

## **Debates on Malthus's Population Hypothesis: Neo-Malthusianism, Anti-Malthusianism and the Socialist View**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The 19th century was a period in which a profoundly serious demographic change was experienced in Western Europe. The economic and social issues caused by the rapid population growth in Europe, especially in the UK and Germany, started to be discussed. Some economists began to allege that the surplus of the population brought misery, not welfare. Malthus was the spearhead figure among these authors, and he is still discussed in the field of demography today. Malthus argues that the rate of population growth is greater than the rate of increase in the food supply, which is the main cause of poverty. This opinion has found both great support and criticism. Malthus alleged a pessimistic theory, by noticing that the increase in the UK population was raising poverty in some areas. In his theory of growth, in which he included population and resources, he claimed that food production would increase at decreasing rates due to the law of diminishing yields, by assuming that the amount of arable land was constant. Malthus is a typical liberal philosopher of the period. According to him, the reason for the misery was that the lower classes reproduced too much and had more children than they could care for. In this context, he strongly objects to the 'Poor Laws' that regulate the state's social assistance to the poor.*

*In 1877, the Neo-Malthusian population approach, which adopted Malthus's population approach, began to take shape in the UK. The first major advocates of birth control were British radical Neo-Malthusians. Despite Malthus's opposition to the contraception in principle, these early Neo-Malthusians in the UK considered overpopulation to be a cause of poverty and supported birth control with the idea that it would reduce poverty and improve the living conditions of the working population by ensuring that the poor had fewer children. Criticism of Malthus and Neo-Malthusian opinions was carried out by Anti-Malthusians and Socialists. Anti-Malthusianism is a doctrine that opposes Malthusian thoughts, sees a decline in population growth as a danger, and promotes fertility. In France, where fertility rates fell in an early era, the Anti-Malthusian trend was widely accepted. Another group that opposed Malthus's thoughts was the socialist thinkers of the period. They were criticizing Malthus's liberal perspective of poverty. According to the Socialists, to eradicate poverty, it was necessary to change the model of society rather than controlling the population.*

**KEYWORDS** Malthus, Starvation, Growth, Socialist

### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Malthus, a pessimist among classical economists, lived in England during a turbulent period of intense class conflict and his writings reflect his position during this turbulent period. Malthus theorized that the world's food resources were not able to feed an excessively growing population. From this point of view, he made proposals for controlling population growth, which were criticized for being "cruel". The Neo-Malthusian approach, which is the result of the reshaping of Malthus's population approach, arguing that rapid population growth is an obstacle to development, has been used to control the rapid population growth in underdeveloped and developing countries, especially after the Second World War. This study examines the ideas put forward by defenders of limiting population growth and their opponents.

#### **1- Malthus's Population Theory and Criticisms**

Industrialization, rapid urbanization and rapid population growth in Europe in 19th century brought poverty and misery. Unlike the Physiocrats, who argued in the previous period that wealth and population growth were interdependent, some economists began to argue that overpopulation brought misery, not prosperity in the early 1800s. Malthus was one of the most prominent of these writers and has still become a debated name in the field of demography today (1).

R. Malthus drew great reactions from the society after the publication of his work "An essay on the laws of population growth" in 1789. The great reaction of the society to this work should be attributed to the conditions of that time. In this period, with the introduction of the machine to industry, companies employing large-scale workers entered to the market and thus the population flow from the villages to the cities for work started. Later on, workers working under very difficult conditions in the cities began to live in great misery.

