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### Thomas Robert Malthus

(1766-1834)

Malthus was interested in everything about [POPULATIONS](#). He accumulated figures on births, deaths, age of marriage and childbearing, and economic factors contributing to longevity. His main contribution was to highlight the relationship between food supply and population. Humans do not overpopulate to the point of starvation, he contended, only *because* people change their behavior in the face of economic incentives.

Noting that while food production tends to increase arithmetically, population tends to increase naturally at a (faster) geometric rate, Malthus argued that it is no surprise that people thus *choose* to reduce (or “check”) population growth. People can increase food production, Malthus thought, only by slow, difficult methods such as reclaiming unused land or intensive farming; but they can check population growth more effectively by marrying late, using contraceptives, emigrating, or, in more extreme circumstances, resorting to reduced [HEALTH CARE](#), tolerating vicious social diseases or impoverished living conditions, warfare, or even infanticide. Malthus was fascinated not with the inevitability of human demise, but with why humans do *not* die off in the face of such overwhelming odds. As an economist, he studied responses to incentives.

Malthus is arguably the most misunderstood and misrepresented economist of all time. The adjective “Malthusian” is used today to describe a pessimistic prediction of the lock-step demise of a humanity doomed to starvation via overpopulation. When his hypothesis was first stated in his best-selling [An Essay on the Principle of Population](#) (1798), the uproar it caused among noneconomists overshadowed the instant respect it inspired among his fellow economists. So irrefutable and simple was his illustrative side-by-side comparison of an arithmetic and a geometric series—food increases more slowly than population—that it was often taken out of context and highlighted as his main observation. The observation is, indeed, so stark that it is still easy to lose sight of Malthus’s actual conclusion: that because humans have *not* all starved, economic choices must be at work, and it is the job of an economist to study those choices.

Malthus addressed many other issues. His *Principles of Political Economy* (1820) was the first text to describe a [DEMAND](#) schedule as separate from the quantity demanded at a given price. His exposition of demand curves clarified the debate on [SAY](#)’s law and gluts (to which he objected in the long run on the grounds that markets self-adjust). His work centered on contrasting the long run, as exemplified by population growth, with the short run, reflected by cyclical events such as those affecting agriculture. Writing before the [INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION](#), Malthus did not fully appreciate the impact of technology (i.e., pesticides, refrigeration, mechanized farm equipment, and increased crop yields) on food production.

Malthus died in 1834, before seeing economics characterized as the “dismal science.” That phrase, coined by Thomas Carlyle in 1849 to demean [JOHN STUART MILL](#), is often erroneously thought to refer to Malthus’s contributions to the economics of population growth.

## About the Author

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## Selected Works

1798. *An Essay on the Principle of Population*. 1st ed. 1798, online at the Library of Economics and Liberty, <http://www.econlib.org/library/Malthus/malPop.html>; 6th ed. 1826, online at the Library of Economics and Liberty, <http://www.econlib.org/library/Malthus/malPlong.html>.
1811. “Pamphlets on the Bullion Question.” *Edinburgh Review* 18 (August): 448–470.
1820. *The Principles of Political Economy Considered with a View to Their Practical Applications*. London: John Murray.

# Malthusianism

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**Malthusianism** refers to the political/economic thought of Reverend [Thomas Robert Malthus](#) whose ideas were first developed during the [industrial revolution](#). It follows his 1798 writings, [An Essay on the Principle of Population](#), which describes how [unchecked population growth is exponential](#) while the growth of the food supply was expected to be arithmetical, leading to a [Malthusian catastrophe](#). Malthus wrote during the time of the [Manchester School](#) of thought.

It drew from this the inference that ideas of charity to the poor typified by [Tory paternalism](#) were futile as it would only result in increased numbers of the poor, and was developed into [Whig](#) economic ideas exemplified by the [The Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834](#), described by opponents as "a Malthusian bill designed to force the poor to emigrate, to work for lower wages, to live on a coarser sort of food"<sup>[1]</sup>, which brought the construction of [workhouses](#) despite riots and arson.

By that time the ideas were widespread in progressive social circles, one proponent being the novelist [Harriet Martineau](#) whose circle of acquaintances included [Charles Darwin](#), and the ideas of Malthus were a significant influence on the [inception of Darwin's theory](#).

According to Dr. Dan Ritschel of the Center for History Education at the University of Maryland,

The great Malthusian dread was that "indiscriminate charity" would lead to exponential growth in the population in poverty, increased charges to the public purse to support this growing army of the dependent, and, eventually, the catastrophe of [national bankruptcy](#). Though Malthusianism has since come to be identified with the issue of general over-population, the original Malthusian concern was more specifically with the fear of over-population by the dependent poor!<sup>[2]</sup>

One of the earliest critics of Malthusian theory was [Karl Marx](#) who referred (in [Capital](#), see Marx's footnote on Malthus from *Capital* - a reference

below) to it as "nothing more than a schoolboyish, superficial plagiary of De Foe, Sir James Steuart, Townsend, Franklin, Wallace" and others, postulating that progress in science and technology would allow for indefinite exponential population growth.

