

Malthusian Thought FREE

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Summary

Robert Malthus's 1798 *Population* has proven to be one of the most influential publications in history. Challenging ideas popular among Enlightenment writers, including the perfectibility of human institutions, he argued that since population could grow exponentially and agriculture only linearly, there was an inherent and irresolvable imbalance in nature that unavoidably led to population being checked by mortality among the poor. The policy implication was that aid to the hungry would only create more misery. The most famous “proof” of the theory came in Ireland in the 1840s, and Malthus's policy recommendations were followed. However, Ireland was setting food export records during the famine, and agriculture has grown much more rapidly than population ever since. The basic tenets of Malthus's have been debunked, but it continues to be influential, especially in the form of neo-Malthusianism, largely because of the interests it serves.

Keywords: population, Malthusianism, neo-Malthusianism, Enlightenment, agriculture, poverty

Introduction

A book entitled “Essay on the Principle of Population” appeared in London in 1798. It was a short, anonymous treatise by a first-time author, attacking some of the day's leading writers and proposing a theory of food and population. It drew outrage and scorn from many readers, and some of its claims would turn out to be so uninformed that the author apologized in a second edition,

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admitting that the book “was written on the spur of the occasion, and from the few materials which were within my reach in a country situation” (Malthus 1803). Yet some readers at the time, and since, welcomed the book so warmly that it “has never been out of the public consciousness for the two hundred years since it was written” (Mayhew 2014, 74), making it one of the most influential social science books ever written. The author was revealed to be Thomas Robert Malthus (he went by Robert), and in the 21st century we still name ways of thinking about food and population after him. I will attempt to explain Malthusianism and the tweaked versions of his ideas called neo-Malthusianism.

There are several reasons for the enduring power of Malthusianism. First is its usefulness: it has served the interests of a range of individuals, states, corporations, and social movements over the years. This was true from the beginning, with it appearing in the early years of the Industrial Revolution when desperately poor and underfed children and adults labored in what Blake called “dark Satanic mills,” the owners of which delighted in a scientific theory attributing poverty and hunger to the laws of nature and to the reproductive habits of the poor. It has proven to be a tool of inexhaustible power for diverting attention from underlying problems over the years, and continues to be so in contemporary attempts to make sense of population and agriculture.

The other reason for *Population*’s remarkable impact is that it laid out a theory of how nature and society worked and did so in a way that captured a sense of anxiety that has persisted across the centuries. Yet one of the ironies of Robert Malthus is that his actual message was *not* to worry. His argument was that it was inherent in nature for the lot of the poor to go hungry, be sick, and lead lives plagued by “vices,” and attempts to intervene will only make matters worse. Yet his work has been the cornerstone of history’s most pervasive strain of worry and fear of the future.

Let us reconstruct the events that led the young man to write a tract that would be such a work of its time and also timeless.

Malthus: Early Years

Born in 1766, Robert Malthus grew up on a country estate in southern England. He graduated from Cambridge in 1788, and, having no job, he moved back in with his parents. Although Robert and his father, Daniel, were close, they increasingly disagreed on social issues. The Enlightenment was in full bloom, and Daniel was an avid reader of its writers’ blend of philosophy and social science. Flowing throughout the Enlightenment literature were strong currents exalting reason and empiricism (as opposed to faith and authority), a belief in the “perfectibility of man,” and an optimism that the ills of the world could be met by improving social institutions. Daniel’s favorite theorist was Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who even visited the Malthuses when Robert was small. Rousseau had a particularly rosy perspective on humanity’s place in nature, famously writing that “[N]othing is so gentle as man in his primitive state” (Rousseau [1754] 1984). He also was a firm believer in the social and political benefits of population growth,

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writing that the best government was that under which “the citizens increase and multiply the most” (Mayhew 2014). Conversations around the Malthus dinner table must have been especially lively during Robert’s time at home, and young Robert grew increasingly skeptical. When he finally left home for his first job, it would be to the little country church where his impoverished congregants would serve as muse to theories growing out of arguments with his Enlightenment-minded father.

