

A PHILOSOPHICAL REVIEW OF THE MALTHUSIAN THEORY OF POPULATION AND WEALTH

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ABSTRACT

The question of overpopulation is adjudged the main source of economic crises and underdevelopment of individuals and nations in the line of thought of Robert Thomas Malthus. This paper therefore presents a philosophical review of Malthusian theory of population and wealth with the aim of pointing out the inherent weaknesses in the theory thereby creating a better understanding of human society with regard to the inherent stock of wealth in relation to human population. The paper debunks the efficacy of implementation of his postulated negative human efforts like abortion, birth control and moral restraint together with positive natural disasters like famine, drought; population checks would not only curb population induced economic crises but also guarantee steady food supply. {add – Thus} as persuasive as this argument could be, Malthus' disputations did not represent the great abundance of nature's resources and the productive capacity of the human genius. The paper concludes that this neglect or oversight is due to Malthus' pessimism, and therefore fall short of explaining fully the relationship between population increase and economic crises.

Introduction

The inability of humans to understand their place in nature and to trust it has been the main cause of hopelessness and brazen pessimism noticeable in all fields of endeavor. This has gone to the extent that even the gift of human resources is still currently misunderstood, misapplied and greatly feared and is really regarded as a threat to the environment. The earth is now regarded as incapable of taking care of its inhabitants.

Robert Thomas Malthus was one of the people whose fears led into abysmal pessimism. He regarded human society within the earth surface to be overpopulated and as such injurious to the limited natural resources. Hence, he advocated for a check on population or else, the earth surface would be outstripped of its capacity to provide subsistence for humans. Malthus eventually propounded a theory of population and used it to demonstrate how the wealth of a nation is determined by that of the individual, how population could cause economic crises and to checkmate all these, he proposed some solutions to them above named crises.

The solutions proffered by Malthus are reviewed in this paper with regards to the question of human productivity, the capacity of nature to balance itself and the unlimited nature of earth resources. These are presented as alternatives with the intention of redefining population as a blessing instead of a curse. To this end, the paper outlines to discuss the following issues: the concept and theory of population; globalization as wealth creation through population; the impact of population on the wealth of a nation; impact of population on the happiness of the individual; Malthusian solution to population crises and concluding remarks.

The Concept and Theory of Population

Population is the number of people living in a geographical location within a specified time. But in this context, the population meant is that of humans within the earth surface in their respective locations. This number of people grows and diminishes on its own accord and can actually be monitored as could be seen in Demography that is the study of population.

For Robert Thomas Malthus, the increase in number of humans must be checked because, the earth resources were limited, arable lands were limited and consequently food supply was threatened. For him as the sexual drive was ever active, population would always grow. Hence, he

would declare, that population increases geometrically, whereas food supply increase only arithmetically, making it a certainty that sooner or later, population would outstrip food supply and the capacity of the land to produce further subsistence for the nation's population, thus, famine would set in. Also for him, it is given that human beings are generally weak and lazy and would never see population or the depreciable land as a problem until they are threatened by starvation or struck even by famine.

As persuasive as his thought could be, Malthus was unable to demonstrate that population was on geometric increase, that land resources and productive capacity were limited, neither did he show clearly the valid relationship of geometric and arithmetic increase in reality. He also underestimated the human genius.

To these objections raised, Malthus seemed to have answered some with the introduction of an essential ingredient in his work than of moral restraint, but again there was an inherent obstinacy in his thought for he neither believed nor trusted nature to be capable of balancing the equation just as he never believed in the human genius which brought about a heavy revolution in the agricultural sector, inexpensive means of birth control and modernized commerce. This amounts to neglect or oversight due to abysmal pessimism which has made him and his thought insignificant today but for some thoughts enunciated in his *Population and Wealth* which was written as a response to Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*.

For Robert Thomas Malthus, any Economic theory that is of value must have to include the impact of population on wealth otherwise it is practically useless. Unlike him, he declared that the health and happiness of a nation should be measured with the health and happiness of the laboring poor which for him constitutes the nation's most numerous classes. The impact of globalization as wealth creation through population is discussed below.

Globalization as Wealth Creation through Population

Economic "globalization" is a historical process; it is the result of human innovation and technological progress (Nwaimo, 2009). He further stated that economic globalization refers to the increasing integration of economies around the world, particularly through trade and financial flows. Since we are talking of integration, what it means by implication is population increment.

Economic globalization cannot be effective without the integration of people of diverse race and other interests. That is the movement of the people who provide the labour, and that of knowledge which is the needed technology for economic growth across international borders. Apart from economic globalization, there also exist others like broader cultural, political and environmental dimensions of globalization as Nwaimo observed in his work.

In a situation like the above, people differ substantially in their gains in a globalized economy. What is important here is the greatest happiness, for the greatest number. If society's goal were "greatest happiness for the greatest number", the problem of allocation and distribution would boil down to doing whatever was necessary to maximize the total utility score (Nwaru, 2007).

Looking further, one sees that globalization demonstrates the "multiplicity of linkages and interconnectedness" that overshadows the role of nation-states, which together constitutes the modern world system (Asiabaka, 2013).

