



HIMALAYA, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies

Volume 26
Number 1 *People and Environment:
Conservation and Management of Natural
Resources across the Himalaya No. 1 & 2*

Article 9

2006

Malthusian Thinking Among Foreigners and Nepalis in Nepal

Tom Robertson

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya>

Recommended Citation

Robertson, Tom. 2006. Malthusian Thinking Among Foreigners and Nepalis in Nepal. *HIMALAYA* 26(1). Available at: <https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya/vol26/iss1/9>

This Research Article is brought to you for free and open access by the DigitalCommons@Macalester College at DigitalCommons@Macalester College. It has been accepted for inclusion in HIMALAYA, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Macalester College. For more information, please contact scholarpub@macalester.edu.



TOM ROBERTSON

MALTHUSIAN THINKING AMONG FOREIGNERS AND NEPALIS IN NEPAL

As a historian of Malthusian thinking in the twentieth century, I'm always curious to see when and how arguments about overpopulation are deployed in contemporary contexts. Recently, two Malthusian arguments about Nepal caught my attention. The first, coming from an American environmentalist, did not surprise me that much. The second—from Nepali friends of mine who live in a village I've worked in for some time—did. These Malthusian arguments provide a window onto an approach to understanding Nepal that dominated development circles during the 1970s and 1980s—and, indeed, onto the mentality against which the Annapurna Conservation Area Project, the subject of the other two papers of this panel, developed in the 1980s.

While reading a 2003 article in Harper's, I came across an article by Jared Diamond, the UCLA geographer who is well known for *Guns, Germs, and Steel* and the more recent *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*. In the article, trying to refute the idea that environmentalists are "fear-mongering, overreacting extremists whose predictions of impending disaster have been proved wrong," Diamond asks readers to compare two lists—a list of countries "where state government has already been overwhelmed and has collapsed, or is now at risk of collapsing, or has been wracked by recent civil wars" and a list of countries "facing some of the worst problems of environmental stress, overpopulation, or both." You might guess where this is going: Nepal is on both lists. The implication is that Nepal's environmental stress and overpopulation have played a key role, if not the key role, in causing the civil war. Diamond offers no elaboration on Nepal, but does say a little more about his thinking: "Today, just as in the past, countries that are environmentally stressed, overpopulated, or both are at risk of becoming politically stressed, and of seeing their governments collapse. When people are desperate and undernourished, they blame their

government, which they see as responsible for failing to solve their problems. They try to emigrate at any cost. They start civil wars" (Diamond 2003).

Diamond's vague language leaves him wiggle room to avoid seeming an extremist—if overpopulation is only one of many factors, then he can claim he's not a demographic determinist. But his tone contradicts his language. He sure seems to be saying that overpopulation causes environmental damage and civil war. End of story. After all, he doesn't point to any other possible explanations, or even mention the possibility of other factors.

Diamond's interpretation strikes me as monocausal and overly simple. Although environmental degradation certainly plays some role in the origins of Nepal's strife and certainly demographic factors play some role in environmental damage, just as certainly other factors are equally important, if not more so. Poverty, for instance, causes high population and environmental degradation as much as it results from them. And what about the other causes of Nepal's problems: class and caste exploitation, a government that pilfers more than it provides, and the across-the-board failure of political leaders?

For anyone familiar with the American environmental movement of the 1960s and 1970s, Diamond's reductive Malthusianism is not so surprising. Concern about population growth, especially the high populations of South Asia, formed a crucial part of the late 1960s and 1970s explosion of environmental awareness. Sometimes this concern took moderate forms—conceptualizing population growth, especially rapid population growth, as one of many factors—and called for measures a great number of Americans believed in, such as access to birth control and abortion rights. But sometimes it appeared a single-minded obsession that made human society seem as easy to comprehend as cells in a Petri dish and, in doing so, overlooked as much

as it revealed. To be fair, the Malthusians of the late 1970s were often responding to extremists on the other side—pie-in-the-sky techno optimists who acted as if human beings faced no natural limits—but that doesn't make their positions correct.

Diamond's Malthusian interpretation of Nepal would not have interested me so much if not for several similar interpretations I heard while in Nepal during the summer of 2004. What struck me about these comments was that they came not from Westerners steeped in the postwar environmental thought but from Nepalis themselves.

ANECDOTES FROM NEPAL: NEPALI MALTHUSIANISM?

When I was in Nepal in 2004, I returned to the place where I lived and worked as a teacher trainer for three years in the mid-1990s and where I've visited every two years since: Khotang District, a middle-hills district in the East between Solukhumbu and Udayapur, Okhladunga, and Bhojpur. During this trip, the main conversation topics were the Maoist conflict, of course, and Nepal's problems of development, a perennial question.

