

ECOLOGY AND POWER

Something is messing up the balance of life, and all of us are suffering.

Breathing city air is a cigarette death. Smog masks for city dwellers are only ten years away say the scientists.

Tokyo, 1970: vending machines are selling whiffs of oxygen instead of candy bars.

Los Angeles, 1970: schools are closed on bad smog days.

The rivers we drink are sewers.

Ohio, 1969: the Cuyahoga River, a liquid that oozes through industrial Ohio, bursts into flame.

The noise never ends: it drives people crazy, it can injure babies before they are born.

Everywhere suburbs sprawl over the graves of trees.

Spray-planes drift over country fields, dusting the plowed earth. The sprays kill beetles by the millions and farm-workers by the hundreds; they kill every one of us just a little bit every time we eat or drink.

Drabness, discomfort, sickness — it's no way to live.

But *why* — and *how* — and *who*?

President Nixon, Life Magazine, the New York Times, NBC, Standard Oil, all tell us the same thing: there are too many people in America, and in the world. Overpopulation is the root cause of pollution. Overpopulation is the reason people around the world are starving. There are too many people and not enough food. Too many people wanting too many things. Too many people making too much of a mess.

Pollution, they tell us, is merely the by-product of a much greater threat, one that could plunge mankind into chaos. They call this the Population Explosion.

Are they right?

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"POPULATION EXPLOSION!" Newspapers warn that we'll be jammed together like chickens in a coop within a century. University professors claim that a tremendous number of us will starve to death before that can happen.

Everyone agrees that people themselves are the problem. Too many people cause overcrowding; too many people cause hunger.

Blaming *people* for these troubles sounds perfectly reasonable, but that doesn't automatically make it true. If we pick apart the "population explosion" idea, it's clear that people are really talking about two somewhat different things: the growing population of the planet, and why people are starving. We have to tackle these one at a time to see if the world's "population problem" is really a *people* problem.

Perhaps we are really the victims.

1

TOO MANY PEOPLE

Right now, the world's population is growing at a rate that would cause it to double every 37 years.

Play around with this figure and you find that a few centuries of growth at that pace would pack the earth with people. Sometimes newspapers or magazines carry incredible articles which do this, and they end up by predicting a sardine-package death for humanity!

Don't believe it. We won't run out of room.

The world's population is growing like never before. But that doesn't mean that the world will become so crowded we can hardly move. Several powerful forces have always limited the number of people that live on the earth, and they will stop population growth long before we find ourselves sleeping five to a bed.

This is easy to demonstrate. Imagine that you're in an automobile cruising along at about 20 miles an hour, and suddenly you press the pedal to the floor. In a few seconds you're doing 60 mph. Now, at this point you wouldn't think, "If in five seconds I've gone from 20 to 60, then I'll be doing 100 in another five seconds. And if

I keep it floored for a minute, I'll be up to 500 miles per hour!" You know very well that the car reaches a top speed and won't go any faster.

The same thing holds true for population. Certain *natural forces* prevent endless population growth, just as a car will only go so fast because its engine can suck in only so much air and fuel and won't turn over any faster. People need food, water and space in order to live; as these get scarce, population growth slows down.

But a car may stop accelerating, even if it hasn't hit top speed, because the driver *decides* not to go any faster. In the same way, people too may *decide* to have smaller families and slow down or stop the rate of population increase. People may put off getting married for many years or *practice* various methods of natural birth control. In modern societies contraceptive devices and medical abortions give people even more ability to limit population growth. All of these are *social forces*.

But then, why is the number of people in the world still increasing? People have been around for over a million years; why haven't we hit our limit yet?

The answer is simple but decisive: technology. Technology means that although there's only so much farmland and water and living-space in the world, we can find better ways to use these things. Metal plows grow more food than wooden hoe-sticks, especially after they've been attached to tractors.

This leads to an important point, overlooked by all the alarmists who fear that more people on the planet automatically means less food per person. These people make the same mistake that the Reverend Thomas Malthus made two centuries ago. Malthus and his 20th century followers never take into account the effects of new forms of technology; people keep finding ways to get more and more from the unexpandable resources of Nature. *Technology expands the limits of population.*

The lesson of human history shows just how important this is. World population has not *constantly* increased since the dawn of humanity. It has increased in *stages*. Whenever a significant improvement in technology came along that let people get more from the fixed resources of the world, population went through a *growth cycle*: