

By JAMES FALLOWS

The literature of the Apocalypse, which has grown into quite a substantial corpus in the last few years, has especially prided itself on the width of its conceptual grasp. Nothing is separate from anything else, the ecologists have told us: fish in the sea are affected by farmers in Missouri, and no solution, which ignores the connections, can hope to succeed. Yet many of these same writers, dugged in their pursuit of DOIT through the third chain, have been surprisingly quiet about similar inquiries into the political implications of environmental control. To the extent they have discussed politics at all, most of the environmental writers have either urged more government regulation of the evil corporations, or lauded good-hearted appeals for vague new ethics of cooperation and frugality.

Judged by these standards, Robert Malthus's new book is an impressive achievement. At the very least, it is the first distinct representation of a second generation of environmental thinking. The conclusion Malthusian reaches when he carries his political theories to their limits are not always convincing, but to leave the reader confident that no important avenue has been left unexplored.

The book's first premise is a future of restricted horizons, as growing population and diminishing resources reduce the world's per-capita wealth. While some writers have portrayed the "no-growth" society as a means of restoring Eden, to Malthusian it is a prolegomenon of the future New World. In the best part of his book, he demonstrates that the end of economic expansion will pose two additional strains to the death which protect individual rights from governmental authority. First, the need to regulate nearly every activity from pleasure-driving to recreation will dramatically enlarge the range of interference with private lives. An unpleasant dilemma then arises: either the world's governments will not be able to control environmental problems before Malthus works his revenge, or else they will, in which case, "Malthus compels me to suggest that the passage through the gateway [sic] ahead may be possible only under governments capable of enforcing obedience far more effectively than would be possible in a democratic setting. If the latter for mankind is survival, such governments may be unavoidable, even necessary."

Second, economic limitations will deprive governments of an important social buffer: the steady, dependable expansion of the general economic pie, which increases the size of every-



Robert L. Malthus

An Inquiry Into The Human Prospect

By Robert L. Malthus.
120 pp., New York: W. W. Norton & Co.,
Cloth, \$12.95. Paper, \$7.95.

man's share without altering the proportions. The Western nation must nearly approximate this condition in England, and its narrow escape from the most threat of general paralysis is all too apt an illustration of Malthusian's warning: "In bluntest terms, the question is whether the Malthusian struggle that is likely to arise in such a drastically reduced economic society would not impose intolerable strains on the representative democratic political apparatus."

Malthusian is not the first to outline these implications, but he examines them more thoroughly than others have done, and he carries out the project with his long-recovered skill in exposition. Did the book would have been far more persuasive if Malthusian had been tougher on himself

about choosing his evidence and setting his own narrative tone. The central Malthusian case is built, for one is generally quite familiar, even stale. (He does, though, deserve credit for reminding us of the risk of nuclear war, which is the great unquestioned topic of the day.) I cannot imagine whom he thinks he is "surprising" with his long point that socialist governments are so confused and powerless in dealing with environmental constraints as are we the capitalists. In a long section on "human nature," Malthusian makes one good point—about our inability to "identify" with people of other nations or future generations, and the consequent difficulty of affecting our behavior on their behalf—but overweighs it with a lot of specious and

unconvincing talk about adolescent authoritarianism.

There are qualities—compared to a more serious student's proposal, with more close-fitting lines to the prose, evoked by the title itself and the jacket illustration of Adam supporting the globe, and reinforced by the numerous text references to "the human prospect"—where "economic difficulties" would have sufficed. While Malthusian's conclusions are vastly different from the cheerful visions produced by the likes of Herman Kahn and Donald Bell, his book suffers from the attitude of over-inflation, certainly that can apply those authors at their worst. The difficulty with such inflationary prognostications is this: at just the time when problems have remained enough of themselves to be understood and written about, the forces that affect their development have often changed in a basic way. What looks like tomorrow's problem today is nearly the real problem when tomorrow rolls around. Just a little more than 10 years ago, a reputable publisher was putting out a book called "Population and Progress," which predicted that America's happy days were at an end because the more forward nations of the north would soon overtake us.

Malthusian is certainly aware of the hazards of "straight-line" reasoning—the misconception that what's happened for the last 10 years will keep happening, at the same rate, for the next 10—and he picks his text with reminders that no prediction is certain. But that does not keep him from leading specific arguments in a cumulatively misleading way. To choose one example from many: "Obviously, there is an absolute limit to the ability of the earth to support or sustain the process of industrial activity, and there is reason to believe that we are now moving toward that limit very rapidly." When we learn about this "absolute limit," it turns out to be the earth's capacity for absorbing heat from industrial processes—a limit we would reach some 100 years from now in the unlikely event that industrial activity kept growing until then at the fastest pace of the last 50 years.

Malthusian also makes, and overstates, the familiar climate-warming argument: we had better do something for the poor before they do something to us. Those of us who sympathize with Malthusian's ends may wish this to be true; it would at least provide a concrete reason for charity. But experience to date shows that the general class struggle quite simply bypassed our best, made the severely mobile (Africans) of those at the command of empire (Vietnam) and can involve the wealthy nations in their struggles.

Even with these problems, it is better to have the book than not to be waiting for it, because it advances the debate another large step. ■

The Human Prospect

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