

# Was Malthus Right?

## An Exchange on Deep Ecology and Population

George Bradford (David Watson)

Bill McCormick

William R. Catton Jr.

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### Dear Mr. Bradford:

Thank you for bringing to my attention your Fifth Estate essay, "How Deep Is Deep Ecology? A Challenge to Radical Environmentalism" [FE #327, Fall, 1987]. I appreciate its extensive treatment of my book, *Overshoot*. Here are some thoughts stimulated by having read the essay twice.

I have no objection to being characterized in your essay as "a leading modernizer of Malthus" for I believe that our future would be much less endangered were Malthus more widely and more accurately understood. He never claimed human populations always and everywhere increase exponentially ("geometrically") nor did he say nothing could prevent a population from outstripping increases in its food supply.

What I have characterized as the "culture of exuberance" that arose from European expansion into the New World has blinded most people to the profound importance of two qualifying words in Malthus's assertion that population, when unchecked, tends to expand exponentially. The result of that oversight has been a failure to see his 1798 essay not as prediction of future demographic trends but, with its subsequent expanded editions, as a lifelong exploration of the nature of the checks that Malthus explicitly said do operate.

Modern Malthusians would indeed err if they regarded his analysis of these checks as the final word on the subject. He classified six checks—vice, misery, moral restraint, famine, disease, and war—into two categories ("preventive" and "positive") according to whether they operate by reducing the human birth rate or by increasing the human death rate. His focus was thus "anthropocentric." In contrast, modern ecologists see three categories of population-limiting relationships between a given species and the other components of its ecosystem. A species population may be predator limited, self limited, or resource limited.

The six checks discerned by Malthus can be assigned to these three relational classes as follows: famine and misery occur when a population is resource limited; vice and moral restraint (which denote within-species relationships) are forms of self limitation; and war and pestilence are instances of predator limitation (the predators being conspecifics in the case of war, or microbes in the case of pestilence). The point is that even a human population does not increase or decrease "in a vacuum" but by virtue of its interactions with the rest of the ecosystem supporting it.

I had thought my book, *Overshoot*, would help clarify the sound aspects of Malthus so contemporary writers need not persist in conventional misperceptions, uncritically supposing world history since his time has emphatically refuted him. I wish your essay had quoted the following from my book:

Sustained yields represent reproduction in excess of replacement by the resource species; the excess is then 'harvested' by an exploiting species—[e.g.] *Homo sapiens*. If Malthus were so wrong, there would have been no

sustained yields of anything. In every bite of our daily bread there is a reminder of the wheat plant's ability to produce more seeds than required for its own replacement.

One of the great ironies of history has been the notion that our species was somehow exempt from a principle that manifestly applies to all other species. Malthus stated the principle of reproduction in excess of carrying capacity for man in particular. Darwin later generalized it to cover all species, and went on to discern its evolutionary implications. In the years since Darwin, most non-biologists seem to have smugly reversed Malthus by 'slightly amending' Darwin's generalized vision—accepting its application to all species except one, ourselves...

I was disturbed by your allusion to Overshoot as having "become a bible of sorts to the deep ecologists" and I was unrelieved by your qualifier "even those, one would surmise, who haven't read it." Like the believer in democracy who must call himself a "small-d democrat" to make clear that he means something other than political party identity, I would consider myself a "deep ecologist" only in a deeper sense than is conveyed when that phrase is used to denote disciples of Arne Naess, etc. I don't belong to any cult, and I had a lengthy conversation with Bill Devall once cautioning him about the pitfalls of turning deep ecology into a cult.

Seeing my book labeled as a "bible" prompted me to consult a dictionary where I found the third and fourth definitions of "bible" were: "3. any collection or book of writings sacred to a religion...4. any book regarded as authoritative or official." Overshoot should never be viewed as "sacred" even by readers who may share my insights. It cannot be said to be "official." It was meant to be eye-opening, and insofar as it strove to be factually accurate perhaps I should appreciate the implication that it was "authoritative." But I think the bible metaphor should just be put aside. It conjured a vision of someone resting one hand on Overshoot while raising his other hand to take an oath of some sort. Books are to be respected as communication devices, not mystically revered as inhibitors of perjury, treason, etc.

