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A review of *Overdevelopment, Overpopulation, Overshoot* by Tom Butler (ORO Editions-Goff Books, 2015), 330 pages.

Earlier this year *The Guardian* ran a photo feature, "Overpopulation, Overconsumption – in Pictures," which announced and allied itself with the publication of a new book, *Overdevelopment, Overpopulation, Overshoot*.[1] Edited by Tom Butler of the Foundation for Deep Ecology, and with an introduction by William Ryerson of the Population Institute, the book is a glossy and expensively produced hardbound collection of photographs documenting the environmental damage we are currently inflicting on the planet. Photographs of burning oil slicks and seas full of trash are interspersed with aerial photographs of slum areas of burgeoning cities in developing nations. The presentation may be slick and professional, but the message is sombre: the sheer weight of human numbers is causing crushing poverty, climate change, loss of biodiversity and general environmental catastrophe.

Overdevelopment is clearly intended to be what is popularly known as a "coffee table book," a digest intended more for casual browsing and conversation starting than for careful study and analysis. In this respect it follows on from Butler's previous work, and particularly the photographic collection *Wildlands Philanthropy: The Great American Tradition* (2008),

which celebrated the role of private wealth in protecting wild areas. The bulk of *Overdevelopment* consists of photo essays designed to communicate a narrative of population growth and overconsumption brought on by greed and an increasing separation from nature in a globalised world. The first of these photo essays, "Lord Man," uses quasi-biblical language to tell the story of how "in the beginning the world was whole, and beauty prevailed" until humanity's "cleverness grew [and] so did his ambitions, until he declared himself ruler of all". Personifying all of humanity as a god or as *God* the story notes that "His work he named 'Progress' [and] his numbers became multitudes". Other essays such as "Demographic Explosion" or "Human Tide" are simply images of humanity *en masse* with brief quotations accompanying them. Ryerson's introduction and the afterword by Eileen Crist offer arguments for restraining population growth and development and for moving towards a "deep ecological" ethos of re-wilding; but these pieces also consider the benefits of living in a world with substantially lower numbers of people (Crist names two billion, instead of the current seven billion, as a desirable target).

The narrative that *Overdevelopment* conveys will be a familiar one to anyone with even a passing interest in environmental issues. It links population growth with growth in both development and consumption and reminds us that, in a finite world, continued growth is simply not sustainable. It succeeds on a visceral level in portraying the relentless damage that is undeniably being done to the environment and the heavy toll that is paid by other species for humanity's success. Each image in the book, whether a dismaying shot of the pervasiveness of rubbish in a third world slum or a record of a crowd of thousands in China, is accompanied by a quotation to drive home the points being made.

However, those readers with a longer-standing interest in environmental issues may well recognise and perhaps be troubled by some of the quotes here. William Vogt, for instance, is quoted as warning that "every area has a limited carrying capacity" and that this capacity "is shrinking and the demand growing." Vogt was best known for his 1948 book *Road to Survival*, a work that bewailed efforts to ameliorate living standards in third world countries through industrial development and the application of medical advances. Commenting in that book on the then parlous state of India, for example, Vogt takes a ruthlessly instrumentalist view of the effects of war, famine and disease on the population:

> A heavily industrialized India, backed up by such population pressure, would be a danger to the entire world. Disorders following the British

> withdrawal seem to be imposing once more the Malthusian checks that held the pre-British population within reasonable bounds. It appears probable that the turmoil will also stultify any considerable industrial development. This is a result piously to be desired.[2]

Vogt's argument is brutally simple in its Malthusian logic: aid and development of poorer countries are dangerously misguided policies because they upset the "natural" equilibrium of births and deaths; and any significant development is thus overdevelopment which must lead to overpopulation. Therefore, as Vogt argues, "from the world point of view" widespread famine in countries such as China and India might be "not only desirable but indispensable."[3]