The job was as a curate in the chapel at Okewood. It was not far from his parents’ house in Surrey, but Okewood was a world apart, a backwoods area of poor farmers and laborers (Mayhew 2014, 61). It was the children of Okewood that Malthus had in mind when he later wrote of “the sons of labourers are very apt to be stunted in their growth, and are a long while arriving at maturity . . . which can only be attributed to a want either of proper or of sufficient nourishment” (Malthus 1798). Their poverty and poor nutrition were jarring to the young man who had spent the past year listening to his father’s disquisitions on progress in the human condition, and his reaction was harsh. He seemed less concerned about his parishioners’ grinding poverty than about the danger that someone might try to help them escape it; he later wrote that a poor man could not make more money without “depressing others in the same class” (Malthus 1798, 25) because they would buy meat for dinner, leading to increased herds and this raising the cost of grain eaten by the poor. Better paid peasants would only work less, leading to a poorer nation (Malthus 1798, 25). The belief that increased wages led to indolence did not apply to the author himself, who was enjoying a generous salary for little work, and who would soon move up to a rectorship in Lincolnshire that required almost no work at all (Pullen 2004).

But most important to social thinking was Malthus’s analysis of why the Okewood peasants were so poor. It turned out that Okewood was in the midst of a tiny population boom during the 1790s. The curate’s duties included baptisms and burials, and the spidery writing in the chapel register shows that births were outpacing deaths (James 1979, 46). The chapel registers for the years 1789–1798 record a yearly rate of sixteen baptisms but only five burials (Stapleton 1986, 27; Surrey Record Society 1927). Actually, these numbers were a meaningless blip in a tiny sample of demographic events, and some equally poor parishes had a surplus of burials for this period (Stapleton 1986, 27). But these short, ill-fed parishioners who appeared to be reproducing rapidly served as a muse to the young pastor who was about to become an author.

Population and Malthusian Theory

The Okewood job was not time demanding, and Robert increasingly turned his attention to a treatise that would set his insights into the grim dynamics of poverty against the rosy enthusiasm gushing forth from the Enlightenment writers. He began by noting that this book grew out of a conversation with a friend, on the subject of Mr. Godwin’s Essay. The friend was father Daniel, and “Mr. Godwin” was William Godwin, the social philosopher who had recently risen to prominence as England’s most discussed philosopher and public intellectual. Godwin was a progressive and daring thinker and one of the first philosophical anarchists. But

he was also a juicy target; he took the Enlightenment ideal of perfecting humans and social institutions to an extreme, envisioning a world ruled entirely by the intellect and without government, marriage, gender division of labor, theater, and sexual passion (Godwin 1793, 1797).

Malthus's counternarrative rested on two proposed truisms. First was that "population, when unchecked, increases in a geometrical ratio," and while he did not say that population literally did grow exponentially, he stressed that population growth was an inexorable force because of the constancy of the sex drive. Second was that "subsistence increases only in an arithmetical ratio," because agriculture could only grow by putting more land under the plow. It followed that food supply must exert "a strong and constantly operating check on population from the difficulty of subsistence" (Malthus 1798, 4–5).

The "check on population" took two very different forms, Malthus reasoned. "Preventive checks" limit the numbers of babies born, chiefly through constraints on marriage. But since such checks cannot suppress population growth sufficiently, there were "positive checks"—an odd name for people being killed off. On these apparently biological facts, Malthus built a set of social theories. First, he saw those positive checks as having to fall mainly onto the "lowest orders of society," and specifically those living in cities (Malthus 1798, 23). Second, the positive checks did not normally take the form of starvation, but rather social pathologies or "vices" (detailed in "Problems with Malthusian Theory"). The set of ideas, which was later called the Dismal Theorem, reflected "laws of nature," independent of culture, history, and the "human institutions" that Godwin emphasized.

There were important policy implications here. If the laws of nature dictated that population would always be checked by human misery, then feeding the hungry would only make more mouths to go hungry. He illustrated this principle (in a second edition of *Population*) by describing a table serving "nature's mighty feast," where making room for the hungry only turned order and plenty into misery and dependence. To make room for "intruders" is to disobey the "great mistress of the feast" who "humanely refused to admit fresh comers when her table was already full" (Malthus 1803). The proposition that feeding the hungry only creates more misery was later called the Utterly Dismal Theorem.