Malthus, on the one hand, watched the growth and development of industry, and on the other hand, he saw the rapidly increasing misery of workers in the face of growth and development. In the face of both developments, he thought about how society could stabilize and how this misery could be prevented without preventing the growth and development of industry and concentrated his ideas in this direction. Malthus's work named "Theory of Population" was largely realized within a Malthusian framework, as the new discipline of political economy incorporated his thought into its basic principles (2). According to Malthus, people tend to reproduce. However, according to the law of diminishing returns, which applies to agriculture, it is not possible for the available land to support population growth (3). Malthus explains his views on population growth as follows by considering the fact that the population in America has doubled in 25 years. If there is no obstacle, while population grows in a geometric sequence of 1 2 4 8 16 32 64..., foodstuffs increase in an arithmetic sequence of 1 2 3 4 5 6 7... (4). Malthus thought that this relationship between population growth and the rate of increase in foodstuffs imposed limits on the perfect level of prosperity that humanity could achieve (5). Malthus argued that if population was not controlled, this would be a major problem, as the difficulty of obtaining the necessary foodstuffs and other necessities for human life would increase more than food production (6). According to Malthus, the imbalance between food resources and population growth must be balanced. In order to achieve this, it is necessary to control population growth, i.e. the reproductive capacity of humans. In fact, this argument of Malthus is quite weak empirically.

**Table:1 Actual Population Growth (million)**

Years	Britain	France	Germany	USA
1750	10 mil.	24 mil.	18 mil.	5
1850	27 mil.	36 mil.	35 mil.	32
1901	39 mil.	41 mil.	65 mil.	93
2001	59 mil.	59 mil.	82 mil.	285

**Table:2 Economic Growth Rates (%)**

Years	Britain	France	Germany	USA
1873	1.8	1.6	2.8	4.5
1914	0.9	1.2	1.4	1.8

<https://sadiikusta.com.tr/malthusun-nufus-teorisi-ve-kapitalizmin-cikmazi-bolu>

As the statistics show, the situation in Europe and the USA did not confirm Malthus's predictions, neither in terms of population growth nor in terms of food shortages. Foreign immigration played an important role in the growth of the USA (7). The rate of increase in food production is, as Malthus himself emphasized, only hypothetical, so that Malthus argued without any direct data that nothing more than an arithmetic rate of increase could be expected. Malthus focused solely on birth rates as the cause of population growth, ignoring the declining mortality rates in developed countries and the impact of technology on productivity growth, and he made empirically problematic inference (8). Malthus was mistaken in two respects in putting forward his views. Firstly, it is possible for population to decrease not only because of starvation or wars, but also because the need to have a large number of children disappears as a result of the improvement in people's living conditions. Secondly, Malthus did not adequately measure the world's capacity to meet the food and other needs of a growing human population. In the period following the 18th century, the process of technological development following industrialization led to unprecedented developments in agricultural production as well as industrial production (9). The theses put forward by Malthus can be proved neither by numerical facts nor by social norms of behavior. However, the main reason why his book was widely acclaimed was both his fluent use of language, his telling of simple stories embellished with examples drawn from everyday life, and the fear of the middle classes that the spark of the French Revolution might spread to England.

## **II. NEO MALTHUSIANISM AND ANTI-MALTHUSIANISM**

### **2.1. Neo Malthusianism**

In 1877, the Neo-Malthusian population approach began to take shape with the establishment of an association in England that adopted Malthus's population approach. Neo Malthusianism is an intellectual movement that emphasizes the necessity of addressing environmental problems not as technical problems, but as economic and social problems, and that this should be carried out together with repressive measures. According to Malthus's thesis, which forms the intellectual basis of environmentalism, there is a disproportionate relationship between population growth on earth and the increase in food production. The Neo-Malthusians have pointed out that this disproportionate relationship is between technological expansion, the consumption of mineral resources as well as the creation of forms of pollution, and the capacity of the earth to feed its population, absorb pollution and the current mode of consumption.

In Neo-Malthusian works, we encounter the argument that the earth's limited resources cannot feed an unlimitedly growing population, and therefore measures should be taken against population growth. However, in these works, it is seen that Malthus focused on different aspects of his original thesis: The change in technology and food production with the industrial revolution, the limitation of energy resources, the different reflections of scarcity and population growth in developed and developing countries, and the relationship between population growth and economic growth are some of the problems that these works focus on (10).