Similar arguments have been made by other controversial figures who are quoted in the book such as Garret Hardin, a Malthusian and eugenicist who railed against aid to poor countries in "Lifeboat Ethics: The Case Against Helping the Poor" (1974). While Vogt and Hardin were key figures in their time, it seems curious that a work published in 2015 should be retrieving and republishing statements from such currently dubious sources, especially given the wealth of more recent and more credible work on ecology, climate change, and the environment. What seems to be anomalous, however, soon becomes a pattern when one encounters quotations from contemporary sources in the book. The section titled "Human Tide" quotes the extremist Finnish Malthusian Pentti Linkola on "the enormous growth of the human population – the human flood." Outside of his native Finland, Linkola is known mainly for his book *Can Life Prevail?* published in translation by the far right publisher Arktos. In *Can Life Prevail?* Linkola espouses a fringe form of Malthusianism that advocates culling the human population, ending aid and development to third world countries and preventing immigration to developed Western nations. Picking up on Hardin's depiction of Western nations as lifeboats surrounded by a sea of poorer nations, Linkola asks the following:

> What to do when a ship carrying a hundred passengers has suddenly capsized, and only one lifeboat is available for ten people in the water? When the lifeboat is full, those who hate life will try to pull more people onto it, thus drowning everyone. Those who love and respect life will instead grab an axe and sever the hands clinging to the gunwales.[4]

It should be remarked that as well as quoting such dubious figures as Vogt, Hardin, and Linkola, the book also cites far better respected mainstream figures such as the Dalai Lama. What makes this problematic rather than inclusive, however, is that there is no context or analysis for these quotations, implying a level of equivalence between world leaders such as the Dalai Lama and extremists like Linkola.

In a more general sense, though, the problem with this book is the *lack* of context. The history of colonisation and appropriation, ongoing inequalities between rich and poor countries and the exploitation and destabilisation of developing nations by wealthier ones are not adequately analysed and discussed here, but instead elided in favour of a vague and ill-defined complaint against "progress" and techno-utopianism. But while population pressure on the environment is undoubtedly a real and pressing concern, it is one which must be discussed explicitly in the context of historical and ongoing inequalities and injustices, for otherwise criticism of development and population growth equates all too easily to a lifeboat mentality that sees poorer countries as a threat to the established way of life enjoyed in wealthy western nations, an outcome which, it must be said, this book's selection of quotations does little to dispel. What, for instance, is the reader supposed to make of the inclusion of D. H. Lawrence's line from *St Mawr* that "mankind would abolish death, multiply itself million upon million, rear up city upon city, save every parasite alive, until the accumulation of mere existence is swollen to a horror"? And who exactly are the "parasites" that should not be saved?

As this review has noted, Malthusian literature has an unfortunate and disgraceful history of portraying development in poorer nations as somehow unnatural and a threat to Western society. As the American anti-racist organisation *Imagine2050* put it in a review of *Overdevelopment*, "this photo essay is part of a long history of the use of fear of overpopulation to advance policies that are biased, unjust, or often downright racist".[5] In failing to properly and adequately contextualise and discuss issues of exploitation and inequality and how they relate to the issue of population growth and over-consumption *Overdevelopment* ultimately fails to move the debate forward, instead perpetuating the same unbalanced westernised perspective that has traditionally inspired so many other Malthusian works.

Notes

1 See "Overpopulation, Overconsumption—In Pictures," *The Guardian*, 1 April, 2015, http://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/gallery/2015/apr/01/over-population-over-consumption-in-pictures

2 William Vogt, *Road to Survival* (London: Gollancz, 1949), 229.

3 Ibid. 238.

4 Pentti Linkola, *Can Life Prevail? A Radical Approach to the Environmental Crisis*, tr. Eetu Rautio and Olli S. (London: Arktos, 1999), 130–1; see Garrett Hardin, "Lifeboat Ethics: The Case Against Helping the Poor," *Psychology Today* 8, no. 4 (1974): 38–42.

5 See Lindsay Schubiner, "Don't Get Tricked Into Scapegoating Immigrants On Earth Day," *Imagine2050*, http://imagine2050.newcomm.org/2015/04/22/dont-get-tricked-into-scapegoating-immigrants-on-earth-day/