The "naturalness" of food–population imbalance also contributed to Malthus's implacable opposition to birth control. Contraceptive technologies were primitive at the time, but Malthus saw contraception itself as immoral, as compared to delaying or refraining from marriage, which he termed "moral restraint."

Problems with Malthusian Theory

If we fast forward, we find that the relationships between population and food production have gone in the opposite direction from Malthus's laws. Since 1798, world population has risen just over sixfold (from around one to six billion) while agricultural

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production has risen around tenfold (Federico 2005). It took until 1830 for Earth's population to reach one billion, and only twelve years for its second billion. But rather than being consumed by scarcity and misery, demographic and nutritional standards indicate improvement in average human well-being. In fact, the years of fastest population growth beginning with the mid-20th-century baby boom have been marked by particularly rapid improvements in living conditions:

“For the world as a whole, life expectancy at birth rose from 46.4 years in 1950–1955 to 64.4 years in 1990–1995, an increase of 18 years. The advantage in life expectancy of the more developed regions over the less developed regions fell from twenty-six years in 1950–1955 to twelve years in 1990–1995. In developing regions, the absolute number (and the proportion) of people who were chronically undernourished fell from 941 million around 1970 to 786 million around 1990”

(Cohen 1998).

And in its race with population, agriculture is pulling farther and farther away: between 1961 and 2005, the world's population increased by 111 percent while crop production rose by 162 percent (Burney, Davis, and Lobell 2010). In 1997, an article in a major scientific journal (ironically, a special issue devoted to the question of whether we were “on the edge of a Malthusian precipice”) pointed out that it was world food production that was actually increasing exponentially (Evans 1997, 901). We pay farmers not to grow; we use vast amounts of farm produce to produce fuel; we burn up much of its food value by feeding animals in factory farms; we throw away and waste a full third of our food globally (Gustavsson et al. 2011). Clearly something is deeply wrong in the theory. It turns out it got wrong not only the postulates on population and agricultural growth but also the key relationship between them.

Malthus's demographic postulate that unchecked populations grow exponentially, while mathematically obvious, was irrelevant because no human population has ever grown at more than a tiny fraction of an “unchecked” rate. All human populations have multiple “preventive checks,” as Malthus himself found out and admitted in the second—and little read—edition of *Population*.

Malthus's postulate that subsistence—meaning agriculture—could only grow arithmetically was based on his ignorance of any form of agricultural change other than putting more land under the plow, and he thought it “arrogant and absurd” to believe that “two ears of wheat should in future grow where only one had grown before” (Malthus 1803, 413). However, average grain yields in the United States today are around 175 bushels/acre, seven times the yields in the mid-19th century. Yields can be boosted enormously by external resources such as fertilizer and irrigation (often termed agricultural industrialization) and also by labor-based intensification (Boserup 1965; Netting 1993). Malthus could not have known about industrialization since he died before agricultural input industries developed, but all five editions of Malthus's *Population* came out during a period of intense labor-based intensification in England; between 1801 and 1851, England's agricultural production per capita doubled (Grigg 1980, 163).

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But the crux of Malthusian theory was the interaction between agriculture and population—the mechanisms that came into play when human numbers pressed against the limits of food supply. Malthus described three levels of positive checks, of which famine was only “the last, the most dreadful resource of nature.” Most people were killed off before that by something that nearly obsessed Malthus: “vice.” He wrote:

The power of population is so superior to the power in the earth to produce subsistence for man, that premature death must in some shape or other visit the human race. The vices of mankind are active and able ministers of depopulation. They are the precursors in the great army of destruction; and often finish the dreadful work themselves”

(Malthus 1798, 44).

It is only if vices “fail in this war of extermination” that things get really nasty and move to the second level of disease, in which “sickly seasons, epidemics, pestilence, and plague, advance in terrific array, and sweep off their thousands and ten thousands.” Finally, and only if depopulation is still not “successful,” then “gigantic inevitable famine stalks in the rear, and with one mighty blow levels the population with the food of the world.”

