

WHY MALTHUS WILL ALWAYS BE WRONG

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Abstract:

Malthus is a figure analogous to economics in the same way as the phlogiston theory is to chemistry: antiquated, outdated, erroneous and harmful. In this paper, we summarize Malthusian theory, its flaws, and explain why it is not valid for policymaking decisions. We also discuss the historical background and response to Malthus's ideals, paying particular attention to the national government-level throughout the world.

Keywords: *Malthus; overpopulation; economic error*

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Introduction

Population economics is the area of study concerned with population and demographics in regards to patterns of trade and business. It is a field which has existed for several centuries, leading to changes and advancements in our understanding, and in subsequent public policy and other political realms. When discussing this subject, it is impossible to give a thorough account without mentioning one of its most influential members: Thomas Robert Malthus.

But how valid was Malthus's theory? Was he truly a prophetic doomsayer, with a message about the end of life as we know it? Or rather, was this dismal scientist presenting a flawed theory which has left a problematic legacy? With the data available at present, it would appear to be the latter.⁶ Malthusian theory is a relic of time; a theory which never was worth its salt.

In the first part of this paper, we discuss the nature of Malthusian theory and its history. Then, we explain the issues with the theory and present data contradictory to the predictions set forth by Malthus. We also attempt to explore the reasons why Malthusian theory has recently seen a resurgence in mass media over the recent years.

Malthusian Theory

Malthus was born in 1766 in the south of England, where he spent the majority of his life and professional career. Throughout his life he collected several honors, including membership into the Political Economy Club with other great economists such as David Ricardo and James Mill. He died in 1834.

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⁶ There are also logical flaws with this doctrine, which we explore below.

Much of the writing of Malthus was a reaction to the British “Poor Law.” This was a body of law which involved support and charity for the impoverished in England and Wales. Malthus opposed these policies strongly, believing them to be implicitly supporting the creation of larger families amongst those who could not effectively support them, which would act only to exacerbate poverty.

The titular theory goes as follows: 1) population growth is exponential, while 2) production is linear, and 3) at a critical point the population growth will outpace the growth in food production. Figure 1 illustrates the graphs of population growth compared to production increase, resulting in an intersection at what is known as the “Malthusian Catastrophe” (labeled as CP), According to Malthus, once the catastrophe point was reached, some catastrophe would reduce the population back to sustainable levels.

One of two types of events would return population to acceptable levels: *positive checks* or *preventative checks*. The former included disasters such as disease, famine, or war, which would result in death prematurely for part of the current population. The latter included institutions (political or otherwise) which would halt the growth rate for a period of time, such as increased abstinence or generally lower rates of childbirth.⁷ For both

types of event, the population level would be reduced to a point under production.

To visualize this using a different device, we shall apply to it the concept of decreasing marginal utility. Figure 2 is a typical graph depicting diminishing marginal utility, however a line ‘x’ has been drawn, which corresponds to the same on Figure 1, as it is at this point when population increasing any further will create rapidly decreasing utility. There is seemingly an optimal point at which production is sufficiently expanded to supply the entirety of the population, as well as a number of points at which there would be a production surplus.

While the theory originated as a means of predicting food production, it would through time be applied to a variety of different resources and served as justifications for a variety of social reforms. Neo-Malthusianism now generally pertains to policies for population control, and still retains significant influence. Malthus’s legacy has extended into countries such as Puerto Rico, the Netherlands, India, and

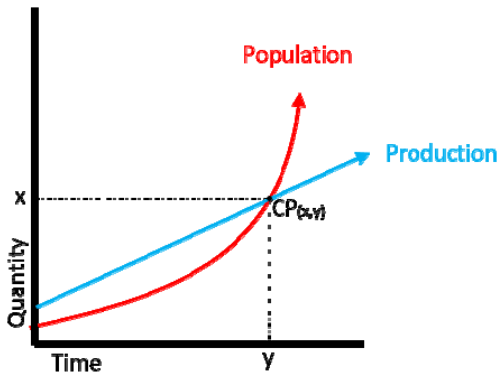


Figure 1

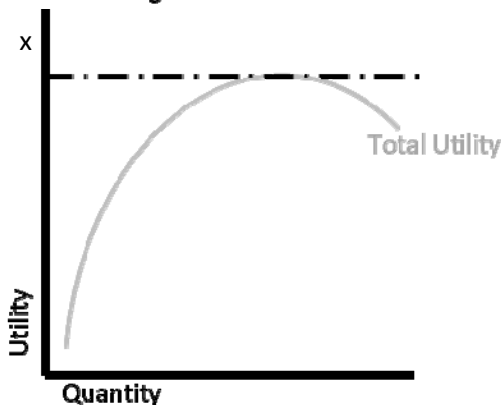


Figure 2

⁷ Later Malthus revised his initial statements to include contraceptives, believing voluntary widespread abstinence was unlikely.