Within the framework of the neo-Malthusian population approach, ideas on population control are generally based on three basic assumptions: According to the first assumption, high population growth is the root cause of development problems in the underdeveloped and developing countries of the world, such as hunger, environmental pollution, economic stagnation and political instability. The second assumption is that in order to eliminate the problem of population growth, people need to be persuaded or, if necessary, forced to have fewer children without improving the impoverished conditions in which they live. According to the third assumption, given the right financing, personnel, technology and Western management techniques, contraceptive services should be provided to people living in underdeveloped and developing countries with a top-down approach in the absence or inadequacy of basic health care services (11). The Neo-Malthusian approach also argues that rapid population growth in developing countries leads to unemployment, as there is no increase in employment to meet the increasing labor supply as a result of high population growth. One of the main concerns of the Neo-Malthusian approach is the risk that the conditions of poverty caused by rapid population growth in poor countries will ultimately lead to political instability (10). Neo-Malthusianism was adopted in former colonies and economically underdeveloped countries that gained independence after World War II. These policies are also supported by international organizations such as the United Nations Population Fund. This approach, which considers population planning and low fertility as essential for economic development, was also articulated in Turkey since the late 1960s and has been implemented as a state policy since the 1970s.

## 2.2. Anti-Malthusianism

Anti-Malthusianism is a doctrine that opposes Malthusian ideas, considers the decline in population growth as a danger and supports fertility. Anti-Malthusianism became dominant in France, where the fertility rate began to decline in the early 1800s. In France, the rate of population growth began to decline since the 19th century. This situation was the first of its kind among all European countries. Between 1851 and 1911, while the German and British populations grew by 57.8% and 42.8% respectively, the French population grew by only 9%. The main reason for this was the decline in births. Opinions claiming that this situation was a major problem threatening France became dominant. Associations were founded, various meetings were organized and public opinion was tried to be formed (1).

### III. SOCIALIST CRITICISMS ON MALTHUS'S POPULATION THEORY

In the 19th century, there was also a need for labor for developing industrial production. Since the adult male population was insufficient to meet the need for labor, both women and children participated in production in factories under very unfavorable conditions. In 19th century Europe, working conditions in factories were characterized by severe poverty and misery. One of those who sought solutions to this negative situation that emerged to the detriment of workers with industrialization was socialist thinkers who opposed Malthus's ideas. While criticizing Malthus for his liberal approach to poverty, they argued, like Malthus, that fertility should decrease in order to increase workers' wages. The point where socialists disagreed with Malthus was in their perspective on poverty. According to socialists, the elimination of poverty required a change in the model of society, not population planning as Malthus suggested. The solution to the problem of poverty was to plan the economy, not the population (1). Neo-Malthusians defended their ideas on population planning by drawing attention to the relationship between labor supply and wages. In the leaflets they distributed outside the factories, it was written as follows:

***“Two workers applying for the same job: low wages***

***Two bosses competing for one worker: high wages***

***Have fewer children!”***

In short, for Neo-Malthusian socialists, who, although they opposed Malthus's liberalism, believed that fewer children were necessary for higher wages, reducing fertility was a precondition for improving the economic conditions of workers. For neo-Malthusian socialists, reducing fertility was a prerequisite for economic development.

### IV. KARL MARX'S CRITICISMS ON MALTHUS'S POPULATION THEORY

Marx addressed the issue of population in relation to the functioning of capitalism and the relations of production, and described the surplus population as a "reserve army of labor".

Based on Ricardo's relationship between population growth and wages, Marx states that the factor that determines wages, that is, the price of labor, is the supply and demand for labor. Accordingly, when the supply of labor is higher, the wage of the worker is lower. A large population allows the labor supply to be high, and therefore employers can employ workers for lower wages. According to Marx, policies aimed at increasing the population serve to create a reserve army of labor, which favors employers. Malthus argued that the natural population growth is geometric and therefore high birth rates are only the result of the "population geometry". Marx, on the other hand, argued that in a well-organized society, overpopulation would not be a problem and that the root cause of unemployment and poverty was the way capitalism functioned. Marx argued that capitalists seized a portion of the value created by those who produced, so that poverty was a product of this system. Moreover, according to Marx, unemployment was necessary for the capitalist system to function properly. Because the existence of an "army of unemployed" prevented wages from rising and capitalists could make more profit by employing low-wage workers. Initially, capitalist accumulation required a large population surplus of young laborers. Secondly, the nature of industrial production and capitalist exploitation led to a very high mortality rate and a very short life span for workers, thus ensuring the rapid reproduction of the basic mass of life (12). With the change of the social system and the establishment of socialism, the problem of unemployment would disappear and the values created would return to those who created them and overpopulation would cease to be a problem. Marx interpreted population growth as not being the main source of poverty and human suffering; on the contrary, it potentially gives human beings an advantage.