What, then, was I trying to communicate when I wrote it. I said in it that I was writing about the way mankind is today locked into stealing ravenously from the future. I would hope readers would see the book as a diagnosis of the industrial malady, a condition I called "diachronic competition," which I said was a relationship whereby the living generation purchases life's gratifications at the expense of posterity by overusing a world in which they will thus be deprived of opportunities to attain similar gratifications. Because other diagnoses of our contemporary predicament have missed this point, I said the book was meant to show that commonly proposed "solutions" for problems confronting mankind are actually going to aggravate those problems.

Overshoot was meant to overcome the human habit of mistaking techniques that evade carrying capacity limits for techniques that raise them, so I said it was, in a sense, a book about how to read the news perceptively in revolutionary times. I meant "revolutionary" in a more-than-political sense—fundamental change, intended or not, welcome or unwelcome. Perceptive reading of events depends on familiarity with an appropriate vocabulary of concepts, and I tried to spotlight one concept in particular—carrying capacity.

It has become essential, I said, to recognize that all creatures, human or otherwise, impose a load upon their environment's ability to supply what they need and to absorb and transform what they excrete or discard. An environment's capacity for a given kind of creature living a given way of life is the maximum persistently feasible load.

Loads in excess of carrying capacity damage an environment's ability to support that kind of life (a point unseen by Malthus). Insofar as industrialism has produced overload, nature is going to require reduction of human dominance over the global ecosystem, and I tried in the book to indicate humanity's urgent need to remain human in the face of dehumanizing pressures that arise in this ecological circumstance.

I am currently working on another book exploring the impacts of industrial division of labor in generating such pressures. In Overshoot I wanted to illuminate the nature and causes of the human predicament so as to head off a tendency we all have to attribute our frustrations to enemies or villains. Vilification may be emotionally gratifying, but I believe it seldom solves problems.

I was not trying, as you suggest, to set forth any full-blown "ecological theory of history." Rather, my more limited aim was to underscore the ecological factor in history, a factor too easily neglected because of industrial hubris. The perspective or paradigm I now call "human exemptionism" is obsolete; we cannot afford to continue adhering to it. For a closer approximation to an ecological theory of history, I recommend *Mankind and Mother Earth*:

*A Narrative History of the World* by the eminent historian Arnold Toynbee. Although I was unaware of it when I wrote *Overshoot* I would now strongly urge your readers to study at least its first five and last three chapters.

With regard to your essay's goal of highlighting the linkage between ecological perils and what you call "the global corporate capitalist system" I would only say I think inclusion of the word "capitalist" tends to foster a version of the "reductionism" you dread. Of course there are many attributes of capitalism I, too, deplore, but the predicament of mankind you and I both seem most concerned about cannot be reduced to a manifestation of peculiarly capitalist economic patterns. It is due to industrialism, capitalist or non-capitalist.

On this point I wonder if you haven't inadvertently committed a "racketizing" of the fundamental issue not unlike that diminution of it that you regret in *Earth First!* For a clear view of the most revealing way to depart productively from American academic orthodoxy by taking an ecological-evolutionary approach to such matters, see the fifth edition of Gerhard and Jean Lenski's textbook, *Human Societies: An Introduction to Macro-sociology*.

William R. Catton, Jr.

Graham, WA

P.S. Because I realize in retrospect that my message might have been clearer in *Overshoot* had I referred to "load" in some contexts where I spoke more conventionally of "population," I am enclosing a reprint of a recent paper, "The World's Most Polymorphic Species," *Bio-Science*, June 1987, in which I discussed the multidimensionality of the human load.

## Dear Fifth Estate:

After moving from inner city Atlanta to a wilderness area of Washington state earlier this fall, I just received your fall issue on "How Deep is Deep Ecology?" You requested in your pamphlet that responses be brief so I will respond only to your comments relating to my previous articles in *EF!* and *Kick It Over* focusing on an integrated approach to population and justice. I still cannot understand for the life of me why Francis Moore Lappe and others focus almost entirely on this matter of "proving" that the issue of overpopulation has nothing to do with the issue of hunger. So what if it does or doesn't, there are still plenty of reasons overpopulation is a serious problem. My answer to all this could best be summarized by quoting a passage from anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss (also cited in my *EF!* article):

"We have only to look at the figures in the reports to be convinced of it—life will become—if it is not already in many places...unbearable only because of the sheer number of people. I don't think it is only a problem of human resources, of finding enough food to nourish I don't know how many billions of people. Even if this problem was solved—I doubt very much that it can, but even if it were solved, it would not modify in any way the fact that there is for (human) kind as for every living species an optimum density...What is taking place now...is that people are getting so close together...that each of them becomes a threat and a hindrance to (their) fellow beings." (Gender-exclusive language adjusted by author of this letter.)