*Economics focus*

## Malthus, the false prophet

May 15th 2008

From *The Economist* print edition

### The pessimistic parson and early political economist remains as wrong as ever

AMID an astonishing surge in food prices, which has sparked riots and unrest in many countries and is making even the relatively affluent citizens of America and Europe feel the pinch, faith in the ability of global markets to fill nearly 7 billion bellies is dwindling. Given the fear that a new era of chronic shortages may have begun, it is perhaps understandable that the name of Thomas Malthus is in the air. Yet if his views were indeed now correct, that would defy the experience of the past two centuries.

Malthus first set out his ideas in 1798 in "An Essay on the Principle of Population". This expounded a tragic twin trajectory for the growth of human populations and the increase of food supply. Whereas the natural tendency was for populations to grow without end, food supply would run up against the limit of finite land. As a result, the "positive checks" of higher mortality caused by famine, disease and war were necessary to bring the number of people back in line with the capacity to feed them.

In a second edition published in 1803, Malthus softened his original harsh message by introducing the idea of moral restraint. Such a "preventive check", operating through the birth rather than the death rate, could provide a way to counter the otherwise inexorable logic of too many mouths chasing too little food. If couples married late and

had fewer children, population growth could be sufficiently arrested for agriculture to cope.

It was the misfortune of Malthus—but the good luck of generations born after him—that he wrote at an historical turning point. His ideas, especially his later ones, were arguably an accurate description of pre-industrial societies, which teetered on a precarious balance between empty and full stomachs. But the industrial revolution, which had already begun in Britain, was transforming the long-term outlook for economic growth. Economies were starting to expand faster than their populations, bringing about a sustained improvement in living standards.

Far from food running out, as Malthus had feared, it became abundant as trade expanded and low-cost agricultural producers like Argentina and Australia joined the world economy. Reforms based on sound political economy played a vital role, too. In particular, the abolition of the Corn Laws in 1846 paved the way for British workers to gain from cheap food imports.

Malthus got his demographic as well as his economic predictions wrong. His assumption that populations would carry on growing in times of plenty turned out to be false. Starting in Europe, one country after another underwent a “demographic transformation” as economic development brought greater prosperity. Both birth and death rates dropped and population growth eventually started to slow.

The Malthusian heresy re-emerged in the early 1970s, the last time food prices shot up. Then, at least, there appeared to be some cause for demographic alarm. Global-population growth had picked up sharply after the second world war because it took time for high birth rates in developing countries to follow down the plunge in infant-mortality rates brought about by modern medicine. But once again the worries about overpopulation proved mistaken as the “green revolution” and further advances in agricultural efficiency boosted food supply.

If the world's population growth was a false concern four decades ago, when it peaked at 2% a year, it is even less so now that it has slowed to 1.2%. But even though crude demography is not to blame,

changing lifestyles arising from rapid economic growth especially in Asia are a new worry. As the Chinese have become more affluent, they have started to consume more meat, raising the underlying demand for basic food since cattle need more grain to feed than humans. Neo-Malthusians question whether the world can provide 6.7 billion people (rising to 9.2 billion by 2050) with a Western-style diet.

Once again the gloom is overdone. There may no longer be virgin lands to be settled and cultivated, as in the 19th century, but there is no reason to believe that agricultural productivity has hit a buffer. Indeed, one of the main barriers to another “green revolution” is unwarranted popular worries about genetically modified foods, which is holding back farm output not just in Europe, but in the developing countries that could use them to boost their exports.

## **Political folly increases in a geometrical ratio**

As so often, governments are making matters worse. Food-export bans are proliferating. Although these may produce temporary relief for any one country, the more they spread the tighter global markets become. Another wrongheaded policy has been America's subsidy to domestic ethanol production in a bid to reduce dependence on imported oil. This misconceived attempt to grow more fuel rather than to curb demand is expected to gobble up a third of this year's maize (corn) crop.

Although neo-Malthusianism naturally has much to say about food scarcity, the doctrine emerges more generally as the idea of absolute limits on resources and energy, such as the notion of “peak oil”. Following the earlier scares of the 1970s, oil companies defied the pessimists by finding extra fields, not least since higher prices had spurred new exploration. But even if oil wells were to run dry, economies can still adapt by finding and exploiting other energy sources.

A new form of Malthusian limit has more recently emerged through the need to constrain greenhouse-gas emissions in order to tackle global warming. But this too can be overcome by shifting to a low-carbon economy. As with agriculture, the main

difficulty in making the necessary adjustment comes from poor policies, such as governments' reluctance to impose a carbon tax. There may be curbs on traditional forms of growth, but there is no limit to human ingenuity. That is why Malthus remains as wrong today as he was two centuries ago.