Malthus’s habit of attributing a wide range of diverse phenomena to overpopulation, and to claim them to be natural checks on depopulation, has been among his most emulated habits of thought. Yet the logic of these population-checking mechanisms disintegrates upon inspection. Consider that the “vices” that he cited as ministers of depopulation included lack of “attention to children,” “unwholesome trades,” “drinking, gaming, and debauchery,” and dirty houses. He even saw cities themselves as a vice, and extolled a vice-free world in which “crowds no longer collect together in great and pestilent cities for purposes of court intrigue, of commerce, and vicious gratifications.” Later editions of the essay would expand the list of vices to include “all unwholesome occupations, severe labour and exposure to the seasons, extreme poverty, bad nursing of children, great towns, excesses of all kinds” (Malthus 1826). Waxing more prudish than logical, he added to the list of vices “promiscuous intercourse, unnatural passions, violations of the marriage bed, and improper arts to conceal the consequences of irregular connexions” (Malthus 1803, 11). As historical geographer David Grigg points out, Malthus “never makes clear the relationship between population growth, the positive checks and the means of subsistence . . . by the ‘means of subsistence’ he appears to mean the food supply, yet most of his positive checks were . . . in no way related to the food supply” (Grigg 1980, 13).

Malthus’s belief that “living in towns” was a vice that lowered population was in a sense true, although it was hardly a natural mechanism as Malthus imagined. Late-19th-century England was unique in Europe in how rapidly its population was moving to the city. By 1850, 41 percent of the population in England and Wales would be urban, as compared to only 14 percent and 11 percent in France and Germany (Wood 2000, 37). Many of the people leaving the countryside had been dispossessed by enclosure movements, and as they gravitated toward cities they had no choice but to work cheap and also buy cheap consumables, thus

providing two key components in the English Industrial Revolution (Wood 2000, 38–39). Their lives as urban workers were often squalid indeed, but this was not because the city was a natural check on population but rather because they were poor and lacking in political resources to create healthier conditions.

Malthus's second positive check was disease, and he was convinced that not just endemic disease but even plagues and epidemics could be partly chalked up to “crowded population and unwholesome and insufficient food” (Malthus 1798, 36). But infectious disease is not a normal result of food–population imbalance except in cases where hunger or malnutrition make people more likely to catch the disease and less able to survive it (Grigg 1980).

Grigg points out that even famine, the third and final positive check, while obviously linked to food supply, is “not necessarily a function of population growth; famines were a result of harvest failure due to bad weather or plant disease and the poor communications that made it difficult to transport grain to afflicted areas” (Grigg 1980, 13).

Reception of Malthusian Thinking

Contemporary reactions to *Population* were polarized. One group that welcomed it enthusiastically were the elites who were making fortunes from the early Industrial Revolution mills, where cheap labor (from disenfranchised workers) and cheap raw materials (such as slave-grown cotton and various resources from colonies) made for windfall profits. The young pastor quickly found himself promoted to the position of professor of history and political economy—a position invented for him at the East India Company's college in Haileybury.

But fierce criticisms also emerged from many perspectives, beginning with religious thinkers taken aback by Malthus's idea of a world in which rampant vice and misery were inherent to human ecology. How could God enjoin humans to “be fruitful and multiply” if reproduction caused incurable depravity, disease, and famine? Malthus's strained explanation was that God had set up the imbalance between population and agriculture to get people's attention and force them to “mental fight.” God had made population grow faster than agriculture in order to “urge man to further the gracious designs of Providence by the full cultivation of the earth” (Malthus 1798, 114). Unanswered was the obvious question of why, if savage subsistence practices were so offensive to God, that he set up a world of rampant misery to get people to avoid them.

A second set of criticisms held that *Population* was politics masquerading as science. It is certainly true that while positing laws of nature, the book was explicitly a work of politics and economic policy. His conviction that poverty and other social maladies were caused by the unchecked libidos of the poor led Malthus to advocate for both broad principles (aid for the poor will only worsen their plight) and specific implications (England's welfare laws were counterproductive). Many saw *Population* as a “sinister

attempt to excuse the massive inequities and injustices of the prevailing social order” (McCoy 1980, 260)—a “political bible of the rich” (Mayhew 2014, 87). The philosopher William Hazlitt denounced him as “the overseer of a workhouse . . . disguised in the garb of philosophy,” using false logic and garbled calculations (Mayhew 2014, 91). Marx later wrote scornfully that the working classes were right in believing Malthus to not be a “man of science”; he was “a bought advocate, a pleader on behalf of their enemies, a shameless sycophant of the ruling classes” (Meek 1971).

