Scarcity Amid Plenty

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The U.S. Census Bureau's World Population Clock recently estimated that the earth's 6,666,666,666 th child has been born somewhere on the planet. Despite the fact that the number of the Beast is 666, this population figure is relevant only because of its sheer enormity. The world's population seems to be exploding, causing many to wonder if the earth can sustain such a vast number of people. In a 2004 report, the United Nations projected earth's population to reach seven billion by 2013 and eight billion by 2028.

Paul R. Ehrlich—in reality, an entomologist specializing in butterflies and now the Bing Professor of Population Studies in the department of Biological Sciences at Stanford University—has been crying wolf on "the population bomb" since his 1968 book by that name. When world population stood at 3.5 billion people, he predicted horrible global famines to occur sometime between 1970 and 1985, all attributable to overpopulation. In his 1990 book, *The Population Explosion*, co-authored with his wife, Anne—when the global population had indeed exploded to 5.27 billion—he was more circumspect in his prognostications, but his point was the same: Humanity is breeding itself toward global famine and collapse.

Most of his specific, catastrophic predictions have come nowhere near fulfillment. His population estimates were wildly overblown (his growth calculations were essentially exponential, having used a compound-interest-type formula, whereas real-world population increases somewhat more linearly). On the other side of his thesis, his forecasts of the earth's and farmers' abilities to produce food were terribly pessimistic.

Contrarily, in 1965, the University of California's Walter Schmitt had estimated that the earth could produce food for 30 billion people,[1] and this was before the bumper yields of the "Green Revolution" were fully apparent. Present estimates suggest that the earth, fully utilized, has the potential to feed as many as 30-60 billion[2]—although environmental catastrophists like Ehrlich would argue that we have already far surpassed earth's sustainability.[3]

These figures are illogically divergent, springing from both ends of the ideological spectrum. One extreme foresees only doom, while the other forecasts only sunny days and blue skies. Neither is looking at reality, and both have left out major factors in their calculations. That said, their estimates are essentially worthless. Against the one, the earth is already sustaining more than twice the estimated population with relatively little hunger; and against the other, the earth will never get the opportunity in this age to test its limits, as world population growth is already slowing.[4]

Obviously, planet earth is a marvelous creation. Its ability to sustain such a vast amount and diversity of life has amazed human beings through the millennia. Despite being abused by mankind—through depleting the soil, expanding urbanization, depredations from war, industrial pollution, even nuclear fallout—it has continued to produce increasing yields, repairing itself remarkably fast. Even the area around the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear power plant disaster site has reforested, providing a haven for many species of native animals and birds.

Yet, if the earth is so productive and resilient, why are we now hearing cries of imminent, worldwide famine in the air?

The Situation on the Ground

On April 26, 2008, Channel News Asia reported that the chief of the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), Jacques Diouf, warned of potential civil wars in Sub-Saharan Africa, Asia, and Latin American countries due to global food shortages. World leaders, he said, had failed to heed FAO warnings about this "predictable catastrophe." He made these comments as riots over escalating food costs engulfed Haiti's capital, Port au Prince.

The food shortages around the globe are real. However, for the most part, these deficits are not driven by the agricultural industry's inability to produce enough food. The problem is essentially *economic*. Josetta Sheeran, director of the World Food Program, in appealing for an extra $500 million in aid, put it plainly: "People are simply being priced out of food markets."

This is not to say that demand is not catching up to supply. The U.S. Department of Agriculture recently reported that global grain reserves have not been so low since 1960. Weather problems in various parts of the world have affected production. Droughts in the U.S., Australia, the Balkans, and parts of the former Soviet Union have hit grain-producing regions especially hard over the past few years. Other, more unusual incidents—like the spreading of African Rust, a wheat fungus that has crossed the Persian Gulf into Iran and threatens Pakistan and India—have also done their part to reduce yields.