You also cite the odious scenario often made by Food First types "the entire world's population could fit inside the United States with a density less than that of England," and I suppose live happily ever after with plenty of food and resources for all, right? My God, what on earth are people thinking of when they quote such pseudo-statistics approvingly? Once again, I feel like this has already been answered by someone else better, this time the reviled and hated arch-guru of the *Earth First!* tribe himself, Edward Abbey:

"Maybe the technologists are right; maybe they can create conditions that will support ten billion people on Planet Earth, or even more...It might be possible, for example, to farm the entire land surface and the oceans too. We could support far more humans that way. We could process sewage into bouillon cubes, eat algae, seaweed, plankton.

"All those things are theoretically possible. But...it seems like it would be a wretched world to live in... billions of humans packed into some sort of planetary food factory. Buckminster Fuller thought it could be done. But the question is, should it be done? Who would want to live in such an ugly world?"

Finally, I think your charge of "fascist tendencies" within the *Earth First!* movement has merit, and is one that we need to take seriously. However, those of us on the left know that the term "fascist" is a very easy political foot-

ball to toss around, and it smears all that it touches. Hitler also spoke of how much easier large masses of people were to manipulate than individuals, and during World War II the Nazis and other Axis powers used the concept of “Lebensraum”—that their land base was severely overpopulated—to justify their drive for expansion. (See Katherine and A. K. Organski’s “Population and World Power” for more on this.) There is also ample evidence that the practice of “continuous growth” was not known to primitive or native peoples, but started only as an outgrowth of the imperial European mindset, the virus of which has been transferred to its former colonies with disastrous effects.

It is clear to me that population pressure causes a veritable Pandora’s box of ecological, social and political problems, and that contrary to Lappe and Collins’ glowing portrayal of communist China in their book, *Food First’s* chronically overpopulated countries such as China (now well over a billion and rising) are severely subject to the forces of totalitarian takeover and controls, as well as the near complete loss of communal self-reliance and personal freedoms. And despite all the bad press Abbey, Foreman and others have gotten (and undoubtedly will continue to get), I still believe that they have done us a service by stressing these issues (not mentioned in your essay), which point to a fundamental flaw in Lappe and Collins’ happy democratic socialist society where the entire population of the world can fit inside the territory of the United States with plenty of room to spare, and the earth can easily support 10 billion, perhaps 50 or 100 billion human beings before it reaches the breaking point.

With as many people on the left—both anarchist and non-anarchist alike—now mouthing this absolute garbage (which will surely lead to some sort of fascist or totalitarian dictatorship if it is allowed to happen, and which, by the way, must make the Reagan thinktanks proud for a job well done), is it any wonder that people like Dave Foreman and the Earth First! movement are rising up as a counterforce, perhaps naive and mistaken in certain of their views, but by the very strength of their convictions a breath of fresh air to the piper march of the Food First Institute.

Bill McCormick  
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## **Response to Catton and McCormick**

To William Catton, let me say that he may need to read my essay again, since I dealt directly, and at great length, with the arguments that he insists on essentially repeating. I did not say that Malthus claimed the exponential increase of population always and everywhere, but that based on his view of nature as permanent and universal scarcity, he argued that population was always and everywhere pressing against available food supply. Malthus made his claim in answer to contemporary utopian writers who had speculated on a future in which human population might possibly overload the planet. Malthus’ argument was that the image they presented was not of the remote future, but the present, in which the majority of humankind was doomed to suffer famine, disease, war and the rest. He believed that if the food supply was increased, or the poor were to receive proper rations from society, their numbers would only increase due to their propensity to multiply beyond their means, and press against food supply once more. After being attacked by his contemporaries (like the poet Coleridge, who wrote in the margins of the “quarto” or pamphlet containing Malthus’ essay, “Are we now to have a Quarto to teach us that great misery and great vice arise from Poverty, and that there must be Poverty in its worst shape wherever there are more Mouths than Loaves and more Heads than Brains!”), he tempered his thesis by emphasizing the capacity to increase more rapidly than food production in the absence of population checks (paralleled interestingly by Catton’s qualifier in *Overshoot* of a “potential” for population to overshoot carrying capacity). As Dennis Wrong argues in *Population and Society*, this capacity is undeniable, but “it leaves entirely open the degree to which at a given time the capacity is actually being realized...for whenever a case is found in which the means of subsistence are abundant and population growth falls short of Malthus’ maximum rate, by definition the checks are at work preventing a more rapid increase.” I have discussed this at greater length in my original essay and refer readers to it. But it is necessary to stress that Malthus’ formulation referred to a “natural law” said to function under all conditions, and therefore argued to let the poor starve—what Malthusian acolytes today call “die-off” of the species to “let nature find its own balance.”

