



“Summary of article by Paul Harrison: One Part Wisdom: The Great Debate” in Frontier Issues in Economic Thought, Volume 1: A Survey of Ecological Economics. Island Press: Washington DC, 1995. pp. 43-46

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(This is a summary of the first chapter of Paul Harrison's book in which the author traces the evolution of the debate about the effects of population growth.)

Human population growth has been through five phases since the beginning of the Christian era. The growth rate in the first phase, between A.D. 0 and 800 - a period of economic stagnation, political chaos, and mass migration - was 0.03% a year. In the second phase, between 800 and 1700, the growth rate rose to 0.11% as a result of agricultural improvements, mainly in Europe and China. Between 1750 and 1900, the third phase, the growth rate increased to 0.57%. The fourth phase was between 1950 and 1980. This period saw death rates falling in developing countries because of the introduction of preventative and curative medicine and the agricultural revolution. Growth rates peaked in the 1960s at 2.05%. Since 1980 we have been in the fifth phase, with growth rates declining to 1.74%. However, while the growth rate is falling, in absolute numbers the decade of the 1990s will see the highest annual additions to world population. Are these increases in population something we should worry about, or are they beneficial?

The beginnings of the modern debate as to whether population growth is a positive or a negative factor can be traced to the late 18th century. In 1761, in his Various Prospects of Mankind, Nature and Providence, Robert Wallace argued that an obstacle to a world of equality was that children would be so well taken care of that infant mortality would fall and population would increase. This increase in population would finally lead to an overstocked world, and cruel and unnatural practices would be necessary to reduce the numbers. In Enquiry Concerning Political Justice (1793), William Godwin objected to this vision and argued that because three-quarters of the earth was uncultivated, population growth would never be a problem.

In 1798, Thomas Malthus published Essay on the Principle of Population, arguing that while population grew in geometrical ratio, food production grew in arithmetical ratio. As a result, population has a tendency to grow faster than food production. Since food is necessary for survival, population growth is equalized with food production by excess populations dying. Malthus argued that in this way natural checks would keep population growth no higher than growth in the food supply. In 1803 Malthus revised his initial essay to argue that population growth could also be limited by the power of self-control.

Malthus' Essay was an onslaught against socialism, and socialists reacted to it in strong terms. William Hazlitt called it the "little, low, rankling malice of a parish beadle"¹ disguised as philosophy. Marx accused it of being a "sensational pamphlet." To Marx, overpopulation was

caused by the laws of capitalism, not the laws of nature. He argued that population growth produced a "reserve army" of unemployed because of investments in machinery. Friederick Engels argued that "mankind could multiply more rapidly than is compatible with modern bourgeois society."²

In America, Henry George argued in Progress and Poverty (1879) that the cause of poverty was not overpopulation but unjust laws, warfare, excessive rents, and lack of secure tenancies. To George, population growth was an effect and not a cause of poverty. He also foreshadowed anti-Malthusian theories of the radical right when he argued that higher levels of population lead to greater wealth.

Ester Boserup, one of George's most influential successors, suggested in her 1965 book, The Conditions of Agricultural Growth, that population growth determines agricultural change. Boserup argued that the first farmers were shifting cultivators who returned to plots after fifteen to twenty years. As populations increased, they were forced to return to plots more often, resulting in yield declines. Farmers were then forced to improve agricultural techniques in order to maintain food production, and these developments helped food production keep pace with population growth. If population growth had not taken place, primitive agriculture would have persisted and would not have resulted in higher levels of cultural development.

The modern debate on population growth has been similar to the debates of the 19th century. Paul Ehrlich, in the role of a modern Malthus, predicted in his 1968 book, The Population Bomb, that overpopulation would result in famines and the starvation of hundreds of millions of people. He advocated compulsory population control measures if voluntary efforts failed, and condemned giving aid to health programs in the Third World. In The Limits to Growth (1972), the Meadows and their team predicted, on the basis of computer models, that a catastrophic collapse of population will occur if present trends continue due to a rise in pollution and a dramatic decline in mineral and land resources. Moreover, they asserted that those who survive will have a dismal, depleted existence. According to the authors of The Limits to Growth, the only way to avoid catastrophe is to undertake a comprehensive program of conservation and population stabilization.

The extreme predictions of modern Malthusianism have evoked reactions from the right and the left. From the right, Julian Simon responded with a pro-growth position. He argued that throughout recorded history standards of living have risen along with population because higher population leads to bigger markets, the possibility of economies of scale, and more people with more brains to think up technical solutions to problems. All of this results in increasing wealth; resource shortages may occur, but only temporarily. On the left, the response to neo-Malthusian views has suggested that overpopulation is caused by poverty, which results from exploitation, expropriation, inequality and injustice. This view argues that the poor have large families because children can bring in wages or care for their parents in old age.

It is not easy to see who is right. Ideology plays a role in molding peoples views. Free markets are the answer for conservatives, while socialists believe social justice is the solution. Third World nationalists see this concern with population problems as a smoke screen for fears about the increasing strength of countries in the South, or an excuse to meddle in their internal affairs.

Religious groups, meanwhile, equate an anti-abortion stance with an anti-family planning position. There is some element of truth in all sides of this debate, and a more synthetic view (see, for example, the rest of The Third Revolution) is needed to provide a balanced picture.

Notes

1. Gertrude Himmerlfarb, ed., On Population: Thomas Robert Malthus (New York: Random House, 1960), *xxvi*; cited by Harrison, 13.
2. Friederick Engels, "Letter to J.B. Schweitzer," Works 2 (1965): 391; cited by Harrison, 14.