At two different moments during these conversations two different Rai friends made comments about how Nepal's population growth had led to the war. In fact, they both mentioned Thomas Malthus. Neither person knew much if anything about my research interests, so they were not trying to pander to my interests. There was no reason not to take their comments at face value.

These references to Malthus surprised me. Diamond's view can be seen as those of an outsider misreading the realities of the third world. Yet here were Nepalis—indeed, village Nepalis—voicing many of the same arguments.

How should we make sense of the appearance of Malthusianism among my Nepali friends? Was Diamond right—was this confirmation of Diamond's approach? Or was Malthusianism wrong no matter who made the argument? This is what I ultimately concluded on the matter. An interpretation should be assessed not based on where it originates or who makes that argument—although these are not unimportant facts—but on how well it explains the evidence.

Nonetheless the origins question is still fascinating. Where did the Malthusian thinking of my friends originate? That they referred specifically to Malthus suggests a complicated history. I wondered whether Malthusian thinking had somehow migrated from the West to Nepal and become indigenized. Two routes for doing so occurred to me: via the British in colonial India and their Indian heirs, or via Americans and other Westerners who worked in and wrote about Nepal in the decades after World War II.

The latter seems the most likely. Nepal embraced international development just at the time when Malthusianism came to dominate thinking about international development. Indeed, both of the Nepalis who made these comments were

“developed” by conventional Nepali standards: one was a high school teacher, the other worked for a local NGO. Unfortunately I didn't take the time to quiz either of them on these comments to really get a sense of what they believed about population growth and poverty and how these ideas fit in with other ideas.

AMERICAN POSTWAR MALTHUSIANISM AND SOUTH ASIA

A little background on American Malthusianism will help show how it could have influenced my Rai friends. Until World War II, Malthusian thinking had never really gained much of a foothold in the U.S. That began to change in the 1940s because of two things: first, some conservationists attributed the Depression and World War II to overpopulation, and second, following the war, they began to see the conditions for renewed war all over the planet. At first this concern related to parts of southern and eastern Europe, but eventually it was associated with areas coming to be known as the “third world.” By spreading western medical practices, disease control, and ideas of consumption-based economic growth in programs such as Truman's Point IV, these conservationists argued, the architects of the new world order were sowing the environmental seeds of future wars. The logic of these conservationists—that population growth creates environmental damage which creates poverty which creates political instability which creates war—found echoes in Jared Diamond's approach to Nepal (Osborn 1948, Vogt 1948, Perkins 1997).

Malthusian concerns grew in importance in the U.S. in the 1950s and 1960s as the Cold War became increasingly centered on the third world and places like India. Malthusians would argue that all the attention given India was because India had the worst problem of overpopulation, environmental degradation, and poverty. But Americans also worried about India's population because of Cold War concerns—India was a key Cold War prize because of its strategic location, its mineral wealth, and its prestige among the decolonizing world. It was one of the dominoes whose fall, it was believed, could bring ruin to America's doorstep (Caldwell and Caldwell 1986, Greene 1999, Ross 1998).

When a famine struck India in 1966 and 1967, the U.S. government reversed years of skittishness and added population control to its repertoire of international development programs. India's famine, one historian of population politics has written, became “the triggering event that moved Washington” toward population planning (Piotrow 1973: 112). These programs grew tremendously: they became a key part of the “basic needs” approach to development and they continue to be a large part of American development aid, including to Nepal (Critchlow 1999).

Appearing in the crucial years after Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) and before the first Earth Day in 1970, the Indian tragedy left a profound mark not only on America's Cold War strategists and humanitarians, but also on a diverse group coming to be known as “environmentalists.” A surprising

number of these activists had personal connections to India, including Lester Brown, future founder of the Worldwatch Institute; Paul Ehrlich, author of *The Population Bomb* (1968), one of the classic texts of the environmental movement; Garrett Hardin, author of “The Tragedy of the Commons” and “Lifeboat Ethics”; and future Zero Population Growth (ZPG) and Sierra Club director Carl Pope, who served as a Peace Corps Volunteer in India during the late 1960s.¹ To these environmentalists, India showed that environmental catastrophe was imminent; it hammered home the do-or-die need to see human society through an ecological lens. India, to them, was the leading edge of the environmental apocalypse. The guiding mission of many American environmentalists, one scholarly observer put it at the time, was “No more Indias” (Fleming 1972: 52). “The problems of Delhi and Calcutta are our problems too,” Ehrlich wrote in *The Population Bomb*, which was essentially a primer on the Indian famine, “We must all learn to identify with the plight of our less fortunate fellows on Spaceship Earth if we are to help both them and ourselves to survive” (Ehrlich: 2).

