

Malthusian Truths About Today's World

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WARRENTON, Va. -- Rare is the man whose name becomes an adjective for centuries to come. Thomas Robert Malthus was such a man.

"Malthusian" has come down to us from the 18th century as describing the most terrifying possibilities that man, accustomed then to an abundant and open Earth, could imagine. Malthusianism meant that population growth, if unrestrained, would eventually destroy man's subsistence here on Earth. Population was destiny.

In recent years, despite the early fascination with his "An Essay on the Principle of Population," Malthus has lost ground among the skeptical classes. His predictions have not come true, deriders say. Despite mankind's well-documented carelessness in regulating its procreation, widespread poverty has NOT yet scourged the Earth or doomed us to extinction.

Yet, now, because of developments in the last 40 years, we must come up with a strong "Yes, but..." for recent conflicts in the world tell us that Malthus' views are indeed all too alive and well. Malthus' famous essay was printed exactly 200 years ago this year, in 1798, and he died in England in 1834, but as the great poet Pablo Neruda once put it, "Everything that is buried is not dead."

At one of a score of recent conferences being held on this Malthus anniversary, writer Robert D. Kaplan, the guru on disintegration in the world, discussed the conflicts he had sought out and seen firsthand for many years. He has come up with a new and still more terrifying play on the Malthusian fear, one that involves conflict rather than food.

"Malthus may have been wrong on specifics, but in general principle he was right," Kaplan told a small group brought together by the Biocentric Institute at Airlie House here. "All the countries with violent upheavals in the 1980s and '90s were the ones that showed the highest growth rate in the '60s! Every country where bloody internecine civil wars have occurred in recent years had a huge population preceding the conflict."

Could he be right? I went to U.N. population data. Rwanda, from 2.1 million in 1950 to 8 million today; Haiti, from 3.3 million then to 7.5 million today; Algeria, from 8.8 million to 30.2 million; Afghanistan, 9 million to 24.8 million; Zaire or Congo, 12.2 to 49 million; Nicaragua, 1.1 million to 4.8 million; Tajikistan, 1.5 million to 6.1 million; El Salvador, 2 million to 5.8 million; Ethiopia, 18.4 million to 58.4 million today. I was flabbergasted.

"You must understand," Kaplan went on, "that in these conflicts the underlying causes come first and the beginning comes last. Take the civil war in Algeria. It all started with the '92 elections (when the military rescinded them because the Islamic fundamentalists were winning.) But actually that 'beginning' was the end of a long culmination of events in the '60s when Algeria began to show one of the highest population growth rates in the world. That brought hordes of children into the cities where infrastructures were collapsing, and soon unemployed young men were roaming around with nothing to do. "1992 was merely the spark."

In short, to cite two other examples, it is no accident that before the Rwandan genocide of 1995-96, Rwandan women were giving birth an average of eight times. It is also no accident that, in Haiti during these last years of implosion and civil war, Haitian women were giving birth an average of six times. These high population rates do not actually cause the slaughters, of course, but they exacerbate all the other problems and remove the possibilities of easier or quicker solutions. They also throw people too closely together and swiftly involve them in a fight for food and water and make genocide an acceptable alternative.

In my own 34 years in the foreign field, I have seen how the sheer crowdedness of increasingly dingy and untenable urban centers (33 million in the valley of Mexico City alone now, and it's getting harder and harder even to breathe, much less move) causes frustration and then conflict on every possible level. I find myself writing more and more about the environmental scarcity that is upon us everywhere -- the sobering disappearance of water in China, for instance.

And meanwhile, we continue to have to live on this Earth, which had 1.6 billion people at the beginning of the 20th century and will have 6 billion by the dawn of the 21st.

Being an optimistic sort, I also write about the countries that are making it because they are smart and disciplined, and because they care about the quality and evolution of life. One of these is little Tunisia on the north coast of Africa, which in those same '60s, when all these other countries were confounding their fates with overpopulation, introduced birth control. That is one major reason given by Tunisians for a thriving populace, which is bettering itself today.

Kaplan has the last word in trying to answer the critics of Malthus. "A man can only write at the time in which he is living, and Malthus was very daring for his time," he said. "In an indirect, subtle sense, Malthus was right."