

## **‘Sustainability’ (a letter in the *TLS* – 15 August 2016)**

Sir, – In the issue of July 15, Richard Betts reviews two books on climate change, and Harry Johnstone two books on global hunger. Both reviewers and, so far as I can tell, all four authors tiptoe around the biggest elephant in these rooms: human overpopulation.

It is simply not true that capitalism is the only cause of the ecological crisis. Sheer human numbers are a primary driver of crashing biodiversity and mass extinctions, which Betts rightly puts alongside anthropogenic climate change, as well as being directly implicated in the demand for energy underlying the latter. As for global hunger, Johnstone seems to believe that “enough food for all” is a plausible slogan, but it only takes a sufficiently high number of “all” for it to become a fantasy. And we are already there, or – in terms of long-term sustainability – well past it.

Even Norman Borlaug described the Green Revolution (itself based on oil) as merely buying time for us to reduce our population, and that has not happened. The refusal to admit and address it as a genuine problem is one reason.

The organization Population Matters, supported by patrons such as Sir David Attenborough and Jane Goodall, does what it can. The silence in these reviews, however, remains far too typical. Apparently motivated by a fear of being called racist or misogynist, overpopulation denial shows a disgraceful lack of honesty and courage. It should be as untenable as climate-change denial. A sign of true realism would be a comprehensive summit, comparable to last year’s in Paris on climate change, to initiate an urgent global programme, in the overdeveloped world just as much as the developing, to reduce human numbers as humanely and effectively as possible.

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