"Carrying capacity," "drawdown," and "overshoot"—these technical expressions remain as divorced from our daily language as "fossil fuel production," "economic development," and "technological breakthrough" are parts of it. The issue isn't vocabulary, of course, but concepts and the ways in which they shape our understanding of problems and our search for solutions. "Carrying capacity," for example, denoting the maximum population that a region can support permanently, comes from the language of ecology and would be in common use if an ecologic perspective, or paradigm, prevailed. We follow a different paradigm for the most part—one that allows us to speak of coal production even though coal is not being produced but merely extracted from the earth. In Overshoot, William R. Catton, Jr., labels this prevalent perspective the "cornucopian paradigm." It is based on a euphoric belief in limitless resources and on the delusion that technology can always save us. Overshoot vigorously argues the need for a long overdue paradigm shift from cornucopian myth to ecological reality, although Catton contends that the best this change in perception can do is to mitigate catastrophe, not avoid it. Regrettably, he makes a strong case.

Human beings have several times succeeded in increasing the earth's carrying capacity through such limit-raising technologies as the use of fire, the cultivation of plants, and improved tool-making, each time the population has increased. Two relatively recent achievements have raised human carrying capacity enormously: (1) expansion into a second hemisphere, and (2) utilization of fossil fuels. The Age of Exuberance that followed caused an unparalleled increase in both population and expectations. The briefly workable premise that it was natural for the future to be better than the past became the cornucopian paradigm.

What most people are still blind to is that the Age of Exuberance was created by necessarily temporary enlargements in carrying capacity. Now no vast bodies of land wait to be "discovered," and the steadily increasing consumption of nonrenewable resources (drawdown) is, by its very nature, transient.

Worse yet, misguided by the mythic cornucopian paradigm, our attempts to solve the problems that arise from it only aggravate them. To raise the productivity of existing land, agriculture has used increasing quantities of fossil fuels; as drawdown accelerates, the cost of food combines with the cost of fuel to lead the inflationary spiral. An alternative might be to increase the amount of land under cultivation, but amidst talk of making the deserts bloom, overuse of marginal land and unprecedented deforestation have upset delicate balances to produce a net increase in desert lands. As for fuel scarcity, the responses have been massive synthetic fuel programs and deregulation of natural gas and petroleum, both aimed at hastening the extraction of fuel from the ground and therefore intensifying the scarcity.

With sharp insight Catton notes that the folly is being compounded. Having resorted to drawdown, renewable resources are now consumed faster than they can be renewed, as indicated by the rapid removal of the world's once vast tropical forests. Catton poses a chilling question. "If biomass consumption already exceeds replacement when fossil fuels are still available, what must mankind be expected to do to the global ecosystem as the Carboniferous legacy runs out?"

Catton is unusually firm in his adherence to the thesis that growth beyond carrying capacity (overshoot) has already occurred. He argues that the astronomical German inflation after World War I, no mere fluke of history, "was a preview of a larger preview to come, when other forms of financial disruption would rend the fabric of trade throughout the world." Reexamined in light of the ecological paradigm, that larger preview—the Great Depression—gave notice "of the fate toward which mankind has been driven by the kinds of progress that depended on consuming exhaustible resources." The inevitable consequences of continuing this ecological irrationality are permanent economic depression and inflation, convulsive social and political change, and epidemic violence. The history of recent decades can be interpreted as a more or less steady move in that direction.

There is a disturbing tendency in Overshoot to dismiss economic, political, and even moral perspectives in favor of a purely ecological view of contemporary problems. The wise reader will be tolerant and move on. If Catton goes too far in rejecting economic and political explanations of current crises, the imbalance created is forgivable, his mission, after all, is to confront a way of thinking in which these explanations are dominant and ecological realities are almost totally excluded. As for morality, his intense commitment to making us see the limitations imposed by nature flows from the profoundly moral objective of minimizing the human misery that is the inescapable consequence of overshoot.

Catton concludes with the advice that whether or not overshoot has yet occurred, our best course is "to act as if we believe we have already overshoot, and do our best to ensure that the inevitable crash consists as little as possible of outright die-off of Homo sapiens." Unfortunately, accustomed ways of thinking and behaving tend to persist until crisis strikes. He isn't very optimistic, and daily indications that the cornucopian paradigm remains deeply entrenched suggest that we shouldn't be either.

