population.

The Third World, like AIDS and killer-bee swarms, gropes outward with persistent tendrils, like the tender roots of plants that pierce even concrete sewer pipes. The branch of medicine called epidemiology has turned up evidence that the Third World has something in common with bacterial cultures and cancerous tumors.

In a bacterial culture, organisms propagate exponentially and without limit, as long as they have food and room to dump their wastes. Given the

chance, they will consume every last molecule of the nutrient medium in which they live. But when the nutrients are exhausted and waste products increase without limit, a population crash in the colony inevitably occurs, as every freshman bacteriology student knows.

Less well known is the fact the expanding cities at the close of the twentieth century have come to resemble bacterial colonies that are on the verge of depleting their nutrient media to extinction.

Scientists have noticed similarities, for instance, between the changing shape of Los Angeles as seen by space satellite, and the changes visible in petri-dish cultures inoculated with *E. coli* bacteria, organisms that live in animal guts. Both the bacterial and human colonies expand in intricate fractal patterns, gradually filling the spaces surrounding them. Judging from satellite pictures, human beings in Los Angeles exhibit no more ability to control their own collective growth than do the *E. coli* germs.

Human reproduction also has some disturbing similarities to cancer. In an analysis he published in 1990 in the journal *Population and Environment*, Warren M. Hern, an anthropologist at the University of Colorado, noted some striking clinical parallels between a typical urban community and a malignant neoplasm, a cancerous tumor. They share rapid, uncontrolled growth, they invade and destroy adjacent tissues, and cells (or people) lost their differentiation, the concerted specialties and skills needed to sustain a society or a multicelled animal.

In his monograph, Dr. Hern included photographs taken from space satellites showing the growth of Baltimore and the colonization of the Amazon basin, side by side with photomicrographs of cancers of the lung and brain. They were hard to tell apart.

"The human species," Dr. Hern wrote, "is a rapacious, predatory, omnivorous [devouring its entire environment] species" that exhibits all the pathological features of cancerous tissue. He grimly concluded that the human "cancer" will most likely destroy its planetary host before dying out itself.

Many would disagree with that assessment, but for what it's worth, my own experience as a journalist bears it out.

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And as we contemplate the social, political and economic needs of, say, Somalia, it may be well to

remember that kindly instincts may do more harm than good when the real ogre is overpopulation.

In 1990 *The Lancet*, Britain's leading medical journal, included a paper and an accompanying editorial that shocked some readers by saying what public health experts have long acknowledged: there are things worse than merciful death.

The author of the *Lancet* paper, Dr. Maurice King of the department of public health medicine at the University of Leeds, England, has devoted his career to saving lives, and he is no callous crank. But he has observed how excess population inflicts famine and other curses on many parts of the Third World — and how the population plague is engulfing more countries every year. Dr. King believes that for people caught in the demographic trap, there are only four possibilities.

They can stay where they are and die of starvation and disease, they can flee their homelands to seek salvation in more prosperous countries; they can kill themselves off by war or genocide; or, finally, they can live on foreign aid, "first as emergency relief and then, perhaps, indefinitely."

In countries racked by cholera and dysentery, many of the infants who in the past would have been doomed to die of dehydration can now be saved by oral rehydration, Dr. King noted. But when a nation afflicted by cholera is also dying of hunger, a thoughtful public health official must make Solomonic decisions. "Such ... measures as oral rehydration should not be introduced on a public health scale," Dr. King wrote, "since they increase the man-years of human misery, ultimately from starvation."

In other words, millions of the world's people today would be better off dead, in Dr. King's opinion. Another British scientist, A.V. Hill, asked the following question in an address before the British Association for the Advancement of Science: "If ethical principles deny our right to do evil in order that good may come, are we justified in doing good when the foreseeable consequence is evil?"

The conservative editors of *The Lancet* endorsed Dr. King's shocking conclusions.

"Global population grows by a remarkable 1 million more births than deaths every four days," the journal said. "If a bomb as destructive as the one that destroyed Hiroshima had been dropped every day since August 6, 1945, it would not have stabilized human numbers. ..."

"Through an unhappy combination of indecision, political cowardice, scientific illiteracy and bureaucratic myopia, will human numbers simply drift toward 15 billion?" *The Lancet* asked.

Among the answers proposed for the population bomb are an intensive campaign to educate and emancipate Third World women; a crash program to reduce the economic gulf between the rich and poor nations; and bounty to any man or woman willing to undergo sterilization.