The charge that *Population* was ultimately a political tract was supported by the fact that its key ideas had been floated before but had attracted less attention because they suited contemporary political interests less (Mayhew 2014). But with England’s Industrial Revolution with its new regime of factory production powered by disenfranchised urban laborers, the theory was invaluable in shifting blame for hunger, poverty, and ill health onto human reproduction.

Malthus and Famine

Malthus’s theory, contrary to how it is often portrayed, wasn’t really about famines, which he saw only as nature’s final resort for when vice and disease failed in their job. But most famines have been about Malthus’s theory. Virtually every major famine since 1798 has been ascribed by some observers to overpopulation, almost always with explicit references to Malthus. Let us consider the important example of the Irish “Potato Famine” of 1845–1849, which was taken by many as indisputable proof of Malthusian principles. This also clearly shows the effects of Malthusian thinking on policies.

Although Malthus died before this famine, he saw the preceding population buildup as confirming that population would grow as fast as the food supply allowed. He wrote that the nourishment provided by potatoes prompted Irish peasants to “follow their inclinations” and marry young (Malthus 1826), leading to the positive checks like “wretched cabins” and “bad and insufficient clothing.” In 1831, the potato crop failed and minor famine hit, providing Malthus with further validation of his theory.

Many contemporary observers moreover held that the crisis of the 1840s fit *Population*’s subtext of the poor lacking industry, morality, and worth. English publications at the height of the famine berated the Irishman for lacking industry and the “mania” with which he grew “his favorite root” (Niven 1846, 21). A century later, writers were still claiming that potato growing had brought out Irish “sloth and slovenliness” and that the sequence of “poverty, potatoes, larger families, more potatoes, and greater poverty” had brought on catastrophe (Salaman 1949, 343). “Only in Ireland,” writes Eric Ross (1998, 39), “among the potato-eating regions of Europe, was the vicious circle posited that the potato made people lazy, while their laziness led them to depend solely on the potato.”

The Great Famine was triggered by a blight that could turn a healthy green potato field to a blackened ruin in four days (Turner

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2005, 342). It spread across Western Europe in the 1840s with significant losses to potato crops but no severe famines except in Ireland. By horrendous coincidence, the 1846 rye, wheat, and oat harvests were also disastrous. By 1847, the blight had abated but now there was no seed potato to plant, and severe food scarcity continued until 1850. There were an estimated one million deaths between 1845 and 1850, out of a population of 8.2 million before the blight struck, and another million emigrated. The actual cause of most deaths was recorded as disease such as dysentery (which spread like wildfire through overcrowded workhouses) (Mokyr and Ó Gráda 2002), but mortality from indirect causes rather than outright starvation seemed to fit Malthus's theory of the operation of positive checks.

If Malthus's Dismal Theorem seemed to explain the cause of the disaster, his Utterly Dismal Theorem guided England's handling of the situation in its colony. Prime Minister John Russell viewed the unfolding crisis with "a Malthusian fear about the long-term effect of relief" (Prest 1972, 271). The relief effort was headed by Treasury Undersecretary Charles Trevelyan, a former student in Malthus's classroom at the East India college. Trevelyan identified the real problem to be "surplus population" that remained despite "every practicable remedy." Still, a "deep and inveterate root of social evil remained, and this has been laid bare by a direct stroke of an all-wise and all-merciful Providence" (Trevelyan 1848, 201). A loving God was trimming the Irish herd.

Trevelyan put Malthusian principles into practice. While independent European countries hit by the blight imported food to make up for the shortfall, England offered scant aid to its starving colony. Relief policies were even designed to expropriate land from Irish cottagers: the Poor Relief Act of 1847 denied aid to anyone owning more than a quarter acre of land, forcing tenants to relinquish land holdings (Ross 1998, 48).

However, the population in Ireland in the 1840s unquestionably could have supported itself with the agricultural technology available at the time; the problem was that many Irish peasants were tenant farmers on small parcels rented from absentee landlords, and over one-third of rural households were landless (Grigg 1980, 120–123). Potatoes were the only way to feed a family on a tiny plot and so the Irish peasants were devastated by the same blight that was tolerated in other apparently crowded areas of Europe.

