

Hunger and starvation can be ended

by Peter Michalyshyn

28 people died from hunger in the last minute. 28 people, 21 of them children, die every minute of every day, every day of the year. 15 to 20 million people die every year as a result of hunger and malnutrition.

The issue of world hunger unfortunately does not excite anyone very much, not like the excitement caused by striking prisoner of conscience Andrei Sakharov, and the scores of protestors preceding him who used hunger and the resulting ghastliness of starvation to force a specific political-ideological point. It is a media event to starve to death in protest of something; it is a non-event merely to starve to death.

It is clearly a problem of scale, among other things. We cannot comprehend massive death by starvation any better than death by nuclear annihilation. But unlike the nuclear debate, most people honestly, or ignorantly believe that world hunger is caused primarily by birth rates rising faster than productivity, the result of which is scarcity; most people believe the only solutions are forced sterilization programs and reductions in living standards. These things are given: like the weather, something we can only dress against, and once insulated from it, we do our best to ignore it.

Two anthropologists at Columbia University in New York, David Nugent and Michele Cros, call this view the gospel of Thomas Malthus: "(there is a) constant tendency in all animated life to increase beyond the nourishment prepared for it."

Malthus was an English political economist who, say Nugent and Cros, foresaw that the numbers of the troublesome poor would be kept in check by a lack of food to feed them all.

The anthropologists make their point in the *Columbia Journalism Review* that in general the media tend to see the problem of world hunger in Malthusian terms: that there is too little food and too many people. In a survey of the *New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *Los Angeles Times*, they found that only 1.5 per cent of articles dealing with world hunger suggested the problem was other than scarcity. Whereas, Nugent and Cros argue the real problem is a "power-distributional" one.

"The scarcity perspective...if not the only one through which to view world hunger. There is an alternative viewpoint held by a large number of quite respectable social scientists who reject the scarcity explanation and are critical of the "development" approach (that underdeveloped societies need only to increase their productivity through foreign "self-help" aid programs)."

Nugent and Cros believe that the real cause of world hunger is the way peasant societies around the globe have been transformed by the expansion of the world economy.

The results, they write, have been:

- *since the late eighteenth century, the world's most productive agricultural land has become increasingly concentrated in the hands of a few;

- *production has turned toward one or two massive "cash crops" for world consumption;

Hunger Project sponsors first ever 36-hour starvathon

What is the *Hunger Project*?

It is two million people around the world whose purpose is to create the end of hunger and starvation on this planet by the year 2000.

"It's an idea whose time has come," is their motto. And their guiding principle is the need for the commitment of individuals to accomplish that task.

This Friday and Saturday, the University of Alberta *Hunger Project* club on campus will hold its first Starv-a-thon.

All you have to do is:

1. Fast for 36 hours from midnight Thursday, March 18 to noon Saturday, March 20.

2. Have as many people as you can sponsor you for each hour that you fast.

You can pick up pledge forms from the Student Help office in Room 250 on the second floor of HUB.

If you cannot fast, come and learn about the greatly-misunderstood phenomenon of world hunger.

This Friday, from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. and Saturday from 10 a.m. to noon at the SUB 'fireplace' U of A faculty members will speak, films will be shown, and background material will be available.

Hunger can be ended in this century you can make the difference.

Even so-called conservative commentators agree on that point.

Professor Nick Eberstadt, writing in *Commentary* magazine, has similarly refuted the "Malthusian" approach to world hunger. However, Eberstadt, a visiting fellow at the Harvard Center for Population Studies, says estimates of the number of starving people are too high.

Concentrating on the world's severely underfed, he reaches a 100 million figure, rather than 500 million, as claimed by the World Bank, and used by various hunger organizations.

Eberstadt does admit, however, that "simply preventing that desperately needy from succumbing to death by starvation can in no sense be construed as a fully satisfactory solution to the hunger problem. There is a world of difference between being kept alive and living...."

"...where desperate poverty and want have been eradicated, it has not been through population control, artificially enforced food self-sufficiency, or 'socialist strategies,' but through the hard work and millions of men and women scattered on tiny farms, in dull villages, in dirty metropolises, and suburban shanty-towns, who are determined to improve their own lives and whose governments have given the wherewithal to do so," Eberstadt writes.

Having said that, Eberstadt goes on to recommend that the United States in particular should encourage liberalizing trade and tariff reforms, an increase of rural industry in underdeveloped countries, regulation of "commerciogenic" artificial infant food formulas, and in general more sincere efforts to help/coerce governments in underdeveloped nations to start taking care of themselves.

Eberstadt, and conservatives, probably would object to popular calls for a restructuring of the world economy, placing such panaceas in the class of "socialist strategies."

Yet, perhaps he oversimplifies the issue.

Ted Howard, editor of *A Shift in the Wind* a periodical devoted to the Hunger Project movement (see box), writes:

"What steps need to be taken (to end hunger)? To ask such a question is to be immediately confronted with the complexity of the issue of hunger. Malnutrition and starvation do not exist in isolation. They are intimately connected with a web of intertwining global issues. To speak of eliminating hunger is to speak of the arms race, poverty, population growth, the international economy, and the role of multinational corporations in developing countries."

At the same time, *A Shift in the Wind* carries a summary of the U.S. Presidential Commission on World Hunger, which addresses the "injustices of the international economic system that keep the poor countries poor." It criticizes trade barriers and other privileges rich countries have developed to protect themselves and delivers the ominous message: "There are compelling moral, economic, and national security reasons for the United States government to make the elimination of hunger the central focus of its relations with the developing world."



photo Teri Paulgaard

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- *this has transformed the traditional societies, which before produced steady yields for local consumption, regenerated natural resources, and stored food to share in times of want.

Nugent and Cros write: "...the lives of hunger they are condemned to are the result of this historical process of land

concentration, pauperization of peasants, and the destruction of indigenous village life."

Whether not we agree totally with the provocative Nugent/Cros explanation of the causes of world hunger, we can be sure of their bottom line: that there is no shortage of food to go around.

patches

THIS WEEK'S ENTERTAINMENT

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Friday March 19 8:00 PM

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