
The Ghost of Malthus

JAMES K. BOYCE

Department of Economics, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, MA 01003, USA

The Malthus Factor: Poverty, Politics and Population in Capitalist Development

Eric B. Ross; London: Zed Books, 1998.

Few eighteenth-century economists are remembered today. An important exception is the Reverend Thomas Malthus, whose *Essay on the Principle of Population* first appeared in 1798 and still haunts us as we enter the twenty-first century. Malthus attributed human misery to the pressure of population on limited resources: human numbers grow inexorably until checked by famine, war, pestilence, and vice. Progressive redistribution of wealth from rich to poor cannot bring about a lasting reduction in misery; instead, this would merely multiply poverty, enabling the poor to reproduce more prolifically until the checks again come into play. By the same logic, technological advances in productive capacity can offer no more than a temporary reprieve. Concluding that neither redistribution nor growth offers hope of an escape from poverty, Malthus declared “the absolute impossibility, from the fixed laws of our nature, that the pressure of want can ever be completely removed from the lower classes of society” ([1798] 1970: 93).

Karl Marx (1865, cited by Meek 1954: 24) termed Malthus’s essay “a libel on the human race.” Yet two centuries later, the bleak Malthusian vision remains stubbornly alive. Its impact goes well beyond giving economics its dubious label of “the dismal science.” In a wide-ranging and provocative account of the reverend’s enduring legacy, Eric Ross in *The Malthus Factor* traces the influence of Malthusian ideology from the horrific workhouses instituted under England’s draconian Poor Law of 1834 to the Irish famines of the nineteenth century, the rise of the eugenics movement in the early twentieth century, U.S. foreign policy after World War Two, and the current tide of anti-immigrant politics in Europe and North America.

I. Two Faces of Population Reductionism

As Ross observes, Malthus broke with the conventional wisdom of his time that saw population growth as a positive force, a source of political strength and economic dynamism. Thomas Hobbes had written in the seventeenth century that “it is the duty of them that are in sovereign authority to increase the people” (quoted by Ross: 4). More recently,

Author’s Note: E-mail: boyce@econs.umass.edu (J. K. Boyce)

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Douglass North and Robert Thomas (1973: 8) have argued that population growth “induced the institutional innovations which account for the rise of the Western World.”

Whether the impact of population growth is assumed to be positive or negative, demographically driven theories of history rely on a simple, reductionist logic. Population either multiplies the good or multiplies the bad. Consider the simple formula expounded by the neo-Malthusian Stanford biologist Paul Ehrlich:

$$I = P \times F,$$

where I = impact, P = population, and F = impact per capita (Ehrlich and Holdren 1971). In Ehrlich’s account, I refers to environmental ills, such as pollution and the depletion of natural resources. But a population booster could apply precisely the same formula to happier phenomena, like technological progress or works of musical and artistic genius. In both cases, the axiomatic inference is that population growth leads to proportional increases in “impact.”

Whether this is true depends, of course, on whether F , impact per capita, is a fixed constant. In assuming that it is, population reductionists proclaim an article of faith in the guise of a mathematical truism. To illustrate the fallacy, following Ehrlich, let I = environmental degradation. In principle, we can partition I into two types of environmental degradation, one that is causally related to population growth and another that bears no causal relation to population growth, denoting these as I_p and as I_n , respectively. An example of the latter is toxic waste generated by the manufacture, deployment, and ultimate disposal of weaponry by the U.S. military. Even if *all* environmental degradation was caused by such activity (so that $I = I_n$), the Ehrlich identity would hold: total toxics equals population multiplied by toxics per capita. Yet it would be fallacious to conclude on the basis of this identity that military toxics are an “impact” of population growth (for discussion, see Hynes 1999).

The real question is, What are the mediating variables that affect the sign and magnitude of any impacts of human numbers on the economy and the environment? To ask this question is to move beyond population reductionism to some of the core concerns of political economy.

2. Malthusianism and the Defense of Inequality

In *The Malthus Factor*, Eric Ross writes that the “most consistent feature” of Malthusian ideology is its “resolute defence of inequality.” Certainly, Malthusianism has served this function over the years. Today, as in Malthus’s time, blaming the deprivation of the poor on their own fertility conveniently absolves the rich of responsibility to do anything about it.

The policy impact of Malthusian thought became apparent when the New Poor Law was passed in 1834, the year Malthus himself died. Describing the law as “a final tribute to Thomas Malthus,” Ross explains that it “instituted a system of workhouses in which circumstances were deliberately made so bad that people would choose to take the poorest paid work rather than enter them” (27). “Our object,” declared an official, “is to establish therein a discipline so severe and repulsive as to make them a terror to the poor and prevent them

from entering.” Fast forward to the present day, and we can see the ghost of Malthus in the guise of “welfare reform.”