Ireland was also uncrowded enough to be producing large amounts of grain and livestock for export to England. Ireland's population may have been growing rapidly during the first half of the 19th century, but its food export economy was growing even faster. By the 1830s, enough grain was being exported yearly to feed two million people (Grigg 1980, 124). Meat exports from Ireland actually increased during the famine: in 1846 alone, at the height of the famine, Ireland exported more than 730,000 cattle and pigs (Kinealy 2002, 105–111). On the receiving end, Britain enjoyed an "extraordinary increase in the home supplies of corn [i.e. grain]" in the years leading up to the famine, with increased food consumption and a surge in the number of horses that were often fed on Irish oats ("Corn Laws and Corn Trade" 1854, 391). It is likely that in the 1820s both Prof. Malthus, who blamed Irish food shortages on the poor having too many babies, and his student Charles Trevelyan, who implemented policies designed

to encourage Irish starvation, were dining on Irish pork, beef, and wheat, and riding horses fed on Irish oats.

Political journalist John Mitchel would write that “this million and a half, then, died of hunger in the midst of abundance, which their own hands created . . . Almighty God sent the potato-blight, but the English created the famine” (Mitchel 1905, 49). Robert Malthus may have been professor of political economy at the East India Company College, but Ireland can only be seen as a Malthusian disaster by ignoring the political economy.

This would not be the only time British leaders would blame subject peoples for famines that the British themselves were behind. Another notable example occurred during India’s 1876–1878 famine, triggered by one of the El Niño climatic events that have repeatedly perturbed global weather patterns. In this unusually intense El Niño, India’s summer monsoon precipitation dropped by as much as 75 percent. As an estimated six to ten million Indians were succumbing to starvation or related disease, the colonial viceroy Lord Lytton blamed Indians for having a population that had “a tendency to increase more rapidly than the food it raises from the soil” (Davis 2002, 32). The colonial finance minister insisted that “every benevolent attempt made to mitigate the effects of famine and defective sanitation serves but to enhance the evils resulting from overpopulation.” True to Malthusian dogma, a government report later asserted that the hardest-hit part of the population had been “unable to adopt prudential restraint,” and moreover that the famine would have been even worse if the government had spent more on famine relief (Davis 2002, 32).

Environmental historian Mike Davis (2002) debunks this self-serving account of a population-driven disaster. The British colonial state (called “the Raj”) had spread poverty for decades leading up to the 1870s. They had crushed indigenous manufacturing institutions and extracted enormous wealth in the form of taxes to a colonial regime that returned little by way of services; taxes on food producers were especially onerous. The Raj seized control of commons that had formerly provided resources such as wood, dung, and water that were especially crucial to poor families.

Famines had become frequent even before 1876, but the failure of the monsoons in 1876–1877 created a dire situation that demanded an effective humanitarian response. Instead, the response of the Raj was ineffective and vicious. Starving applicants for relief work were required to travel to distant dormitory camps outside their locality to perform coolie labor on railroad and canal projects. Laborers were prohibited from seeking relief until “it was certified that they had become indigent, destitute and capable of only a modicum of labour,” and a deliberately cruel “distance test” forced able-bodied individuals to walk at least ten miles to get work. For those who were actually given relief work, rations were actually more meager than those in Nazi concentration camps. As in Ireland before, “those with the power to relieve famine convinced themselves that overly heroic exertions against implacable natural laws, whether of market prices or population growth, were worse than no effort at all” (Davis 2002, 32).

The last parallel with Ireland is the quantities of food that were exported from India as its peasants starved due to an alleged food shortage. India exported a record 358,000 tons of wheat to the United Kingdom in 1877–1878 (Davis 2002, 31–32).

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Neo-Malthusianism

Robert Malthus's theory has been re-engineered many times over the years, but many key elements of the original theory have never gone away, despite their logical problems and persistent failure to fit world events. His fondness for blaming population for all manner of problems, even with no credible causal link, is also still with us. *The Population Bomb* author Paul Ehrlich blamed everything "from rubbish to riots" on population in the 1960s (Ehrlich 1969). Examples abound even from esteemed scientists, such as academic ecologist and PBS presenter Paul Colinvaux, who flatly stated that "all poverty is caused by the continued growth of population" (1978, 222).

