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A Confused Statistician

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Hans Rosling has been making a splash lately telling people his five pieces of good news that should "upgrade their world view" (http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-24835822). One is that "Fast population growth is coming to an end." Globally, that may be true, but it is not happening soon, and it certainly isn't true for countries like Nigeria, Zambia, or Yemen with average family sizes of five or more. Population growth globally is projected to continue for another century, barring some enormous catastrophe. The second item is that "The 'developed' and 'developing' worlds have gone." Again, this is partly true but, although the sharp differences of thirty years ago are disappearing, almost half of humanity still live in conditions the average American, Australian, European, or Japanese would find unacceptable. Conservatively, somewhere around 2 billion people are seriously underfed or micronutrient malnourished. The third claim is that "People are much healthier." Basically that may be true on average, but not in absolute numbers. In 1960, perhaps 1 billion of Earth's 3 billion people were hungry, and several hundred million others were poorly nourished at best. That's fewer than the 2 billion in bad health today because of dietary deficiencies, but the proportion of the population in poor health is not very different. Rosling's fourth claim is that "Girls are getting better education." True, but it's far from universal. The fifth, "The end of extreme poverty is in sight" might be true, but more likely is "In this century extreme poverty will be the lot of most of humanity, after civilization collapses."

The likelihood of such a collapse is, of course, the result of the perfect storm of environmental problems that now threaten all nations. Those problems are all related to Earth's severe overpopulation, continuing population growth, and associated vast overconsumption, especially by the rich. Climate disruption alone, closely tied to human population size, could end the society we know. If the planet warms by, say, five degrees Celsius (as seems ever more possible), the impacts on the global food supply would be catastrophic. Additional threats from global toxification, loss of biodiversity, a decaying epidemiological environment, severe resource depletion, and the prospect of increasing resource or geoengineering wars (possibly

going nuclear) are all very real and escalating, as are the classic signs of impending civilizational collapse (e.g., diminishing returns to complexity).

If civilization collapses, population growth will certainly come to an end with a rapidly rising death rate and a population crash. All nations will be de-developed, virtually everyone will be less healthy (or dead), most girls (and boys) will be getting little or no education, and almost all survivors will be living in extreme poverty by today's standards. None of this *has* to happen, but there is almost no sign today of people in power taking the situation seriously, while the world continues its addiction to endless material growth powered by fossil fuels. Rosling's soothing assurances are analogous to a physician telling her lung cancer patient, not to worry, don't get treatment. There's lots of good news: your teeth have no cavities, your vision is excellent, and I see no symptoms of flu.

FOR DOCUMENTATION OF THE VIEWS EXPRESSED, SEE:

Ehrlich, P. R. and A. H. Ehrlich (2013). "Can a collapse of civilization be avoided?" Proceeding of the Royal Society B **http://rspb.royalsocietypublishing.org/content/280/1754/20122845**.

Klare, M. T. (2012). The Race for What's Left: The Global Scramble for the World's Last Resources New York, NY, Metropolitan Books

Michaux, Michael. (2013). Peak mining and its implications for natural resource management. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TFyTSiCXWEE

Tainter, J. A. (1988). The Collapse of Complex Societies. Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press.

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