Catton, like other Malthusians, doesn't read Malthus in an historical mode, so he does nothing to answer the historical critique I wrote of Malthus and Malthusianism. I said that outside of its social context, Malthus' "principle" might have been mere speculation. But given its context, the ideological justification for brutal class rule is obvious, in Malthus and in his followers. Malthus wrote, "That the principal and most permanent cause of poverty has little or no direct relation to forms of government, or the unequal division of property; and that, as the rich do not in reality possess the power of finding employment and maintenance for the poor, the poor cannot, in the nature of things, possess the right to demand them; are important truths flowing from the principle of population..." As Marx commented in *Capital*, "The great sensation this pamphlet caused was due solely to party interest...[and] was greeted with jubilation by the English oligarchy..." Given the refusal from all deep ecologists, be they of the "big D" or "small d" variety, to read Malthus in his historical context, and the frenzied red-baiting and slander of their critics as "boring leftists" or "red-green" putschists or freakish, three-headed "anarchists-marxists-leftists" (Bill Devall's sparkling formulation), I take a risk in even citing Marx, despite his insight into Malthus' principle as political ideology (and apart from the problems in Marx, which I also noted in my essay). And, given their disturbing tendency to historical know-nothingism, who knows what other corpses the deep ecologists will resuscitate?

Catton has not addressed my central criticisms of his book, so I will briefly review them. Based on simplistic computations of present world energy and minerals consumption, Catton argued in his book, "There are already more human beings alive than the world's renewable resources can support," and furthermore, that the present levels of industrial destructiveness are "unavoidably created by our life processes." I think my essay more than adequately demolished his thesis, but he never responds to my objections to his numerical methodology for identifying carrying capacity (or "load," which is already explicit in his thesis, and which answers none of the objections). Nor does Catton respond to my discussion of the current hunger crisis or my critique of his historical analysis.

While he may deny having elaborated a theory of history, his description of the "ecological factor" claims to explain everything, from oil shortages to the rise of ancient empires to the post-First World War inflation crisis to the emergence of the political culture of the United States, crudely reducing complex social-historical developments taking place within human culture to terms borrowed from biology (where they are interpretatively problematic to begin with). Hence, his historical treatment of U.S. empire is appalling. The U.S. "tried honestly and generously to share the fruits of its frontier experience with people in societies overseas," he tells us, but "American imperialism was essentially fruitless" —where has this guy been? And his statistical casuistry ignores global corporate exploitation. Oil and mineral shortages supposedly demonstrate how the U.S. population "had already overshot" the country's carrying capacity. My response to this insane reasoning was that only a critique of the system that turns food into a commodity—a critique of the commodity system as a whole—will explain the destructive swath of this civilization. Catton simply refuses to engage in this discussion.

Most troubling of Catton's omissions is his failure to repudiate the statements of Foreman, Abbey, et al, or at least to distance himself in any way from them (other than to let us know of his warning to Bill Devall of the cult possibilities of deep ecology—he should now be realizing that this cult is fully in operation). Malthus' defense of misery and his call to "court the return of the plague" has found a sinister revival in Garrett Hardin's pseudo-theories of the "tragedy of the commons" (quoted favorably in the article Catton sent) and a "life-boat ethic," as well as in recent "deep ecological" applause for deadly viral diseases, the closing of nation-state borders, starvation and higher infant and child mortality rates in the Third World, and even jokes about biological warfare. And Catton's streamlined model of Malthusianism merely contemporizes eighteenth-century obscurantism with academic jargon—jargon reeking of the alienation and dehumanization of the laboratory. This isn't "thinking like a mountain," to use ecologist Aldo Leopold's resonant phrase, but calculating like an investor's computer.