But while core elements of original Malthusianism live on, what has come to be more common and more influential are "neo-Malthusian" perspectives in which some key element of the original theory has been adjusted or even reversed. The two most important such adjustments are what we will call "reproductive" and "industrial" neo-Malthusianism.

Reproductive neo-Malthusianism accepts Malthus's view of population as an inexorable force and source of human misery but reverses his hostility toward contraception. This position is not new—it was endorsed by some of Malthus's contemporaries (Micklewright 1961)—but it came into its own later in the 19th century, beginning with the Malthusian League in Britain and the Neo-Malthusian League in the Netherlands. A major reason reproductive neo-Malthusianism gained traction when it did was the improvement in contraceptive technology. Condoms made of impregnated linen or animal membranes had been around since the 16th century, but were as unpopular as one might expect. But the discovery of vulcanization led to vastly improved condoms made of rubber, the first of which appeared in 1855. Reproductive neo-Malthusians sought to improve the reputation of contraceptives, which were associated with seamen and prostitutes (Micklewright 1961). They also had to buck formal opposition from the Church of England and the British medical establishment, which remained firmly opposed to devices that they saw as a lustful, selfish and immoral "sin against physiology" and a cause of cancer, sterility, nymphomania, mental decay, amnesia, and suicide (Peel 1964, 136).

Many 19th-century reproductive neo-Malthusians like Annie Besant were sincere progressives who sought to empower poor women. But history has shown again and again that there is a fine line between strengthening reproductive rights of the poor and suppressing the reproduction of the poor (or other categories deemed undesirable). Malthus is remembered for theorizing why there is "overpopulation," but it was not simply population that was excessive—it was always the numbers of certain kinds of people. Malthus never suggested there were too many people from wealthy families like his own; it was the poor that fell prey to their libidos and hence suffered the positive checks on population. Reproductive neo-Malthusians stress keeping down numbers through birth control, a position that would seem to have much to recommend it except that it often is joined to an enthusiasm for keeping *others* from reproducing. In modern times their activities are often justified in terms of empowerment, and it is quite true

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that giving people—especially women—information and technology allowing them to have greater control over if and when they have babies is profoundly empowering. The problem is that there is no hard and fast line between providing what can prevent childbirth and encouraging, or urging, or pressuring, and demanding, and finally forcibly preventing women from having children. This is the dark and vital lesson from the era of eugenics in the United States, which would inspire many activities of the Nazis.

Industrial neo-Malthusianism is driven by promotion of technology-based external inputs. Input industries postdated Malthus, but he was even opposed to external inputs on principle. He did not object to putting more land under the plow, but he believed that among the poor, distress from food shortage was “so deeply seated that no human ingenuity can reach it” (Malthus 1798, 30). (One might have thought he would see the Irish adoption of the highly productive, nutritious, labor-intensive potato as an example of people improving their agriculture in response to God’s preordained scarcity, but instead he condemned it for encouraging population growth and misery.) He insisted that “if the only check on the growth of population is starvation and misery, then no matter how favorable the environment or how advanced the technology the population will grow until it is miserable and starves” (Boulding 1956).

This perspective has lived on in some quarters. Paul Ehrlich and the leaders of the 1970s environmental movement may have diverged from Malthus on population control, but they were just as dour on the merits of production-boosting technology. As they saw it, “since resources grow only arithmetically if at all, our exponential growth in population and in consumption levels is bound to bring us up against scarcity, shortages (even widespread famine) and the destruction of life on the planet” (Matthaei 1984, 83).

Industrial neo-Malthusians, however, replace Malthus’s nihilistic hopelessness with the conviction that agricultural science—and only agricultural science—can feed the world. This perspective rose to prominence after World War II. “Modern science has the answer to Malthus,” Orr and Lubbock insisted in their 1953 book *The White Man’s Dilemma: Food and the Future* (80). In his influential 1964 book *Transforming Traditional Agriculture*, economist Theodore Schultz explained that peasant farmers could only boost production if “modern” technologies could be developed for them. The article “Malthus Foiled Again and Again” tells that salvation from disaster comes from the science of fertilizer and seeds (Trewavas 2002, 668). This radical reconfiguring of the Dismal Theorem has been invoked to justify every occasion on which agriculture is penetrated by a new external technology, even if the technology did not actually feed any more people and even when there were already food surpluses.