China⁸. While Malthus considered abstinence to be preferable to contraception, most Neo-Malthusians mention this as the focal point for their argument. Some examples of economists propagating Neo-Malthusian ideals include economists such as John Maynard Keynes and Paul Ehrlich, and an increasing number of other influential speakers in other movements including Feminism and Environmentalism.⁹

Malthusian ideals have also made their way into popular media in the recent years. Action films such as *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018), *The Inferno* (2016), *After Earth* (2013), and even children's films such as *Wall-E* (2008) have presented the Malthusian theory as a plot device, slowly pushing it into public awareness even without crediting its original creator.¹⁰ When acted upon directly by an antagonist, the theory is presented as radical and terrible, yet at the same time treated as an inevitability. These films treat the antagonists as committing a necessary evil, intentionally leaving the audience to consider the victory over them to be bittersweet; as though it is simply delaying the inevitable.

As an important note, Malthus's beliefs were strongly rooted in Christian morality with heavy focus on self-control and abstinence.¹¹ He believed strongly that many of the issues with population would be easily solved through the preventative checks that followed from "moral restraint." But just as he was an economic realist, he also knew that depending on the population of the world to act specifically in accordance to this type of morality was an unreasonable expectation; hence he attacked policy directly rather than focusing as much on just ethics.

Media Obsession

So what brought it back so recently? Its return can actually be best traced back to the 1960's, after Paul Ehrlich (1968) published a book on the topic and others shortly thereafter (including social reformers) began speaking on the topic as the "population problem" (Neeley, 2013). The craze started to become common in films as a plot device for necessitating anything from government corruption and cruelty to the literal apocalypse. Even though the Ehrlich-Simon bet¹² was officially settled at the end of 1990, Hollywood has continued to use Malthusianism as justification for disaster stories. And it is not just the filmmakers who consider the Malthusian theory to be so appealing from a narrative standpoint. Many moviegoers to the 2018 film *Avengers: Infinity War* walked away from the film considering the villain Thanos as a "gray villain", whom they interpreted as motivated by noble intentions to solve a real problem. "Gray villains" have become popular in media lately, as audiences wish for their antagonists (as well as protagonists) to be morally complex and realistic (Mendoza, 2017).

The reality of the situation is that while not everyone knows about Malthusian theory by name, nor that there is data and logic refuting it, everyone is aware that the population of the world is growing. There has been data for years showing population growing at an exponential rate, breaking annual predictions. Projections based on the same concepts from figure 1 have been shown on all types of media outlets in different

⁸ Particularly famous is China's One-Child Policy, which had disastrous results (Fifield, 2019).

⁹ <https://ehne.fr/en/article/gender-and-europe/european-feminisms/feminism-and-neo-malthusianism>.

¹⁰ For an Austro-libertarian review of the latter, see Chamberlin and Block.

¹¹ Again, reactionary, this time to patterns of later marriage in Europe.

¹² https://www.google.ca/search?q=Ehrlich-Simon+bet&rlz=1C1CHBF_enUS724US724&oq=Ehrlich-Simon+bet&aqs=chrome..69i57j0.2426j0j4&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8.

forms over the last two decades.¹³ The growth continues to be described in most media as the “population problem”, and thus Malthusian villains present people with an antagonist who seems to be ‘solving it’, with the enduring narrative: “We all *know* this is a problem, but these villains are solving it! It isn’t pretty, but they’re getting their hands dirty where we won’t! They’re the real heroes after all!”

Debate through History

What the aforementioned media craze might not make clear is the degree to which Malthus’s theory was debated through the last two centuries, before falling out of favor, at least amongst the movers and shakers.

Significant criticism of Malthus came from the Marxists; not least of which from Karl Marx himself. Marx argued that population growth was not the actual cause of poverty and resource constraint, but rather was due to capitalist forces. According to Marx, the only reason there was poverty was due to the capitalists hoarding resources by not paying their workers what their work was actually worth (Magnus, 2009). In other words, while Marx believed that socialism would solve the problems which Malthus was setting forth, he also saw Malthus as propagating capitalism and its problems. It is important to understand that while Marx entered politics after Malthus’s death, he was also writing during the height of the industrial revolution, when production in both factories and on farms was improving greatly compared to the previous years. Leaders of the Soviet Union would continue the trend of socialism adopting anti-Malthusian policies to prevent population control. Joseph Stalin would in fact push policies to increase population, making abortion illegal.¹⁴