In his clarification of his thesis, Catton makes the same error of qualification that Malthus did in his retreat to the notion of a capacity for exponential growth beyond subsistence. His notion of "load" ("the product of two dimensions: the number of users and the mean per capita use...An increase along one axis...must be compensated by a decrease in the other dimension.") is an abstraction that in the most general terms makes sense, but which is meaningless in any real sense in the same way that his number-crunching in Overshoot is meaningless. The schema only works by balancing two abstractions against one another: population per se means nothing, and per capita use means nothing except in relation to actual use in a certain social configuration (Pentagon bio-war budgets get figured into my per capita use to show that I cost the Earth too much). In a society like the U.S., where some people,

dressed in rags and malnourished, die of exposure just outside the resplendent palaces of the rich and powerful, and where energy is expended and eco-systems contaminated for the express purpose of undermining subsistence (as the U.S. is doing in Central America), Catton's impalpable graphs are void of meaning or context. They only serve to mystify the real issues: what it means to create an ecological culture, and how this project can only be anchored in human freedom and long-term well-being in the fundamental sense of those words.

Catton's logic—aimed at “policy makers” without questioning the social conditions for the hierarchy that puts these rulers into their positions of power—has the same thrust as Malthus', and his arguments could have been made just as easily by the parson: “In particular,” the professor lectures the politicians he hopes to gain as his audience, “the supposition that Earth is a cornucopia for mankind needs serious modification.” (Doesn't your run-of-the-mill Republocrat say as much when he slashes funds for the needy?) The professor misses the point that even a cornucopia can be squandered and forever fouled by a pathological, totalitarian civilization. Yet his logic leads where one would expect: quoting an ecology textbook, he tells us, “The time is already on us when...the carrying capacity of our living space is not enough to provide a broadened niche for all men who now exist.” What a “broadened niche” implies is ambiguous enough (Porsches for everyone?), but otherwise the line is clear: some of us will have to go, now. Of course deep ecologists of the Malthusian stripe (are there any other? can it be that a new world paradigm, as they describe it, could already be so rigidly defined?) do not include themselves in this category, we can be sure.

Modern Malthusianism, even propped up by the legitimate insights of conservation biology and ecology, evades the problematic character of human culture and how we exist on Earth. For human beings, famine and misery are not necessarily the results of a condition in which “population is resource limited,” as Catton has it. More often than not, famine and misery occur for social reasons. And it is certainly the case that the natural limits of the Earth (and one would be even more insane to argue that there are no natural limits, as some technocrats do) are not the cause of the famine and misery that plague humanity today. Furthermore, it is poor biology and even worse sociology to draw simplistic parallels between human social categories of war (or even disease, when it is the kind of selective death that occurs when children are dying of malnutrition and dysentery in poor countries dominated by agribusiness) as “predator limitation.” When the military machines presently in command of the rival empires decide to unleash their nuclear and biochemical arsenals in a final conflagration for flag and country, will that, too, be natural checks, predator limitation, as well? Catton's thesis takes a general and important recognition of natural limits and turns it into scientific ideology. He should ponder exactly how his mystifications are employed by those who do treat his book as a kind of bible—an authoritative book by my dictionary—with an argument that for Earth First! eco-moonies has become a deep ecology “litmus test”

There are many important insights gathered within the traditions affirmed by deep ecology adherents, which is why we were so favorable to deep ecology and Earth First! when we first became aware of them. It seemed we were moving in essentially the same direction—toward an earth-based, visionary and liberatory refusal of megatechnic civilization and industrialism, capital and the state, and an affirmation of human community and community with nature—which led us to begin an exchange with them in the spring of 1986. We need not take seriously their claim as their philosophical property and their “paradigm” the visionary, earth-based counter-tradition that since the emergence of Leviathan has stood counterposed to a civilization and its destruction of nature and the human spirit. That tradition belongs to us all. What is far more negative about the deep ecology movement is its thorough contamination of the primal, animist, visionary, earth-based vision with their spurious “anti-class posture,” their mean-spirited Malthusianism and their sage-brush national chauvinism.