Yet Malthusianism has changed over time. Perhaps most important, the twentieth century saw the rise of “neo-Malthusianism” as the rationale for policies of population control. Whereas Malthus himself opposed birth control—this was the “vice” he counted among the dismal checks to population growth—the neo-Malthusians have embraced it as a one-size-fits-all solution to poverty, environmental decay, and social unrest. Malthus’s own prescription was essentially *laissez-faire*: preach the moral restraint of abstinence to the masses and let them suffer the consequences if they fail to heed this advice. Neo-Malthusians, by contrast, are more favorably disposed toward social engineering: the state should intervene to limit fertility by means of incentives and disincentives and, perhaps, even coercion (see Hartmann 1995: 124–8).

A striking feature of contemporary neo-Malthusianism here in the United States is that its most ardent champions today generally are found not on the conservative end of the political spectrum but among “liberals.” Internationally, the country that has gone furthest in implementing neo-Malthusian policies in recent years is China, where the “one-child policy” at times has been pursued with draconian zeal (for examples, see Greenhalgh 1994; and WuDunn 1993). Remarkably, Ross does not discuss China’s population control policy. As these examples suggest, the simple equation of Malthusianism with the defense of inequality can mislead. Not only are there liberal (and even “Communist”) Malthusians, but also there are staunch defenders of inequality—from Thomas Hobbes to right-wing U.S. senators today—who espouse non-Malthusian views of population growth.

Ross devotes two chapters in his book to the “green revolution” in agriculture—the introduction beginning in the 1960s of highly fertilizer-responsive varieties of wheat and rice in Asia and, to a lesser extent, in Latin America and Africa. He portrays this as a Malthusian development strategy—even if aimed to increase food production, a goal Malthus would have dismissed as impossible or self-defeating—on the grounds that it was promoted as an alternative to egalitarian land reform. Indeed the green revolution not only downplayed the need for redistribution of land but at times exacerbated inequalities of income and wealth (Griffin 1979; Boyce 1993: chaps. 3, 4). At the same time, green-revolution strategists systematically discouraged traditional agricultural techniques and ignored the potential scope to increase output and raise incomes by building on the knowledge of poor farmers (Barkin and Suárez 1982).

In painting the green revolution as part of a monolithic capitalist project, however, Ross identifies it—mistakenly, in my view—with agricultural mechanization (119), the need to purchase hybrid seeds in the market every year (164), increased production for export markets, and increased dependence on food imports from the United States (139). This broad-brush approach misses important distinctions between agricultural intensification and mechanization, between hybrids marketed by private seed companies and new varieties introduced by public sector institutions, and between basic grains and export crops. It also fails to consider seriously whether some features of the green revolution, such as public sector plant breeding and increased fertilizer use, may be necessary if an alternative strategy based on the “enormous potential” of “peasant horticulture” (198) is to have a real chance of success.

3. Beyond Malthus

Laying to rest the ghost of Malthus will require three important steps: first, recognition that human activities can enhance as well as degrade the natural environment; second, the development of strategies that simultaneously reduce poverty and protect environmental quality; and third, adoption of family planning policies based on the principle that individuals ought to be able to control their own reproduction, neither pushing them to do so in the name of population control (as neo-Malthusians seek to do) nor denying them access to birth control in the name of morality (as Malthus himself would have advocated).

For millennia, humans have shaped and reshaped the environment. Sometimes the impacts of our actions are negative, but sometimes they are positive from the standpoint of long-term human well-being. One type of positive impact is “ecological restoration”—repairing damages caused by earlier human activities—via reforestation, for example, or the cleanup of contaminated water bodies. But the scope for positive impacts is not confined to the reversal of past negative impacts. Humans can, and often do, reshape the environment in ways that make it richer: more bountiful and more diverse. Perhaps the greatest historic example of this creative potential is the domestication of crops and animals that began roughly ten thousand years ago and the subsequent human-assisted evolution of the agricultural biodiversity that today underpins long-term human food security.

Recognition of the scope for mutually beneficial interactions between humans and nature can open the door to strategies that combine poverty reduction and environmental protection. For example, agricultural biodiversity is sustained today by millions of peasant farmers around the world, people whose livelihoods are threatened by market-driven global economic integration. Rewarding farmers who cultivate this diversity would both improve their well-being and strengthen their incentives to continue providing this vital ecological service to humankind. Similarly, struggles for environmental justice that aim to defend the right to clean air and clean water can bring economic benefits to low-income communities as well as environmental benefits. Far from being subject to a “great trade-off,” evidence is accumulating that poverty reduction and environmental protection are complementary goals (Boyce 2002).

Finally, birth control must be liberated from the extremism that has dominated policy debates in the United States in recent decades. These debates have pitted proponents of population control (generally “liberals”) against those who oppose birth control in general and abortion in particular (generally “conservatives”). In the middle ground between these extremes, their voices often drowned in the clamor, stand feminist reproductive-rights advocates and others who believe that individuals have the right to have access to birth control and abortion, if and when they so choose, but that no one should have these pushed upon them.

In pitting humans against nature, the economy against the environment, and the power of the state against individual reproductive freedom, the ideological descendants of Malthus carry on his dismal legacy. The best antidote is a positive vision of human agency.

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