But many scientists believe such measures will

inevitably be too little and too late. One ingenious alternative that some experts are pondering would exploit a harmless virus to spread an epidemic of human sterility for a few years ... long enough, perhaps, for the planet to catch its breath.

The scheme would depend on the meshing of two biological techniques, both of which are under investigation. This first is the development of an antifertility vaccine that would immunize a man or woman against conception for a few years, just as people are protected by vaccines against tetanus, smallpox and many other diseases.

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The other prong of the new therapy would be the development of a bacterial or viral carrier that would make the antifertility factor infectious — capable, that is, of spreading throughout the human race on its own. Infection of a few individuals with the sterility bug might produce an epidemic that might spread widely enough to reduce the global birthrate for a while, until human beings became immune and resumed breeding.

One of the pioneers in this little-known but potentially important field of research is Dr. Cecil Hugh Tyndale-Biscoe of the Australian government's Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organization. He and other scientists are currently looking into the feasibility of springing something like this on Australia's overabundant rabbits. But the scientists involved are very much aware that the technique might work for humans as well, although, as Dr. Tyndale-Biscoe put it, "I can't imagine the government of Australia or any other nation authorizing such an approach to human population control."

I suppose journalists should be grateful to the Third World for supplying us with much of the dramatic misery we are able to pass on to our readers and viewers. But since most sensible people would want to avoid personal contact with the Third World, here are some of the warning symptoms I have observed that can tell us when the Third World is nigh:

- *People refuse to stand in line for anything — buses, bread, railroad tickets, economic recovery, lifeboats — anything. Altruism toward strangers disappears, and devil-take-the-hindmost public behavior eclipses common decency.*

- *The clan take precedence over collective society in all matters, even while strolling the sidewalks. Friends or relatives fan out as they walk along, obstructing the way to strangers.*
- *Unenforced laws and edicts proliferate as rapidly as worthless money.*
- *Police take to carrying automatic weapons.*
- *Locally made products break, and the busiest and most prosperous artisans are the handymen and fixers.*
- *Range wars, wars for water rights and wars for simple living space become endemic.*
- *A pervasive religious hierarchy — priests, mullah or witch doctors — dominates society and suppresses dissent.*

One reason the Third World illness is so hard to treat is that people persist in kidding themselves with euphemisms like "Third World" and "developing." Argentina, for instance, is classified today as a "developing" country despite its retrograde progress over the past half century. In the 1930s, economists ranked Argentina as "developed," because of the riches it earned from its pampas, the vast grasslands that once produced enough cattle to feed a large part of the world. But because of the hemorrhaging of Argentine capital into foreign investments — and because of the country's backward social and political practices — Argentina has declined, and bankers now call it a "developing" country.

Why do otherwise reasonable people tolerate such distortions of language?

Now we have another misnomer called the "North-South Dialogue," a shouting match between the underprivileged nations of the Southern Hemisphere (a.k.a. "The Group of 77") and the alleged economic exploiters of the Northern Hemisphere, especially the United States. The North-South Dialogue has no more chance of a friendly resolution than the Hundred Years War, but it does, at least, provide work for diplomats and journalists.

Elusive though a good definition of the Third World may be, I think it boils down to an overall lack of commonweal, a collective unwillingness to work for anything larger than a family or clan.

***"...it's every man for himself,
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the exit door."***

Like Pleistocene society, the Third World is violent, It offers constant work for people like my

friend Clyde Collins Snow, a forensic anthropologist and defender of human rights, who travels far and wide searching for bones of the victims of Third World pogroms. Snow and his colleagues even sometimes manage to finger the state-sanctioned murderers themselves, for all the good it does them

Experts like Dr. Snow have some interesting insights into human behavior. For many years Snow was employed by the Federal Aviation Agency as an expert in the identification of bodies from airplane crashes. He examined the pitiful bones of thousands of crash victims, and from them, he came to an appalling conclusion: in virtually all airliner crashes that leave any survivors, the passengers who pull through tend to be sturdy, active men — frequent-flyer business travelers, for the most part. Women and children don't survive crashes very often. The clear evidence, which the FAA tried at one time to suppress, is that in a crash, it's every man for himself, even if this means putting a heel in some child's face to get through the exit door.

That, to my mind, is the essence of the Third World. ■