However, the main problem is spiking costs, and there are a handful of reasons for them:

The first reason is the present inflation of the price of fuel, a pinch in the pocketbook that everyone feels. While there may be some increase in the price of a barrel of oil due to tensions in the Middle East, a prime engine of fuel-cost escalation is the expansion of the Chinese and Indian economies. These two huge, developing nations have a hearty thirst for fossil fuels both in their industries and in their burgeoning middle classes. More Chinese and Indians with money to burn are buying cars than ever before, and those cars do not run on sunshine. As a result, fuel prices have risen worldwide, and food producers simply pass on their increased fuel costs to customers.

The second factor is the international push for biofuels, gasoline or diesel substitutes—ethanol and biodiesel—made from fermented plant materials, or biomass.Some nations, including the U.S., have mandated that a certain and increasing percentage of acreage be allocated for growing biomass crops, and they have also proffered subsidies to farmers who switch from food to fuel farming. This political move has driven the cost of grains to record highs, doubling or more than doubling prices. Again, producers shift their increased costs to purchasers in the grocery stores.

A third cause of high food prices is worldwide economic development—growing pains, as it were. As more nations enter the global economy, the millions of new consumers put strains on the worldwide system of trade. Before they developed, these nations had the money to buy only sparingly on the world market, but now, with more purchasing power, they can divert to themselves higher-status foods—wheat instead of barley, for instance—which had once gone only to the richer nations. In addition, these nations are consuming more meat, especially beef, which is grain-intensive to produce. In both of these cases, the increased demand boosts prices at the supermarket.

Seeing these factors, one could conclude that the real culprit is the global economy. In this case, in trying to spread economic prosperity throughout the world through globalism, wealthier nations like the United States are allowing their own citizens to absorb the financial pains of wealth-redistribution through sharp spikes in the costs of two necessities of this modern age: food and fuel. Yet, citizens of poor, undeveloped nations like the aforementioned Haiti, unable to compete on the world market, are feeling real, sharp pains of hunger. Thus, we have famine in the midst of plenty.

The Red Horse

Politics and its brutal brother, war, are the chief causes of famine, as the seals of Revelation 6 suggest in their inspired order: deception, war, famine, and death. In the last few decades, for example, the Horn of Africa—Ethiopia and Somalia, in particular—suffered terrible famines. Millions of Westerners saw the horrible pictures of stick-thin children with bloated bellies, and filled with compassion for their suffering, they contributed billions of dollars to send food, medicine, and other supplies to the afflicted region. More than enough aid reached those nations to turn the tide of the famine—had the warlords and factions not taken the bulk of it for themselves, their cronies, and their causes. The Darfur region of Sudan now suffers the same inhumanity.

Haiti's ongoing problem is also governmental. It shares the island of Hispaniola with the Dominican Republic, which, unlike Haiti, has experienced a stable democracy for the past dozen years and sustains a growing economy. Yet, the instability of the Haitian government, plagued by incessant political violence, has reduced the nation to being the poorest in the Western Hemisphere. Currently, eighty percent of the population there lives on only $2 per day, and some of its people have been reduced to the point of eating cookies made of a mixture of dried yellow dirt, vegetable shortening, and salt. This is especially tragic because, until few decades ago, Haiti was self-sufficient in rice, its staple crop.

The current calamity in post-Cyclone Nargis Myanmar, the former Burma, is a similar consequence of repressive, corrupt government. In its paranoia, the military junta there has obstructed and at times denied the importation of necessary food, water, and other aid to the survivors of the devastating storm. Relief experts expect the death toll—already over 100,000—to double due to disease and malnutrition/starvation as a result of the intractability of the generals in the initial few days after the cyclone hit the vulnerable Irrawaddy Delta region.

In all of these instances, once again, an abundance of food exists in the world, and in most cases, nearby. The trouble is overcoming the political and military obstacles placed in the way of the massive supplies available to relieve the suffering. While natural disasters and poor yields devastate some areas of the earth every year, human nature causes more suffering from starvation by far.