Social Darwinists would later adopt the Malthusian theory as applied to the concept of natural selection (Teitelbaum, 2018). Their concern came from a theory that the “inferior” members of society were more fertile than those “superior” members of society, and would dilute genetic purity. The Nazis¹⁵ were one example of such a group who held this belief. They particularly followed the original Malthusian theory that food production was limited, and therefore wanted to eliminate the “inferior” people. Less radical Darwinists went on to try to explain Malthus’s theory on the increasing family size of the poor as an example of natural selection on several levels. On one level, the larger family size would result in potentially better chances of survival, as it would lead to more able-bodied individuals who could become potentially hireable. On another, more children could lead to competition between themselves for the limited resources, meaning that some of them would develop better skills for survival. In some ways, the positive check of disease can be considered an inevitability of higher population density; although Malthus’s mathematical models would not support this to the level of devastation which Malthus would say was necessary for population to reach sustainable levels.

¹³ From quite reputable outlets, including the New York Times in 2008 (<https://www.nytimes.com/2008/06/15/weekinreview/15mcneil.html>) as well as PBS in 2014 (<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/world-woe-malthus-right>).

¹⁴ Although Lenin had legalized abortion in 1920, it was banned about a decade later in the decree of 1936. (<https://www.marxists.org/history/erol/ca.firstwave/cpl-abortion/section5.htm>).

¹⁵ Hitler never quotes Malthus directly, but the arguments are similar.

It is at the same time necessary to explore whether or not Malthusian theory does in fact lend itself directly to this type of discrimination (and in this example genocide), A significant portion of Malthus's writing was reactionary to English poor Laws. According to Malthus, having systems of poor relief would encourage population growth amongst the poor. With the population increasing, the numbers in the work force would increase far past the actual number of jobs available and thereby drive wages down. Malthus was not necessarily hostile to the poor,¹⁶ but he did believe that policy which led to the poor being provided resources (such as housing and food for the family) would lead to stagnation and keep people living dependent on the state.¹⁷ And in the case of poorhouses, Malthus wanted them to be sufficiently bad conditions so as to strongly and harshly encourage those people to find stable work and a sustainable wage.

So all this to say, was Malthus classist?¹⁸ Based on the available evidence it does not seem so, given the way he discusses the problems of population. While Malthus does see the larger family sizes of the lower class as a problem, he places the blame more often on policy. And he did see this population increase as the cause of declining standards for the entirety of the population; lower, middle, and upper as well. However, some will point out that Malthus was raised in an upper class family and spent most of his life surrounded by great philosophers of the time (including Rousseau and Hume, who were family friends), So while he was surrounded by some of the greats of his time, his view of society may have been somewhat biased. He was able to combat this somewhat by being an early economist to use and gather statistical data for his theories, those who observed him did describe his use thereof as somewhat liberal. So he does not seem to be overtly classist, and there is always some chance of indirect prejudice, there is not enough evidence to say so definitively.¹⁹

Knocking It Down

It is all too easy to say that Malthus was wrong and then point to the fact that humanity has existed and flourished for centuries after his predictions without any disaster which has led to the population being decimated or culled significantly. Population growth has not only continued to increase, but has in fact continued to outpace predictions made even in recent decades. In between, there have been a number of doomsayers who have quoted Malthus and offered the thesis that "this time it's for real." And each time they have been proven false. However, the fact that Malthus was wrong is not nearly as important as why Malthus was wrong.

Human Capital

What does every living person have? A brain. Every human being is capable of learning, thinking, and problem-solving. And while a million monkeys with an infinite amount of time and a typewriter would inevitably write a Shakespearean play, a handful of brilliant people could change the world.

¹⁶ Seemingly, Malthus argues that through his writings he wanted to help the poor, although this is contended.

¹⁷ An issue which has been recently in political discussion (although advocacy of the Malthusian approach would never get a politician elected).

¹⁸ Classism- prejudice or discrimination based on class (Merriam Webster).

¹⁹ We should avoid such attribution biases where possible.

It is true that not everyone is going to devote such energy (mental or otherwise) to do great things. Some people are handicapped, physically or otherwise, while other might simply refuse. That being said, it is reasonable to assume that as a community grows, so too will the number of brilliant minds. But even then, why limit it to that? Some will start without a proclivity for complex thought, but they will desire it and work towards it. So at our disposal are those with the mental horsepower, those who work hard enough to compensate, those with both, and then everyone in between. If Horace Mann was right, and education truly is the “great equalizer”, then it stands to reason that as more of the world’s population gains access to education in the years to come (including higher education), then that will result in more people being given the chance to shine.

