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Book review

William Stanton, *The Rapid Growth of Human Populations 1750–2000: Histories, Consequences, Issues*, Multi-Science Publishing Company, pp. 230 (+ vi), £25

William Stanton states that ‘All human history is of populations expanding when resources are available and shrinking when they are not’, and he predicts that ‘population reduction will begin as soon as foreign aid dries up’ and when basic ‘carrying capacity will become critical’. If it is necessary to read the history of collective human reproductive mistakes in order not to repeat them, or to avoid continuing to make them, then this is the book that should be read by all policy makers who have anything to do with famine relief, foreign aid, fertility control education as well as immigration/greenhouse gas emission. It offers a graphical record of recent population growth as well as a brief verbal summary of the political history for every nation.

Stanton’s panoramic history takes us back to the transition from hunter-gathering to agriculture about 10,000 years ago when he supposes that world population may have been double the 2 million of 100,000 years ago. The Agricultural and Industrial revolutions in the mid 18th century, and the Green revolution in the mid 20th century increased the ability of society to feed greater and greater numbers. He points out that before 1750 most of the world’s half billion people lived on the edge of starvation, confronted with repeated famines, and 250 years later almost five times as many survive in similar conditions. The increased food produced by the Genetic revolution in the 21st century is expected to be similarly unsuccessful in raising living standards, because the response of our species has been to produce more babies to meet the increased carrying capacity that these revolutions have facilitated. ‘Darwinian’ reality, with only the fittest surviving the scarcity that results when births exceed deaths, has been suspended for the last 250 years. Until the mid 18th century there was a very slowly rising population ceiling as deaths approximately equalled births.

With population growth currently exceeding 80 million per year, Stanton says that ‘most of the world’s people are entirely unaware that they are living in an anomalous [period of ever increasing food production], which, after 250 years is approaching its end.’

Historical carrying capacity, absent the temporary increase made possible by exhaustible fossil fuels, is dealt with early in the book using England as an example; from 300 BC, until coal and then oil made vastly more food production possible starting around 1750, the population approached five million several times but it repeatedly collapsed to much lower levels due to poor crop yields, tribal warfare and disease. The “Death Control (DC)” in the intervening two centuries, that has produced a ten fold population increase, has been dependent upon the increased agricultural carrying capacity and improved health care that are supported by finite exogenous geological energy stores. Stanton and a growing number of others foresee future energy scarcity orchestrating a population collapse, back to historically, solar-energy supported levels, during the next 100 years. Estimates of human numbers after the collapse vary from

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48 the 600 million that solar energy supported in 1750, to perhaps 4 billion, depending on whether
49 global energy depletion or local factors such as water shortage, desertification, sea level rise,
50 climate change or the overcrowding and land hunger that produce 'Violent Cutback Level
51 (VCL)' drive the collapse. Stanton appears to define the population densities (persons per square
52 kilometre) that result in 'VCL' by hindsight according to when and where tribal conflict,
53 genocide and ethnic cleansing have taken place.

54 Although population percentage growth rates are decreasing worldwide, Stanton drums home
55 the fact that population numbers continue their inexorable and uninterrupted exponential
56 increase due to the ever larger numbers these percentages are based upon. Relief from population
57 pressure is provided by emigration from areas where numbers grow faster than their economies,
58 to areas where the economy is still growing faster than the population, and by longstanding
59 foreign aid programs and famine relief that mask the fact that the land will no longer feed the
60 increased number of mouths. The continuing acceptance of massive numbers of immigrants and
61 provision of food aid, by countries that are still able to produce agricultural surpluses, are seen to
62 allow inappropriate fertility patterns to be irresponsibly maintained.

63 Stanton is very critical of the willingness of aid agencies to take the easier course of 'saving
64 lives' with food aid that artificially maintains reproductive strength as human populations
65 continue to further overshoot the carrying capacity of their lands, while most of these aid
66 providers refuse to address the more difficult issue of assistance with the birth control programs
67 that many women are clamouring for in recipient countries.

68 The book illuminates the concept of competitive breeding, wherein certain ethnic groups
69 openly admit that they have a policy of maintaining irresponsibly high birth rates ('We will beat
70 you in the beds'), designed to produce long-term political and militarily dominance, at great cost
71 to the natural ecosystems that must support them long after current conflicts are forgotten.

72 The author designates the last 250 years as an historically unprecedented, one-time
73 phenomenon with 'Weak Restraints On Growth (WROG)' as escalating human numbers rapidly
74 draw down the Earth's resources (especially non-renewable energy). He attributes much of the
75 reluctance to deal with the 'delicate subject' of population control to the now obviously failed
76 'Demographic Transition Theory' of Adolphe Landry (1934), that assumed increased prosperity
77 and food supplies would result in people having fewer children. This idea 'has persuaded
78 decision takers and their advisors that population growth is not a serious problem because
79 financial aid will sort it out'. If Stanton had written the book in 1960 and policy makers had taken
80 remedial action, there might be several billion less people contributing to the global carrying
81 capacity overshoot than there are today. He suggests that donor nations must finally realize that
82 population control must precede attempts at poverty reduction because the other way around
83 does not raise living standards.

84 Stanton sees multiculturalism and massive immigration policies being feasible only when
85 conflict to control resources is unnecessary, in countries whose populations still are growing
86 slower than their economies. He anticipates violent 'religious', 'ethnic' and 'class' conflict to
87 control shrinking resources as the legacy of such policies when the temporary (200 year long)
88 'Petroleum Interval' begins to wind down.

89 At the end of the book, Stanton speculates that 'political correctness', 'civilized standards',
90 current ideas about 'human rights', and the concept of 'the sanctity of human life' will
91 disintegrate in the face of resource conflicts and massive movements of refugees from lands
92 whose carrying capacity has been reduced by combinations of soil depletion/erosion,
93 desertification, sea level rise and the lack of continued access to non renewable energy stores.
94 Among grim alternatives, he foresees a return to 'quick and inexpensive corporal punishment for

95 lesser crimes' (corporal punishment being defined as whipping, the death penalty and
96 imprisonment), the general encouragement and legalization of 'euthanasia, abortion, and
97 infanticide for handicapped babies' as well as the enforcement of severe restrictions on family
98 size.

99 Stanton hopefully speculates, as have others, that the population collapse that is expected
100 during the 21st century will produce a smaller human society that will have 'the wit' to restrain
101 its numbers so as to allow 'a sustainable high quality of life', at a level that is in balance with the
102 Earth's long-term carrying capacity, and a level that may even allow some repair of an Earth that
103 has been considerably damaged by the open-ended expansionism of the last 250 years.

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