The Third Seal

The apostle John witnessed the opening of the seals of Revelation 6. He writes regarding the third seal:

> When He opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, "Come and see." So I looked, and behold, a black horse, and he who sat on it had a pair of scales in his hand. And I heard a voice in the midst of the four living creatures saying, "A quart of wheat for a denarius, and three quarts of barley for a denarius; and do not harm the oil and the wine." (Revelation 6:5-6)

Clearly, this third seal pictures famine stalking the land (see Matthew 24:7; Luke 21:11). Biblically, the color black—unlike our modern conception of it as the color of evil, as opposed to white—signifies mourning and ill health as a result of scarcity (see Jeremiah 14:2; Lamentations 5:10; Nahum 2:10; all of which, in Hebrew, describe people's expressions, skins, or faces as "black" due to want). This is in keeping with another use of black or darkness in Scripture: as a sign of God's judgment for sin (Zephaniah 1:15; Joel 2:2).

The pair of scales, of course, suggests similar things, adding an economic element, as grains or other foods would often be weighed for sale. Scales could also be used, as is likely intended in the third seal, to ration food during a time of scarcity. In the vision, a denarius represents a laborer's daily wage, and a quart of grain equals a person's daily nutritional requirement. The third horseman, then, portrays a scenario of hunger and suffering, when the powers that be tightly control the meting out of staple foods at highly inflated prices.

Finally, there is the curious phrase, "do not harm the oil and the wine." Commentators have been debating the meaning of this command for centuries. It is clearly spoken by God, sitting among the four living creatures, and just as He sets the famine prices of grain, He also decrees that oil and wine be spared any harm. How are we to understand this?

Olive oil and wine are not luxury items, as many take them to be; in the Mediterranean world, they are important supporting elements of the common diet (see Deuteronomy 7:13; Hosea 2:8; Haggai 1: 11; etc.). However, while they provide supplementary nutrition, people cannot subsist on them alone. Thus, they are secondary food items, and in the prophecy, they remain plentiful. This leads to two possible conclusions:

1. God is limiting the severity of famines, as "the end is not yet" (Matthew 24:6) and "these are the beginning of sorrows" (verse 8); or more likely,

2. He is indicating a measure of disparity and irregularity in these famines. Some foods will be scarce, while others are abundant. Some people will be sorely affected, while others will hardly suffer. Some areas will be hit hard, while others feel little impact.

This second conclusion suggests human involvement, a wild card in every circumstance, which would fit well with the first two seals. Unlike simple natural disasters, religious deceptions and wars require the decisions and actions of people to bring them about. God hints at a human element in all these disasters, including famine, that occur down through the centuries to remind us of our culpability in them. When man governs without the guidance of God, catastrophe and destruction are not far behind.

Right now, we in the developed world are not facing starvation, just feeling a little light in the pocketbook. If nothing else, the present high prices for staple foods should warn us that the global economy is more fragile than is generally recognized. A major shock to the system—war, depression, major natural disaster—could derail the smooth flow of goods even to strong, wealthy countries

How prepared are we for such a circumstance? How well would we survive until the system resumed normal operations? Now is a good time to heed the wisdom of Solomon: "The prudent foresees evil and hides himself; the simple pass on and are punished" (Proverbs 27:12).

Endnotes

1 Cohen, Joel E., "How Many People Can Earth Hold?" *Discover*, November 1, 1992; http://discovermagazine.com/1992/nov/howmanypeoplecan152).

2 The "Accelerating Future" blog, in its entry, "Overpopulation? Not a problem!" has an interesting discussion of the earth's population capacity. The author argues that, using only 70% of the earth's land mass, it could easily and comfortably sustain 100 billion people, provided that the current pace of technological progress continues. (http://www.acceleratingfuture.com/michael/blog/?p=174)

3 Monbiot, George, "Just Fade Away: It's Time to Lighten Up About Falling Birthrates," *The Spectator*, May 15, 2004. "Ecologists estimate the earth's carrying capacity—the number of people it can sustain without ecological collapse—at between two and four billion."

4 *Ibid*. Monbiot writes, referencing Phillip Longman in the May/June 2004 issue of *Foreign Affairs*, "Demographers now predict that our numbers will peak at about nine billion in 2070, and then begin to fall."