During the 1970s and 1980s, critics on both the right and left, including other environmentalists, attacked the reductive focus on population by environmentalists such as Ehrlich. Many human decisions had led to the famine in India, they argued, including Nehru’s emphasis on industrial development to the expense of agricultural development, and U.S. surplus grain exports, which had undercut India agricultural programs (Bhatia 1963 and 1991). Other powerful critiques were also leveled at environmentalists. Frances Moore Lappe and Amartya Sen pointed out that social inequities explained famines better than overpopulation (Lappe and Collins 1977, and Sen 1981). Feminists like Linda Gordon pointed out that the population control measures that environmentalists called for meant giving the U.S. government unprecedented power over the bodies of some of the most marginalized people on the planet (Gordon 1976, Hodgson and Watkins 1997). Though no doubt population growth was a source of concern, it seemed that Cold War political myopia had created a type of environmentalism narrow in diagnosis and overly authoritarian in remedy.

Did this concern with population shape Western views and policy toward Nepal? It seems clear that the answer is yes. Caste may have been the traditional filter that Westerners used to understand South Asia society historically, but during the 1960s and 1970s population and environment became a new filter.

SOCIAL SCIENTIFIC VIEWS OF ENVIRONMENT/POPULATION IMBALANCES IN NEPAL

During the late 1960s, environmental issues became an important part of anthropological concerns, and within this new focus on environmental issues, demographic issues grew in importance. More so than ever before, researchers began to focus on how many developing societies were out of balance demographically. An example in the Nepal context is Alan

MacFarlane’s 1976 ethnography of the Gurungs, *Resources and Population*. MacFarlane opened his book with a quotation from Paul Ehrlich. On the next page, he writes, “We are rapidly moving towards a population catastrophe which will make past plagues and two world wars seem insignificant by comparison” (MacFarlane 1976).

MacFarlane’s otherwise careful study shows both the power and some of the pitfalls of demographic analysis. By focusing on population, MacFarlane made an important advance to earlier models: instead of focusing on equilibrium, as Roy Rappaport and other anthropologists had, he stressed historical change. Through population, he incorporated history into the study of the Gurungs. At the time, few other anthropologists incorporated historical change into their social models. Moreover, MacFarlane was not unsophisticated about his approach to population. He stressed that population growth was not an independent variable—that is, he noted that social and economic factors, not just biological factors, contributed to population growth rates. But he was less sophisticated about his understanding of poverty and environmental problems, which he blamed on overpopulation. He did not see how other socio-economic factors, such as poor government or social exploitation, had contributed. And he did not see how, at least in some cases, a large family could be a buffer against poverty.

MacFarlane was hardly alone in this thinking. During the 1970s, many scholars and development workers came to believe that the Himalayas, especially the Nepal Himalaya, faced a profound environmental crisis because of deforestation caused by overpopulation. The view became so common that it eventually earned a name—the “Himalayan crisis scenario.”

In retrospect, these concerns have been shown to be exaggerated. As Jack Ives, Bruno Messerli, and allies such as Piers Blaikie have pointed out, deforestation and other forms of environmental degradation were not as widespread as believed. Moreover, they note, even where degradation did exist, overpopulation has not been the chief cause. Ives even hints that the longevity of the Himalayan crisis scenario can be blamed on the development industry’s need for justification and the ease with which they can blame peasant farmers (Ives 2004).

In a useful 1991 article, John Metz summarized many of the flaws with Malthusian approaches to Nepal. Taking issue with the idea of peasant population growth as the cause of deforestation, Metz noted that most deforestation happened before Nepal’s population growth accelerated and that tax incentives and state policies of jagir and birta were far more important causes. He also pointed out that mountain farmers have been unfairly maligned: instead of being destructive forces driven by biology and unaware of environmental problems, farmers have traditions of stewardship that work and they adapt to changing conditions in positive ways. Metz also stressed that observers have misunderstood the relationship between population growth and poverty: Poverty

often causes population growth, he said, not the other way around (Metz 1991).

What effects have these critiques had? It seems clear that the shift from a demonization of peasant farmers to a celebration of their local knowledge is at least part of what has driven the move to community-based natural resource management programs, at least for many of the outside experts and donors. (See the accompanying papers in this issue.) But, as the comments by my Nepali friends demonstrate, Malthusianism still lives on in Nepal. Moreover, it seems hard to believe that this is in no way related to the pervasiveness and longevity of the Himalayan crisis scenario among development workers, both American and Nepali, in Nepal. Indeed, a brief look at the history suggests that American development agencies in Nepal, especially USAID, have played a key role in the development of concern about population growth among Nepalis.