Perhaps a concrete example is needed: Apollo 13? This mission was intended to put humans on the moon for the third time in history, but due to problems with the spacecraft the crew were put into a dangerous position in space, with nothing but what was at hand and a limited amount of oxygen. Through the quick thinking and precise actions of the crew on board and the NASA scientists back on Earth, the craft was restored to a condition wherein it could return safely to Earth without loss of life. Against impossible odds, human minds saved the day. This is to not even go into details of the “impossible” task of exiting Earth’s atmosphere and returning in the previous missions. We know we can do the impossible when enough minds are put to the task.

Technology

The population growth within the last few decades is certainly undebatable, so Malthusians may be chomping at the bit to argue that the catastrophe point is approaching soon. The population has nearly doubled within the last 40 years,²⁰ and it is expected to climb further for the next few decades. That being said, however, the growth in technological growth has also increased exponentially in a shorter period of time. Additionally, such technology has also become readily available in more areas of the world than previously. Education rates have surged worldwide, electricity is becoming both affordable and sustainable in most developing nations, and vaccinations are reaching further than ever before. So, while population has increased so much within the last few decades, technological growth is on track to outpace it.

Social Changes and GDP

A trend which has been observed in most countries with high GDP per capita has been the shrinking sizes of family units and shifting ages of the parents thereof. Many other papers have shown the relationship between GDP and such things, and it is important to not confuse technological growth as necessarily the reason for this, rather than potentially a symptom of the same cause. That being said, it is important to note. Family sizes have been shown to decrease with GDP, and as countries become more efficient in their production (and find their niches,) population growth in that country begins to slow (Wesley, 2017),

In some ways Malthus’s assumption that poorer populations have larger family units is not entirely unfounded, based on data which he was reported to have acquired during his

²⁰ Records are available from the U.S. Census Bureau.

career.²¹ However, while Malthus would see this be fixed by government policy and preventative measures, this seems to be the wrong way of approaching this. The “One Child Policy” of China proved to have problematic consequences,²² not least of which limited to ethical and human rights concerns. On the contrary, it would seem that an effective way to solve such problems would be by addressing the cause, rather than the symptom: through expanding the economy. If GDP creates lower impoverished populations within a country, then it would seem to be a worthy investment on multiple levels.

Conclusion

What does this mean moving forward?

As a problem which has been proven time and time again to be a non-issue, and based on a faulty theory, it would seem that an easy solution would be to increase awareness. In the same way that Paul Ehrlich brought back Malthusian theory into the limelight, and it was adopted by celebrities of the time, perhaps the theory’s refutation needs to be discussed by other famous people of this era. If an expert came forward and discussed the faults in the theory, and it was then promulgated by other celebrity figures and developers of mass media (such as film), then perhaps society would move on from the theory? Unfortunately, “If it bleeds, it leads”. And although Ehrlich did discuss the theory at length in interviews and writing, he did also publicly admit his loss of the bet with Julian Simon. So just giving a refutation (or as in Ehrlich’s case, a redaction) is not sufficient for filtering misinformation out of the *vox populi*. And from an entertainment perspective, the number of movies about humans overcoming problems do actually outnumber those where the opposite occurs. So if one was to ‘overthrow’ Malthusian theory through the medium of film, it would need to be done in an overt way which would come off as so heavy-handed that it would most likely fall on deaf ears.

So then what do we do? Quite simply, the same thing which Malthus did: through policy directly. Remnants of his theory still persist in implicit assumptions and models which we then apply to policy making decisions at the governmental level. To cure the illness, we should attack the cause: remove Malthusian assumptions from things government signs into law, and stop referring to it as the “population problem”. Once we attack it directly, then the rest of society will catch on that our population is not the issue; how we treat them is. And, perhaps once we have done so, we will begin to better understand how the people in our society are in fact our greatest asset, rather than a liability.²³

²¹ Malthus is famously one of the first economists to formally use statistics (MacRae, 2018) although his methodology was reportedly very bad.

²² Many of which shall be borne by the elderly population in the years to come (Powell, 2012).

²³ For further criticism of Malthus and Malthusians, see Block, 1989; Block, Dauterive and Levendis, 2007; Coffey and Block, 1999; English and Block, 1997; Bauer, 1981; Boudreaux, 2008; Desrochers, 2015; Friedman, 1972, 1977; Gaylor and Weil, 2000; Robbins, 1928, 1966; Rothbard, 2011; Say, 1821; Simon, 1981, 1990, 1996; Sowell, 1983; Williams, 1999; Wittman, 2000.

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