

# Neo-malthusian population control

People



The Malthusian theory of population holds that at some point in the future, with generational turnovers of humans, will outpace agricultural production. Based on the works of Thomas Malthus, this principle of population expresses cynicism about the future of human life. To avoid the Malthusian catastrophe, which results from an unchecked population, there seems to be a number of measures that a group or society can take. These measures usually involve government intervention in procreation as a form of population control. Celibacy, or sexual abstinence, struck Malthus as potentially an effective solution for solving the problem he himself diagnosed with human societies (Gilbert). As we should in contemporary liberal societies, most will find Malthus' conclusions unsettling, not only because of what they describe as in our future, but because of what his findings might justify in terms of government control. The kinds of methods that Neo-Malthusians suggest are necessary to protect the Malthusian catastrophe are undesirable at best and totalitarian at worst. Given this background, there are numerous theorists, from many different fields, who oppose the arguments of Neo-Malthusians by criticizing Thomas Malthus himself. One criticism is apparent in economist David D. Friedman, who concludes that the prospect of parents having "too many" children is unlikely. His first argument is that although parents may not always be the most rational in deciding to have a child, it is even more difficult for a government, which is the only alternative from having parents decide. Parents are, despite common concerns, rational decision-makers. As the Malthusian catastrophe nears, reasons Friedman, economic effects are felt on fertility. Friedman says, "Consider also the effect of economic conditions on fertility. At the bottom of a depression, with short term income low and long-term

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prospects-for both parents and children-bleak, birth rates should fall. They do" (Freidman).

Julian Lincoln Simon, another libertarian-leaning economist who specialized in population and natural resources, cites some separate problems with the Neo-Malthusians' arguments. Firstly, his trouble begins with unprecedented levels of education and knowledge among common people. Never before have there been so many educated people to recognize their self-interests in their own social context. Thus, it is far less likely that the global community would near the proposed Malthusian catastrophe, if individuals are intelligent enough to recognize the steps needed to avoid doing so. Secondly, Simon proposes that economic freedom provides an effective stoppage tool to any adverse effect of overpopulation. The world's ability to increase production in response to market pressures (or profitable opportunity) ensures another check on the approach of a Malthusian vision (Simon).

In addition, economist and writer Ester Boserup has criticized the prospect of the Malthusian catastrophe by noting that it is the size of a population (or the demand for a product) that determines methods of agriculture. This opposes a common interpretation of Malthusian arguments as saying that it is the inverse relationship which happens to be the case. Contrary to prior times, the amount of resources does not shape demand, but it is demand in a market economy that shapes supply. The lessening of poverty in developed nations also ensures that the food supply does not shape populations through starvation and disease. Boserup emphasizes that these factors invariably shape the growth and development of populations (Boserup).

Neo-Malthusians base their claims and recommendations about public policy  
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on classical Malthusian arguments, which remain controversial. It remains unclear the extent to which overpopulation and the exhausting of resources poses a threat to mankind. Therefore, it is unlikely that they can be used to justify overarching policies used to control population growth. Individuals in developed countries will remain unaffected by this growth.

#### Bibliography

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