Los Angeles Times

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OPINION

Op-Ed: Is humanity doomed? That depends on us

Concern over the world having too many people or too few has led some public figures to predict doom for humanity. (Wally Skalij / Los Angeles Times)

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MARCH 28, 2022 3 AM PT

Will birth rates doom humanity? Tech billionaire Elon Musk sounded an old alarm in December when he claimed that declining births are “one of the biggest risks to civilization.”

“Please look at the numbers,” he implored the Wall Street Journal’s CEO Council. “If people don’t have more children, civilization is going to crumble, mark my words.”

Such population doomsaying is not limited to billionaires. Paleontologist Henry Gee argued in November that our species is destined for extinction — and soon. Low genetic variation, declining fertility and habitat degradation imperil Homo sapiens, Gee claims, warning that “[t]here comes a time in the progress of any species, even ones that seem

to be thriving, when extinction will be inevitable, no matter what they might do to avert it."

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Other prominent figures have naturalized doomsday — from the opposite direction. Stanford biologist Paul Ehrlich famously predicted that population growth would outpace food production in the 1970s, leading hundreds of millions to starve to death. Even today, some scientists and environmentalists fear that humans will exceed the planet's carrying capacity and in doing so, destroy themselves.

These two predictions at first seem completely contradictory. Simultaneous fears of overpopulation and underpopulation cannot both be right. But they share a logic: that the apocalypse will result from the "natural laws" of population dynamics, rather than from political and economic decisions.

As ecologists and anthropologists who study human evolution and human relations with the planet, we are deeply troubled by the continued naturalization of doomsday — the narrative that suffering and societal collapse are the inevitable outcomes of evolutionary forces. This narrative invites political nihilism and disinvestment in the present. It denies our ability and responsibility to create a better and more just future.

Concerns about underpopulation reduce humanity to a pool of genetic resources and mistakenly assume that a species' ability to survive comes from population size. On the contrary, our species has survived due to its diverse array of behavioral, ecological, creative and collaborative capacities driven by social learning — in other words, our cultures.

At the same time, concerns about overpopulation flatten political and cultural differences in how people relate to their environments. They mistakenly assume that overconsumption is guaranteed by natural selection rather than ad campaigns, governmental policies and economic structures. Greed and exploitation are not inevitable. As demonstrated by the classic work of Elinor Ostrom, a Los Angeles native and the first woman to win the Nobel Prize in economics, self-organized groups around the world have found ways to sustainably consume and manage natural resources.

OPINION

Op-Ed: Forget overpopulation. The world could soon face a population bust

Feb. 24, 2019

Any claim about the "natural state" of the human species is deeply political, both in its account of humanity's past and in its vision of the future. In his 2018 book "Enlightenment Now," cognitive psychologist Steven Pinker writes that poverty "needs no explanation. In a world governed by entropy and evolution, it is the default state of humankind." In this way, Pinker naturalizes poverty. Yet this view ignores that the world is governed by people, whose decisions — sometimes by design — create poverty, inequity and misery.

In an essay published last fall, Luke Kemp of the University of Cambridge's Center for the Study of Existential Risk argued that only a few institutions truly have the power to imperil humanity. Scholars of catastrophic risk point to climate change, nuclear weapons, bioweapons, autonomous weapons and mass surveillance as humanity's greatest existential threats. All of these are the product of a small group of powerful industries dominated by a few actors, such as powerful CEOs and the U.S. government (which, for example, leads the world in spending on deadly autonomous weapons such as unmanned drones).

Climate change is a clear example of how decisions by small numbers of powerful humans, not population size, drive environmental degradation. The richest 1% of the world, about 63 million people, is responsible for more than twice as much greenhouse gas emissions as the 3.1 billion people who made up the poorest half of humanity. Just 20 fossil fuel companies can be directly linked to more than one-third of all greenhouse gas emissions in the modern era. Regulating population size, as some have recommended to lower emissions, would infringe on the liberties of billions of people while failing to ameliorate climate change.

In addition to the climate crisis, we live in a time of war, inequality, white supremacist violence, backlash against women's rights, technological upheaval and fraying social networks. None of these dire conditions is a biological or ecological inevitability. Nor is human extinction. To assert otherwise is to disavow responsibility for the policies and power structures that cause habitat degradation, income inequality and widespread injustice — conditions that already threaten the lives of countless people and other beings on this planet.

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