

## Malthusianism

It was, as various writers have noted since, a "tract for the times": a pamphlet published anonymously in 1798 by a young and unknown pastor, challenging the Enlightenment giants and taking a harsh stand on welfare policy in Britain. Its central point was that the prime driver of societal ill is population's tendency to outgrow food production. Its strengths, as its later adherents saw it, were unflinching honesty and scientific legwork; the result, as economist Alfred Marshall later put it, was "one of the most crushing answers that patient and hard-working science has ever given to the reckless assertions of its adversaries."<sup>1</sup> By its second edition it was no longer anonymous: the name Thomas Robert Malthus was attached to the work, and this name has ever since been attached to its central point.

The pamphlet, *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, countered Godwin's and Condorcet's idealistic views on the perfectibility of social institutions, pointing instead to "fixed laws of our nature," specifically that "Population, when unchecked, increases in a geometrical ratio...subsistence increases only in an arithmetical ratio." These "fixed laws" comprised two claims, one agricultural and one demographic. For the demographic claim, Malthus did marshal some empirical support (including data from colonial America), but he mainly supported his case by appeal to the facts of human nature: Godwin may have predicted the triumph of mind over body, but Malthus countered that overpopulation resulting from "passion between the sexes" could only be checked by misery, vice, and death. The agricultural claim was seen more as a given, since he was writing when there was little inkling of how food production could be boosted except by putting more land under, or more men behind, the plow.<sup>2</sup>

The centuries since Malthus's time have brought profound changes not only to human demography and food output, but to the scientific fields devoted to their study. These developments have been unkind to Malthus's basic postulates. On the population side, various effects of social institutions, government policies, education, and economic development have repeatedly overridden the constant effect of "passion:" baby booms and baby busts have come and gone, and total fertility rates have plummeted worldwide (including throughout most of the developing world since the 1960s). On the agricultural front, it was soon after Malthus died that external-input agriculture began, first with the advent of global trade in nitrogen fertilizer, then by revolutions in mechanization, breeding, pesticides, and information technology. Malthus knew nothing of the common process of *agricultural intensification*, whereby output is increased by added labor and skill rather than acreage. Overall agricultural production has been outstripping population growth ever since 1798, and is expected to keep doing so for as far out as the FAO makes predictions. The fact that famine continues to haunt humanity underscores the deep problem in malthusian causality. In recent years, a Nobel prize has been awarded for an economic historian's work on the nondemographic underpinnings of famine, and overflowing

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<sup>1</sup> Marshall's comments specifically referred to the expanded 1803 edition of *Population*.

<sup>2</sup> "Premiums might be given for turning up fresh land, and if possible encouragements held out to agriculture above manufactures, and to tillage above grazing. Every endeavour should be used to weaken and destroy all those institutions relating to corporations, apprenticeships, etc., which cause the labours of agriculture to be worse paid than the labours of trade and manufactures" (Malthus [1798] 1959:33).

grain stocks have been reported in the country with the world's largest population of under-nourished.

Yet Malthus's "tract for the times" has proven to be one of the most timeless documents in western intellectual history, contributing inspiration for, and shape to, a long and varied history of theories, schools of thought, movements, and policies. Much of this persistent power of "malthusianism" is due to its malleability, and the fact that its basic tenets and implications can be adjusted to changing agendas. (Some writers write instead of *Neomalthusianism*, but the distinction serves little purpose since Malthus himself tinkered with his basic arguments so much that he would have to be classified as a neomalthusian himself.) Given the failures of malthusianism to fit the history of fertility and food production, or the dynamics of food shortage, why it has had such a long history of influence is an interesting question. The main answers are political and social, and anthropologist Eric Ross has provided a history of the political and social uses of malthusianism, beginning with its original use to explain and justify the burgeoning slums and short lifespans of the Industrial Revolution workforce. In the mid-19th century, malthusianism was used as a justification of ruthless colonial policies. For instance, the Irish potato famine was held up as confirmation of malthusian doctrine, despite the fact that Ireland exported large amounts of meat to England throughout the crisis. Nineteenth century famines in the British colony of India, caused in large part by the forced replacement of food production by commodity production, were likewise attributed to Indian overpopulation -- as was the need for high taxes on Indian colonial subjects.

In the first decades of the 20th century, malthusianism provided support for anti-immigrant societies and policies in the U.S. Academic books stressed the dangers posed by the reproductive urges of "inferior races" such as Jews and Irish.

Malthusianism shaped Cold War thinking in the U.S., attributing the spread of communism to high population densities. These fears were particularly focused on India, where peasant movements in the post-war years were taken as warnings that India might go the way of China. Through the PL-480 program, the U.S. transferred enormous amounts of grain to India well into the 1960s, to check the spread of communism (and to absorb U.S. grain surpluses). The Indian state therefore invested in industry and allowed the agricultural sector to stagnate, reinforcing the dependence on grain imports and perception of malthusian overpopulation. Therefore the Green Revolution is often credited with averting a malthusian catastrophe.

Beginning in the mid-1990s, malthusianism helped fill the void in post-Cold War thinking, with academic writers and journalists stressing environmental security as the new driver of Third World conflict. This surge of malthusianism took local population/resource imbalance as the principal driver in what were presented as gathering crises. Robert Kaplan's lurid essay "The Coming Anarchy" popularized this perspective in public and policy circles (although detailed case studies by geographers and anthropologists showed that such conflicts were consistently driven by other, nondemographic and nonlocal, factors).

Most recently, malthusianism has been used to great effect in the promotion of genetically modified crops. This began in the late 1990s largely in response to European rejection of genetically modified foods. Biotechnology media began to raise alarms about population growth and impending food shortages in developing countries, FAO projections notwithstanding. This latest use of malthusianism furthers interests of corporations (who stand to make or lose billions), states (who compete for niches in global trade), and universities (whose biology departments have moved rapidly into genetic modification).

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