Asiabaka further observed that international system of trade, finance and production cement together, in very intricate ways, the prosperity and fate of households, communities and nations across the world. That is why he stated that most economies logically view globalization rather positively, because it frees "the forces of competition that help channel the energies of people and the resources of countries into activities where they are likely to be most productive."

The Impact of Population on the Wealth of a Nation

'Population and Wealth' was written by Malthus as a response to Adam Smith's *Inquiries into the Nature and Cause of the Wealth of Nations*. Adam Smith defined the wealth of a nation to consist in the annual produce of its land and labour. This includes manufactured goods and the produce of the land. He foretold optimism in relation to productivity of the land. Hence, he declared that the wealth of a nation is bound to increase and that this increment meant increment in revenue to the numerous class of a society (the poor labourer). This is because there is bound to be an increase in productivity so a Nation can save enough revenue which it could re-invest either as a working capital or kept as funds for the maintenance of labour.

This presupposition of Adam Smith that the land would keep on producing, that there would be constant demand and effective distribution of accrued revenue which meant an overall increment

of the wealth of a nation; was not well taken by Robert Thomas Malthus who believed and did propose a geometric increase in the population of human beings and the limited nature of land's capacity to produce subsistence.

For Malthus, if a nation employs what is saved to its manufacturing capital alone and the Nation surely would grow richer as Adam Smith had proposed but if the population of laborers to be supported increases, the volume of wealth depreciates thereby impoverishing the Nation. Again if some manufacturers decide to raise incentive to buy labour it will increase the number of labourers and the price of labourers, thus it will take a country constant productivity to meet with the cost, but unfortunately this is not the case for the land has limited resources and capacity. If the country invokes improved instruments in production, it will surely cut down the cost of production due to maintenance of labour, therefore the country can indeed save more and can grow rich.

This rise in the wealth of a nation due to improved manufacturing system, reduction in the funds for the maintenance of labour and management of the limited capacity of the land to produce, are all counter-productive. This is because this sort of wealth is not only diminutive of human subsistence but also no wealth at all or at least a wealth nominally. Malthus felt that for a nation to be said to be wealthy, it must be able to cater for the basic necessities and conveniences of life of its citizens, mainly the laboring poor. But then, it is nearly impossible for population of labourers of the majority of the nation is on geometric increase while subsistence is on arithmetic progression and land as a major factor of production is limited in productivity and fecundity.

However, population has an impact on the wealth of a nation positively or negatively. Malthus demonstrates a negative implication in that he believes that a wealth which does not reflect in the lives of the major class of the society is no wealth at all.

Impact of Population on the Happiness of the Individual

For Malthus, a nation's wealth can only be measured not nominally but in the amount of comfort and happiness such a nation affords its population which comprised mainly of the laboring poor. Happiness here would mean that health and command of the necessities are conveniences of life. The comfort/happiness of the laboring poor depends according to him on the funds set aside for

the maintenance of labor. This fund is supposed to increase in proportion to the increment and rapidity of the annual revenue of the country either through manufacturing capital or through the produce of its land.

Unfortunately, this is not the case, for as Adam Smith presupposed that an increment in the stock or revenue of a society meant also a rise in funds for maintenance of labour. Malthus observed that when there is an increment in stock or revenue, the possessor sees it as an additional fund to engage new laborers who are always increasing due to over population from untraceable sexual drive; and not as a means to guarantee happiness to the already existing laborers. For example, Imo State University has a workforce of 500, and has 100million revenue due to produce of labor, out of this amount it uses 70million for wages. Instead of using the surplus 30million for the improvement of the workforce it decides to use it for employment of yet another 100 workers and so it continues; now the former workers are not happy because they are not well taken care of. This cycle of unhappiness continues and even if the produce of land is brought to remedy this produce of labour, it still continues. Now the country in question is busy getting rich without correspondent happiness to its teeming working/peasant class. Of what good would a nominal wealthy nation be when the working class wallows in poverty and discomfort?

This is equal to population explosion and decrease in the productive capacity of the land. In Malthus's thought, it would be nearly impossible for there to be happiness except population is envisaged as a threat and effort made to reduce it.

Malthusian Solution to Population Crises

To solve the crises created by increase in population, Malthus proposed human activities like infanticides, abortion and moral restraint. He proposed agro-allied economy than commercial economy. This is based on the fact that on that economy, the poor working class would be in plenty. Unfortunately, the arable lands are limited and the capacities of the available lands is also limited, hence, there is bound to be a regression with yet another population if the nation chooses an economy based on commerce, the wealth accrued would be much but of no appreciable effect in the comfort and happiness of the laboring poor.

In conclusion, Malthus did try to demonstrate that population could really determine so many economic situations including personal happiness; hence the inherent pessimism that characterized his submission leaves much to be desired. For example, any of the solutions offered will either lead to food shortage or overpopulation, none of which spells good for humanity. Malthus could have been better off, if he had believed the human ingenuity which today has revolutionized agriculture and commerce. Therefore, it intended that if nature should be seen as right and efforts made not to moralize its activities; a lot will be well with humanity. Also, it is no gain saying that there is an infinite capacity to what and how humanity can develop itself positively thereby never to be overpopulated and never over stretching the resources of the earth.

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