U.S. DEVELOPMENT AND NEPALI MALTHUSIANISM

This story begins in the mid 1960s. In a later interview, Joseph Toner, the director of USAID from 1964 to 1966 recalled that, although he wanted to focus on family planning, Nepali government officials “had no interest.” He didn’t elaborate but he did point out that, at the time, Washington also lacked a serious commitment to the issue. In truth, Washington was not against a very modest plan, but they didn’t really push it. In the wake of the famine in India, though, American policy changed: a 1967 law vastly expanded USAID’s population planning program in Nepal. With this help, the Nepali government program expanded its family planning programs, but, USAID reported, their interest remained tepid. At the time, many Nepalis thought that a high population growth rate was desirable, especially to counterbalance India (Skerry et al. 2001: 124).

During the early 1970s, USAID tried to drum up more support among high-level government officials through a series of trainings and seminars. One of these, which included environmental leader Lester Brown and the economist Stephen Enke, was attended by Harka Gurung, Tulsi Giri, Yadav Pant, and Pashupati Jang Bahadur Rana. These meetings resulted in the formation in 1975 of POPCOB, the Population Policies Coordination Board, with USAID funding. By the late 1970s, USAID’s efforts paid off. The Fifth Five-Year Plan made population planning one of its top priorities and called for a vast expansion of programs. Concern about population growth has existed ever since.

During these discussions in the early 1970s, American consultants and Nepali political officials even considered compulsory population control measures. In one 1970 seminar, for instance, G.P. Lohani argued that “Living and working patterns will have to be altered.” Lohani continued, “The concept of mass indoctrination will also have to be accepted and applied to some extent. Many of the vague, liberal values adopted by the thin crust of the elite section of the population will have to be abandoned or modified.” An

American identified in the record as Dr. Beyer echoed this sentiment, suggesting that “the Western notion of individual and family oriented population control might not be valid in Nepal. Perhaps the decision of the individual about family size is related to the opinions of others in the community” (CEDA 1971: 53 and 25). Among these elites, there was no strong argument that compulsory population control might be an unacceptable infringement of individual rights. This was, of course, several years before Indira Gandhi’s experimentation with forced sterilization in India during the “emergency.”²

During the 1970s and 1980s, many American environmental workers routinely singled out population growth for Nepal’s problems. In 1985, for instance, two American development workers blamed deforestation on population: “The rapid reduction in forest cover that has accompanied the pressures of an expanding population on the land base has resulted not only in growing shortages in such important inputs to the household and rural economy, but also in widespread soil erosion, flooding and damage to the land base” (Arnold 1985: 1). A 1990 assessment of USAID’s natural resource policy also singles out population growth as the main culprit:

First, like in many low-income developing countries, the degradation of Nepal’s natural resources is closely tied to unrelenting pressure exerted on limited arable land by a large and rapidly growing population, almost 90 percent of whom depend solely on agriculture for their livelihood. Over the past three decades, Nepal’s high population growth rate has consistently outpaced the growth of the agricultural sector. Population growth has also resulted in the expansion of agricultural activities into marginally arable lands, causing rapid resource depletion and related environmental degradation. Therefore, any long-term effort to improve the management of Nepal’s natural resources must be based on programs to increase agricultural productivity through intensified cultivation, rather than through expansion, and to curb population growth (Chew 1990: 1)

Because of this emphasis on population growth, it’s a relatively straight line to the inclusion of population control in both formal and informal education programs related to health, women’s literacy, and environmental awareness. I don’t know for certain, but I speculate that this helps to explain why my Nepali friends came to blame Nepal’s problems on Malthusian dynamics.

Conclusions

The USAID efforts to spread population control and Malthusian thinking bring up two questions, which I broach as way of a conclusion. First, would my Nepali friends be blaming population growth if not for several decades of American development? On this question, I’m not quite sure what to say except that there are clear connections. But this

only leads to a second question: does it really matter whether the origins were American or Nepali, or whether the motives were for population control, which was normally the case, or for women's autonomy, which has only recently been the case? Here, I am inclined to say both no and yes. No, the origins of these programs don't matter, especially if concern about overpopulation leads to programs that give individuals more control over their reproductive lives and their futures, which I take to be a good thing. But yes, it does matter, if poverty and civil war is blamed on overpopulation to the exclusion of other causes, such as exploitation and government incompetence. Here I think that overpopulation too easily can be an excuse both for American development workers and for Nepali governmental officials. Blaming overpopulation is a way to take responsibility out of their hands for ineffective development and poor governance.