Green Revolution hero Norman Borlaug was the perfect embodiment of industrial neo-Malthusianism. He repeatedly cited the ~~inexorable power of population growth that he blamed for a dazzling range of social ills in the dubious manner of Malthus~~ himself. But while Malthus had fussed over population growth causing sexual deviance and infidelity, Borlaug blamed it for loss of personal freedom and absence of world peace (Borlaug 1970b). Borlaug was zealous in his belief in science as the only antidote,

and in his 1970 Nobel speech he insisted that “we are dealing with two opposing forces, the scientific power of food production and the biologic power of human reproduction” (Borlaug 1970a). This “scientific power of food production” inevitably means commercial technologies sold by private corporations. Borlaug was a persistent, single-minded, and combative proponent of agriculture based on external commercial inputs. Early in the process of getting his high-input seeds into India, he wrote the head of the product research division of Esso Research and Engineering Company to gush about the enormous scale of sales after farmers started “clamoring for fertilizers.” He insisted that “fertilizer corporations like Esso should play an ‘enormous role [in] selling’ the new technology to the governments of developing countries; moreover, these corporations should convince the countries to develop policies conducive to fertilizer production and application, such as setting up new factories and establishing favorable pricing and credit strategies” (Saha 2013, 307). He would later appear in press conferences organized by the pesticide industry and promote the “Declaration in Support of Protecting Nature with High-Yield Farming and Forestry” from the Hudson Institute, a think tank supported by the agricultural chemical industry (Sumberg, Keeney, and Dempsey 2012). Late in life Borlaug was a militant proponent of the agricultural biotechnology industry and a disdainful critic of its detractors.

Aside from rehashing the claim that hunger comes from lack of agricultural output, industrial neo-Malthusianism has the insidious effect of obscuring the great differences in the effects that technologies have on different groups by lumping everyone together as a hungry population.

Legacy

Malthusian theories, both in their original and “neo” forms, have had enduring impacts on both law and policy and on popular (and even scientific) understandings of population and food problems. His work had direct impact on English law during his own lifetime—for instance helping to pass the New Poor Law of 1834 eliminating important forms of poor relief and forcing the poor to enter workhouses (Merchant 2015, 52)—and in the years following his death in colonial policies described in “Malthus and Famine.” Malthus-inspired interpretations and policies have continued to resurge, such as in the 1960s when Paul Ehrlich’s bestselling *The Population Bomb* (1968) advised letting India starve and the influential social scientist Garrett Hardin would write that “clearly the worst thing we can do is send food. The child who is saved today becomes a breeder tomorrow. We send food out of compassion, but if we desired to increase the misery in an overpopulated nation, could we find a more effective way of doing so? Atomic bombs would be kinder” (Feenberg 1999).

Yet science has completely debunked Malthusian theory. Continuing to use the theory, always regulated by preventive checks and agriculture tends to grow faster than population rather than serving as a systemic check on population. To explain why the theory remains lodged in public understandings, we return to the time of its original publication, when it was lauded not for its scientific

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rigor but because it so neatly suited the interests of influential groups. The theory and its “neo” versions have continued to provide useful rhetorical tools to vested interests over the years. Histories by Eric Ross (1998) and Allan Chase (1977) follow the theory’s use through anti-immigrant movements, eugenic sterilization programs, and even some environmental movements. It has also been invoked each time a new agricultural technology comes onto the scene, from hybrid corn (Harpstead 1975, 213) to genetically modified crops (McGloughlin 1999).

In the 21st century, we find ourselves in the odd situation of well-publicized agricultural excesses, including in countries with the greatest incidence of hunger (Stone 2002), while some voices continue to sound alarms about overpopulation. In the end, it seems that Malthus, who lambasted Godwin for the “error of attributing all the vices of mankind to human institutions,” attributed almost everything that goes wrong to population. This is perhaps the most profound and problematic legacy of Robert Malthus’s, as countless writers in succeeding generations would not only point to population growth as an ominous and inexorable danger but would attribute all manner of social ills to population even where there was no rational causal mechanism.

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