

“Overpopulation” - Too Many People? Or Too Many Selfish People?

I regularly listen to speakers for whose opinions I have a lot of respect, but whose warnings about ‘overpopulation’ strike me as unworthy of them. Are they unknowingly echoing the existential angst inherent in the ‘Survival of the Fittest’ world-view?

The idea of ‘overpopulation’ has a striking simplicity, and is all too often allowed to replace a thoughtful analysis of how and why the planet’s biosphere is being destroyed. I am reminded how some countries make a great fuss about recycling household waste, ignoring the fact that manufacturing a kilo of consumer goods requires the creation of several dozen kilos of waste in the industrial supply chain, albeit somewhere else in the world. The whole picture is lost by simplifying it for popular consumption.

Talk of ‘too many people’ emphasises people’s numbers, as if numbers alone were the problem. Yes, people have to eat and drink, but most of what Westerners take for granted is not actually needed. They don’t need HDTV, air-conditioned mansions, disposable plastic anything or even toilet paper, cutlery or chairs, to say nothing of foreign wars, 24 hour strip malls or S.U.V.s and freeways to transport them to office jobs they hate. When not pumped full of poison and fed lies, people have a great capacity to care for their surroundings, to think intelligently and work productively. An end to the 20th century’s free energy binge will mean a return to a more natural life in some senses, but as Cuba has shown, it doesn’t necessarily mean that life must be nastier, more brutish or shorter.

Although harder to predict, and not subject to quantitative analysis, the issue of how people live would be of more importance than how many. Here in Bangladesh, 150 million people live at a density of about 1000 people/km². Admittedly Bangladesh is about the most fertile place in the world, but that’s half the population of the USA in an area the size of Iowa. Without the high technology. There are two flyovers in the whole country, both built in the last decade. Their ecological footprint is around a tenth of “highly developed” countries, meaning Bangladeshis don’t have the material “standard of living” of those in US. Most don’t have cars, for example; they walk, use cycle rickshaws or buses. They eat fresh food instead of using refrigerators. Even where they have television, people remain very close to one another and the most popular recreation is probably still ‘*golpo-tolpo*’, that is, talking.

I originally came here to try to help this poor country, but the more I got involved, the more I discovered that their suffering was as illusory as the bliss of the American Dream of consumerism. *By and large, people in Bangladesh seem happier than those in UK.* I see a lot more smiles and hear a lot more singing here than in ‘developed’ countries. This seems to be one point which is well understood by the Transition Towns movement:- although involving less consumption of goods, a post peak oil, energy descent life may be healthier and more fulfilling than the mass produced monocultural sprawl of the 20th century’s cheap oil bonanza.

I am very interested in predictions of the natural world, but not in quantitative predictions on a human level, whether we’re talking about levels of population, terrorism, early retirement, cocaine use, foreclosures or whatever. Statistical forecasts project existing trends assuming that errors remain ‘normal’, i.e. that all the significant factors have been modelled. I am therefore not surprised that I have yet to find a single prediction which has attempted to factor in the change ahead of us, one on which more and more commentators from different backgrounds are agreeing is inevitable. Is it even possible to attempt to understand it through the quantitative, reductionistic methods so beloved of our age? Could anyone from close observation of heating water, observing a steady linear increase in temperature over time, possibly predict that at 100°C, its temperature would suddenly cease to rise, but that instead the water would start to vanish? Sure, a few bubbles could inform the observant experimenter that some kind of change was afoot, but without prior experience of the boiling process I don’t see how anyone could anticipate the rules of the game changing so suddenly. I see plenty of social bubbles around us to inform us that such a radical phase change is indeed underway.

Crises so manifold and powerful are ongoing that soon even the richest and most deluded will no longer be able to think they can buy their way out. Meticulously cultured illusions of superiority will vanish the moment that the financially rich return empty handed from the market. Without the poor to serve them, they are not rich at all. They will finally realise we are all in the same boat.

Whilst boiling water suits climate change, another water analogy better suits my predictions for human society. Highly pure water can remain liquid down to about 40 degrees below zero. This process of *supercooling* is possible because ice crystals need impurities on which to form. Once seeds are provided, an amorphous mass of atoms can suddenly freeze instantaneously. I use this analogy because of the atomised state in which mechanised consumer monoculture and the debt money system have trapped so many people. Lacking basic farming skills and deprived of access to land, people are forced to compete for scarce money in a struggle to survive.

Bereft of significant relationships with the world around them, many Westerners feel devoid of uniqueness, intimacy and meaning as never before. When I travel to Europe from Bangladesh, I have to acclimatise not only to the weather but the social climate – people’s general coldness, their internalised fear and lack of readiness to bond with strangers. Levels of depression support my impression that people are less and less content to live like this, even as ecological predictions confirm that something has got to give. What is preventing new structures from forming is lack of seeds, that is, lack of perceived alternatives on which to build. I see the rapid militarization and roll-out of control technologies as a last desperate bid by the centralised power mongers to suppress creation of such seeds, which by offering a base on which new social structures could form, would change the nature of society fundamentally. Attacks such those of September 11th or September 1999 show not only the ruthlessness and moral bankruptcy of centralised power, but also the fact that they are desperate and can no longer suppress information, since as the truth of these false flag events emerges, it fuels the change already underway. People are undergoing a kind of ‘arms race of emergency’, in which they must be bombarded with more urgent threats merely to keep them too afraid to grasp the real nature of the ecological dangers ahead.

If you’ve read this far, you probably already know how much food is thrown away, how many people toil away at jobs that have no real meaning outside the distorted lens of the money system, how much energy and natural resources are consumed by warfare and pointless economic competition. In short, you’re aware of the incredible wastefulness of the current socio-economic systems. From this perspective, the doctrine of “overpopulation” makes sense only if we assume that society is unlikely to change significantly. This assumption I think is untenable on any level, so it is one that the promulgators of “overpopulation” would do well to consider.