The destruction of nature is bound to the collapse of human community itself, and the two crises are one, to be resolved together. A spiritual identification with the natural world that maintains an instrumental attitude towards humanity ought to be suspect from the start; it isn't even consonant with deep ecology's more fundamental reasoning, after Aldo Leopold's call to extend the ethical basis for community from human beings to the land. The deep ecology movement, in contrast, doesn't even see beyond the borders of the imperial nation-state or the nationalist control of “resources,” which are themselves the culmination of the crisis in human community which began the process of degradation of the whole planet in the first place. And deep ecologists, depending on a Malthusian vision and elitist support for the nation-state, will never achieve the renewal of the earth that they claim to desire, but will

only reproduce capital's war-of-all-against-all and ensure our species' mutual destruction along with everything else.

The anti-class posture that Catton shares with deep ecologists blinds him to the structural character of the global system of domination and exploitation that is destroying the biotic integrity of the planet. "We" aren't so much "stealing ravenously from the future" as he puts it, so much as a global megamachine made up of interlocking rival empires is stealing from the past, present and future to accumulate capital, congealed wealth and the structures of power and repression that maintain it. The plunder going on is the result historically and currently of world capital. Catton would like to distinguish capitalism from industrialism—but where has there ever been an industrial system without capital?

Industrialism and capitalism are two elements of the same alienated, megatechnic civilization. What drives industrial development East and West is the accumulation of capital, and in turn it takes accumulated capital to continue industrialization. In both the private capitalist West and the state capitalist East, nature is exploited and destroyed by a hierarchic work pyramid in which, in order to survive, wage laborers and slaves must sell or surrender their vital life energies—kill themselves in order to live. They survive by purchasing (or being doled out) their subsistence and sometimes their empty luxuries in the form of commodities, paying with money printed by the State. At the core of such societies is coerced, alienated labor. At the summit are powerful banking, industrial, government, and military administrators, who in the West are often the formal, juridical owners of the productive and economic apparatus, while in the East they are only the privileged representatives and administrators for a state which replaces the capitalist owner. Finally, in both kinds of societies, culture and subsistence are themselves thoroughly commoditized and technicized. And in some ways, the systems are converging into the same essential form: increasingly technocratic, statified and bureaucratic megamachines. Catton seems to be completely unaware of a whole current of anti-capitalism, growing out of utopian socialist, anarchist, and libertarian communist perspectives, as well as other revolutionary traditions that long predate Marx and "scientific socialism," but if he is ever going to understand the character of the modern world, he will have to investigate them. I doubt that we can get to a point where we can face the state of nature until we've confronted the nature of the state.

Catton mentions that there are "many attributes of capitalism" that he, too, deplures, and I'd be curious what they are, but perhaps even more, I'd like to know what attributes he endorses, his "ecological factor" notwithstanding. The looting of nature and the pulverization of ecosystems, peoples and cultures, particularly in the Third World where my discussion of hunger and ecological devastation centered, is largely the work of specific, international capitalist institutions. Multinational corporations chop down the forests and mine the mountains and the seas, finance development institutions and equip uniformed mercenaries to murder anyone who gets in the way. To abstractly decry industrialism while omitting mention of its material context is moral and political cowardice, blindness, or both. It is the other side of a false coin, balancing 'the leftist pseudo-opposition to capitalism that leaves mass technology, industrialism, and the exploitation of nature intact.

In response to Bill McCormick, I see a parallel between Catton's evasion of my discussion and McCormick's attempt to shift the debate entirely outside its central concern, the current starvation crisis and the destruction of planetary biodiversity. Thus he responds that "proving" (he must put this word in quotation marks to emphasize, one assumes, that no amount or quality of evidence will convince him) that hunger and current ecological destruction are not the result of over-population is meaningless. "So what if it does or doesn't" explain the current chaos, he says. That is a big "so what," since my essay essentially demolished the arguments of Malthusians that overpopulation is the cause, and thus their rationalizations for mass death.