A spate of recent articles about the "miracles" of genetic engineering illustrate the point. While several teams of plant researchers look for ways to increase agricultural production, their counterparts in other laboratories are trying to engineer plants to produce fuel that could replace petroleum. The promises held out by these uncertain efforts to create new forms of life divert us from thinking seriously about overshoot and preserving present forms as best we can. But even if the research is completely successful, where do we find the land to grow both food and fuel for an expanding population, conditioned by the cornucopian myth? [See "Food or Fuel?" Worldview, Feb. —Eds.]
Only the future will tell if Catton’s pessimism about our ability to readapt is justified. Meanwhile, he has provided an impressive challenge to the dominant paradigm combined with a powerful stimulus for shifting to a more realistic one. The shift could save an immense number of lives and prevent a great deal of misery. That makes Overshoot a book of exceptional importance.

**DECLINE OF AN EMPIRE**
by Hélène Carrère d’Encausse
(Newsweek; 304 pp.; $10.95)

Myrna Chase

At first glance this appears to be a popular, perhaps sensational, work, complete with dramatic cover art and juicy subtitle, “The Soviet Socialist Republics in Revolt.” The easy style (the translation is by Martin Sokolinsky and Henry LaFarge) aimed at an educated, civic-minded public—not one generally chosen by Sovietologists—continues the deception. Nonetheless this is a major contribution to our knowledge of the Soviet Union and to our understanding of nationalism and ethnicity at a time when many small nations are pressing claims against their rulers. Decline of Empire contains a wealth of information that was unearthen, one assumes, with great difficulty, given official Soviet attitudes. One gains an immense respect for the tenacity of national groups that hold onto their language, culture, and traditions even as their lives alter drastically, sometimes in reaction to these changes.

Americans tend to forget that the Soviet Union is a multinational state—the last of the great nineteenth-century European polyglot empires that collapsed in the First World War, enabled the Bolsheviks to come to power, and ushered in a new era of sovereign states in Eastern and Central Europe. Ideology has obscured the fact that the revolutionary force of the twentieth century, even in Communist Russia, has been nationalism. Carrère d’Encausse is an expert on the nationality question in the USSR with rare knowledge of the Central Asian Islamic peoples. She briefly traces the history of Bolshevik dealings with the czar’s subject peoples as their struggle to free themselves from the “prison of peoples” temporarily coincided with Lenin’s revolution.

For Lenin, and for Marxists in general, national aspirations were second to and often in conflict with world and national revolutionary goals. Lenin was no Third World revolutionary. His revolution was international, fraternal, proletarian, and he turned away from the revolution of the oppressed Eastern peoples. The tension between nationalist and internationalist revolution, which dates from the beginning, still characterizes Soviet relations with the Third World, according to Carrère d’Encausse.

To consolidate Red Army and Bolshevik victories, Lenin acknowledged the equality of nations, defined as cultural communities, in the USSR. The creation of a new citizen would render national differences harmless, he hoped; a new Soviet man, socialist and rooted in his nation, would be loyal both to the federal union and to the international revolution. Throughout the 1920s the USSR fostered national languages and cultures and the “indigenization” of leadership. Languages long deceased were resurrected; those with no written alphabet acquired one; dialects were elevated to literary languages; histories were written for “historyless peoples”; and, above all, peoples advanced to literacy in their national language. The tongue was national but the message was socialist. Education in socialism would bring to an end the unfortunate legacy of the czar’s oppression.

Stalinism broke the back of this experiment, but Stalin shared with Lenin the sense that national differences would pass away with the building of socialism. All the force of the state was used to reinforce the dominance of Russians, including propaganda that asserted the unique “civilizing” role of the conquerors of the non-Russians. The political and economic structure was Russified. Massive collectivization, the forced settlement of nomadic peoples, and industrialization destroyed venerable ways of life. In the RSFSR (historical Russia) the murderous purges may have been blind, but in the borderlands they were deliberate, says the author, and systematically destroyed the old and new national élites.

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