ENDNOTES

¹See Brown 1994; Hardin 1968 and 1974; and Pope 1972. Hardin visited South Asia in November and December, 1970.

²For more on the history of coercive population control programs advocated by many U.S. development workers and Indians in South Asia, see Connelly 2006.

REFERENCES

- Arnold, J.E.M. and J. G. Campbell, "Collective Management of Hill Forests in Nepal: The Community Forestry Development Project" Second Draft, 15 April, 1985, Paper Prepared for the Common Property Resource Management Conference, Annapolis, MD 21-27, April, 1985. College Park, MD: Land Tenure Center, University of Maryland.
- Bhatia, B.M. 1963. *Famines in India: A Study in Some Aspects of the Economic History of India, 1860-1945*. New York: Asia Publishing House.
- Bhatia, B.M. 1991. *Famines in India: A Study in Some Aspects of the Economic History of India, 1860-1990*. Delhi: Konark Publishers.
- Brown, Lester, and H. Kane, *Full House: Reassessing the Earth's Carrying Capacity*. New York: Norton.
- Caldwell, John and Pat Caldwell. 1986. *Limiting Population Growth and the Ford Foundation Contribution*. Dover, N.H.: F. Printer.
- Centre for Economic Development and Administration [CEDA]. 1971. *Population and Development: Proceedings of the Seminar "Population and Development," Kathmandu, July 28-30*. Kathmandu: CEDA.
- Chew, Siew Tuan. 1990. "Natural Resource Management: AID's Experience in Nepal." AID Evaluation Occasional Paper No. 41, Washington: USAID.
- Connelly, Matthew. 2006. "Population Control in India: Prologue to the Emergency Period." *Population and Development Review* 32 (4), December, 629-667.
- Critchlow, Donald. 1999. *Intended Consequences: Birth Control, Abortion, and the Federal Government in Modern America*. New York: Oxford.
- Diamond, Jared. 2003. "The Last Americans." *Harper's Magazine*, June, Vol. 306, Issue 1837.
- Ehrlich, Paul. 1971. *The Population Bomb*. Rev. edition, Rivercity, MA: Rivercity Press.
- Fleming, Donald. 1972. "Roots of the New Conservation Movement." *Perspectives in American History* 6.
- Frances Moore Lappe and Joseph Collins, *Food First: Beyond the Myth of Scarcity*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977.
- Gordon, Linda. 1976 *Woman's Body, Woman's Right: Birth Control in America*. New York: Grossman Publishers.
- Greene, Ronald Walter. *Malthusian Worlds: U.S. Leadership and the Governing of the Population Crisis*. Boulder: Westview Press.
- Hardin, Garrett. 1968. "Tragedy of the Commons" *Science* 162: 1243-48.
- Hardin, Garrett. 1974. "Living on a Lifeboat," *Bioscience* 24, no. 10.
- Hodgson, Dennis and Susan Watkins, "Feminists and NeoMalthusians: Past and Present Alliances." *Population and Development Review* 23 (3) (Sept): 469-523.
- Ives, Jack. 2004. *Himalayan Perceptions: Environmental Change and the Well-Being of Mountain Peoples*. New York: Routledge.
- MacFarlane, Alan. 1976. *Resources and Population: A Study of the Gurungs of Nepal*. London: Cambridge University Press, 1976.
- Metz, John. 1991. "A Reassessment of the Causes and Severity of Nepal's Environmental Crisis." *World Development*, Vol. 19, No. 7, 805-820.
- Osborn, Fairfield. 1948. *Our Plundered Planet*. Boston: Little, Brown and Co.
- Perkins, John H. 1997. *Geopolitics and the Green Revolution: Wheat, Genes, and the Cold War*. New York: Oxford.
- Piotrow, Phyllis. 1973. *World Population Crisis: The United States Response*. New York: Praeger Publishers.
- Pope, Carl. 1972. *Sahib: An American Misadventure in India*. New York: Liveright.
- Ross, Eric. *The Malthus Factor: Poverty, Politics, and Population in Capitalist Development*. London: Zed Books.
- Sen, Amartya. *Poverty and Famines: An Essay in Entitlement and Deprivation*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1981.
- Skerry, Christa, J. Isaacson, K. Moran, K. Kalavan, *Half-A-Century of Development: The History of U.S. Assistance to Nepal, 1951-2001*. Kathmandu: USAID.
- Vogt, William. 1948. *Road to Survival*. New York: W. Sloane Associates.