McCormick would benefit as well from rereading my essay, and perhaps Food First, too. Neither the authors of Food First nor I ever argued that population growth is a matter of anything less than grave concern, and there wasn't even the suggestion in my essay that it might be a positive thing. I wrote that as population continues to grow, "it is fair to ask what possibility there will be for liberatory societies living in harmony with the natural world." I stressed that "techno-fix responses" like those described by Abbey or by technocrats from Herman Kahn to Buckminster Fuller "are either absurd fantasies or 'solutions' that are worse than the problem itself." In the name of biodiversity and the quality of all life, we need, in my view, to confront the population question with a long-term goal of population reduction, and I thought I made that clear in my essay. But blaming hunger and present destruction on overpopulation is a critical error (and in many cases a manipulation), and because ideas have material

consequences, it will determine how we all will “respond to a whole complex of associated problems.” I don’t know how to make this clearer than I already have, and Lappe and Collins essentially make a similar point, despite McCormick’s uninformed depiction of their argument.

The modern Malthusians ignore the connections between runaway population growth and the destruction of traditional societies, and the powerlessness and landlessness that result, and thus reduce this complex of associated problems to a crude “natural law,” consigning the victims of the global machine to annihilation. Population pressure, rather than the industrial-capitalist leviathan and its pathological mode of death-in-life, is passed off as the source of the “pandora’s box of ecological, social and political problems.” Here McCormick is lining up with U.S. development agencies, the World Bank, techno-bureaucrats like war criminal Robert McNamara (who blames the Salvadoran insurgency on population pressure), and the very multinational corporations who fund population control while sucking the Earth’s blood. I can see what is in it for them, but what could possibly be in it for him?

McCormick quotes selectively from my article to promote his hysterical image of a sardine can-world, and thus misuses a quote, not from Food First as he alleges, but from bioregionalist Kirkpatrick Sale, who discussed the possibility of the present world population fitting into the U.S. as a response to worst-case scenarios such as Abbey’s. My point in mentioning it can be understood by what followed. “The statistics, to back up arguments, grow exponentially,” I wrote. “Meanwhile, practical steps must be taken to stop the process by which the world, and everything in it, are being reduced to money, and, finally, to toxic waste.” This means that only a revolutionary social transformation that defends human freedom, particularly women’s freedom, as its focus and that brings about agrarian revolution and confronts the whole structure of capitalist mass technological development, production and distribution, will begin to address the complex of crises that create the conditions for the population explosion. A focus on population control that sees population growth as the source of the crisis and as the focus for change, doesn’t work (as Lappe and Collins, and Betsy Hartmann’s book, *Reproductive Rights and Wrongs*, reviewed in this issue, demonstrate)—it doesn’t even lower population, even when it makes a token and abstract tip of the hat, as McCormick does, to social justice. Instead, it legitimates reproductive coercion, starvation and genocide.

Deep ecologists have failed to address my criticisms, the arguments about world hunger, or about how to go about lowering population levels in a way that doesn’t dehumanize us into monsters willing to commit any crime (from closing borders to expelling immigrants to forced sterilization, gassing the “unfit,” walling up the world’s ghettos and starving the “human pests” inside, etc.) to bring about such change. So for example, poet Gary Snyder can say that “an immediate reduction of human population” is necessary “to allow wildlife its place on the planet,” and then add by way of qualification, “Not something you can hope to accomplish in this century, or maybe even the next, but this would be something to shoot for over the next few centuries.” Someone will have to explain the flagrant contradiction in this statement—I’ve seen it in two separate deep ecology articles without comment. The fact is that only revolutionary social transformation along the lines I have described gives us a shot at what Snyder, and all of us, desire, while the Malthusian position will only increase the deepening immiseration and destruction, working to undermine the very biodiversity and human community it claims to defend.

McCormick also quotes selectively from Claude Levi-Strauss, who wrote in *Tristes Tropiques* (from where I believe the passage cited by McCormick also comes), “Once men begin to feel cramped in their geographical, social and mental habitat, they are in danger of being tempted by the simple solution of denying one section of the species the right to exist.” Too many of the deep ecologists appear to have reached that point. For some, in fact, the response has been, if this be fascism, so be it. If deep ecologists plan on participating in the world-wide elaboration of a vision of human community with the natural world and each other, they had better reexamine their hardened ideological positions and clean their house of right-wing survivalists and nationalists. Too much remains to be done, too many possibilities of freedom and harmony remain possible, and too much is at stake.

—George Bradford



# fifth Estate

George Bradford (David Watson)  
Bill McCormick  
William R. Catton Jr.  
Was Malthus Right?  
An Exchange on Deep Ecology and Population  
1988

<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/328-spring-1988/was-malthus-right>  
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