Beyond Malthus: Population and Power by Neil W. Chamberlain
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Robert E. Neil

This book is a relentless pursuit of the obvious. I could not find a single idea in it that would not be self-evident to any faithful reader of Section 4 of the Sunday New York Times. What is worse, Chamberlain insists on couching his platitudes and truisms in a pompous academese that frequently rises to the level of self-caricature.

A few random quotations will illustrate the content and flavor of the book:

"Without attempting any more complete catalogue of devices for containing pressures for change in the authority structure, let us simply note that resort can also be had to physical repression. . . ."

"If there is a pressure on resources, then, we can say that those groups whom we speak of as contained by the authority structure will be disproportionately disadvantaged. The diminishing returns from resources will fall on them most heavily." (In plain English: when things are tough the poor will get an even shorter end of the stick than usual.)

"In general, if a subpopulation is growing at a greater rate than other groups, and is disfranchised, it appears to endanger the interests of those other groups, especially if it itself is dissatisfied with its own participation in the social advantage. . . ."

"The congregation of numbers of those who are discontented with their place in the social scheme may give rise to violent action, such as riots. . . ."

"Without imputing to urbanization any wholly independent influence on society or erecting it into a self-sufficient social force, we can nevertheless recognize that this demographic phenomenon is pervasive enough in its influence to be given its conceptual role in any general theory of social process. . . ."

Chamberlain does not make these bold assertions solely on his own authority. It would never do, for instance, simply to state what everybody knows, namely, that big cities are lonely and impersonal. Instead, Durkheim and anomie are trundled in to confound the skeptics. And then, to prove that anomie is a Bad Thing, Chamberlain cites the Kew Gardens episode of 1964 when dozens of New Yorkers witnessed the murder of a young woman without even calling the cops. In case the significance of this example has eluded the reader, the author nails it down with a learned footnote. Here we discover that a two-man "team" of researchers has decided that the Kew Gardens incident shows that "inaction by some induces inaction by others."

All of this blandness of conception and dreariness of expression is really too bad because Chamberlain, in the first chapter of the book, zeroes in on an important and stimulating problem. Population growth has been studied almost entirely in terms of pressure on natural resources (the approach inaugurated by Malthus). But the growth of man's numbers, as the author rightly notes, also involves pressure of people on people and of people on institutions. Even if natural resources were infinite, these other pressures would still pose crucial problems. We must therefore go beyond Malthus in studying the implications of population growth.

So far so good. To be sure, the reader is already aware after chapter 1 that he is in the hands of a wret-
ched stylist, but his interest has been whetted and he expects some new insights from the chapters to come. Unfortunately, blandness now sets in, and about all that the reader learns from the rest of the book is that population growth unsets the distribution of authority and privilege, that it creates problems of urbanization, that bigger populations produce bigger governments and social organizations, that the rights of private property are curtailed as the population gets denser, and that the disproportionate growth of population in the poor countries generates resentment toward the rich and so may unsettle world affairs.

Although Chamberlain constantly uses the word "analysis" to describe what he is doing, his actual treatment of the problems beyond Malthus is appallingly superficial. Take, for example, his discussion in chapter 8 of "population and international relations." By now it is a truism that the East-West cold war axis of tension is being replaced by a north-south one dividing have and have-not nations. Any follower of James Reston knows that. We therefore have a right to expect that Chamberlain will have something new to say on the subject in chapter 8. And the fact that the chapter contains four numbered points set forth in italics seems to promise some real analysis. But what are these points? (1) Poor nations with growing populations may be tempted to improve their position by going to war, and they will do this before their resources are too depleted. (2) Poor nations with no military prospects may try to use their very instability to extort help from the great powers. (3) Poor, overpopulated nations (in Chamberlainese such nations are said to have "an adverse demographic matrix") are "likely to be the beneficiaries of a gradually developing ethical sense among people and nations." And (4) the tension between have and have-not countries "will give rise to a more effective instrument [of international government] for the relief of nations suffering from an adverse demographic matrix which they cannot adequately correct in the short run."

Now the first two of these points are self-evident. Obviously, desperate and miserable nations will try anything, including war and blackmail, to stave off disaster. The other two points are highly questionable. Isn't it rather utopian to believe that the North-South gap will be bridged by rising ethical standards and that some kind of international government will bring relief to the suffering nations? Why wouldn't it be just as reasonable to argue that the have nations will band together to keep up their living standards by keeping down the have-nots? After all, Chamberlain himself has already conceded that "resort can also be had to physical repression" in containing domestic pressures. Why not global ones, especially now that the preponderance of force at the disposal of the rich nations is infinitely greater than it was in the days of gunboat diplomacy and old-fashioned imperialism?

As tensions mount, the rich nations may well conclude that repression is cheaper than relief, and this can be justified by invoking the reason-of-state principle. Indeed, it can also be justified with some plausibility by arguing that meaningful relief is impossible. Here, I suspect, we will have to go back to Malthus.

In plain English an "adverse demographic matrix" means that a country has too many people for its resources. Pumping in outside resources can only prolong the agony unless the population is stabilized or reduced. It has been calculated, for instance, that the benefits of the Aswan Dam have been pretty well canceled out by Egypt's population growth since construction began. Thus, though adverse demographic matrices undeniably have international repercussions, they are nevertheless homegrown problems that in the end can only be solved where they began—at home. Relief is not progress, and an international welfare system will not solve the problem of world poverty.

Chamberlain's roseate notions about the destiny of the Third World are typical of the spirit of his whole book. In reading his clinical description of the social effects of population growth, one does not get the impression that these constitute problems that urgently require solution. The tone is about the same as that of a television newscaster reporting the fate of earthquake victims in Chile.

Indeed, Chamberlain actually seems ambivalent about solving some of them. Though he concedes, for instance, that decentralization might be a partial solution to urban anomic, he cautions that "any major move in this direction would be at the sacrifice of that culture which derives from the cities and is rooted in the diversity of their composition." By the same token, Chamberlain is not worried about the interaction of rising population and rising affluence. He quotes Harvard's Jean Mayer on the "overpopulation": "I believe that as the disposable income rises throughout the world in general, the population pressure due to riches will become as apparent as that due to poverty." But he then dismisses this problem with a wave of the pen:

"For in the same way that science, technology, and industry have combined to overcome the dangers of food shortage in the advanced economies (and potentially in the world at large), so they are likely to meet the problem of space and facility shortage.... There is no apparent reason why overpopulation in terms of wealth cannot be met in the same way as overpopulation in terms of numbers [sic]."

This is one of the two variants of the ostrich approach to population: the "They'll come up with something" version as opposed to the older "God will provide." One. Chamberlain even comforts us with the prospect of "new forms of recreation, perhaps embodying the illusion of space."

There is no need to worry this naive and utterly empty book further.