"Marx objects to Malthus's naturalization of the creation of unemployment and poverty by reducing it to the simple relationship between population growth and pressure on resources. His main objection is to the thesis that poverty is produced by the rapidly growing working class, i.e. the blaming of the victim. Marx's aim is to show that capitalism produces poverty regardless of the state or rate of population growth (13). In other words, Marx criticizes "Malthus for showing poverty as a natural condition" (14). Nikitin harshly criticizes Malthus's theory, calling it "the theory of escaping from human beings". "This theory was capable of justifying all the badness of capitalism. Unemployment was attributed to the absolute excessive growth of the number of the working class. Misery was explained by the excess of mouths to feed and the scarcity of means of subsistence. According to Malthus, the proletariat could get rid of unemployment, misery and hunger. However, this could not be done by changing the capitalist order, but by avoiding marriage and preventing birth by artificial means. Another point Nikitin criticizes is that Malthus's proposed solutions are not natural. "Malthus considered disasters such as war, epidemics, etc. as a good for humanity. Because, he said, these disasters destroy the 'excess' population and bring it in line with the amount of means of subsistence" (15). Does the fact that Malthus came up with such proposals mean that he was cruel? Galbraith thinks this would be unfair: "Malthus was not, as one might think, a cruel man, and his thinking tended toward remedial steps for the authority of his controlling law. He thought that marriage at an older age might to some extent be the solution. He wanted marriage to include the warning that the young married ones would bear the consequences of their passions and pay the price" (16).

Marx's population argument differs from Malthus's view on two important issues.

1. Marx argues that poverty is the fault of the poverty, and that the fault lies with capitalist production in general and the capitalist class in particular;

2. Population problems are a problem arising from class relations (17)

Poverty is defined as the emergence of negative social consequences due to lack of economic resources (18). Marx attributes the cause of poverty to social factors rather than the individual and states that capitalism is to blame for the emergence of poverty and that poverty is the reason for the existence of capitalism. Poverty is necessary for capitalism to accumulate capital and to find low-wage labor. In fact, one of the causes of poverty is that resources are not distributed fairly to workers. In an environment of unfair distribution, poverty persists (17). High incidence of poverty leads to high birth rates, which in turn leads to a high growth of the population living in poverty (19). Karl Marx argued that the capacity of a population to feed itself depends primarily on economic and social organization and that capitalism, not population growth, is to blame for poverty (20). For Marx and Malthus, the central economic question of population was the question of the cause of poverty. Malthus emphasized biological determinism, Marx emphasized the socio-economic conditions of capitalism. More precisely, Malthus defined the problem of poverty in terms of the principle of society acting unconsciously as a natural law. For him, population was an independent variable, resulting in economic distress and increasing misery for the poor as a class and for society as a whole. Marx defined the problem of poverty as a conscious class problem (12).

## **V. ESTER BOSERUP**

Boserup is one of the economists who argues the opposite of Malthus's ideas. He argues that technology in agriculture will be shaped according to the pressures created by population. If the population density is low, land-intensive technologies that save more labor will be used in agriculture, and if the density is

high, labor-intensive technologies will be used. In this model, land or more broadly natural resources are considered as capital factors. According to Boserup, "Population growth is the cause, not the effect, of agricultural change, and the principal change is the intensification of land use." Malthus predicts that population tends to increase as much as subsistence opportunities allow. Boserup, who also disagrees with this view, states that the invention and diffusion of a technology do not occur simultaneously and that agricultural methods that use agricultural land more intensively spread in regions where population density reaches a certain level (21).

## VI. CONCLUSION

Throughout the 19th century, population was a highly debated topic in Europe. Malthus's "Theories of Population" divided the thinkers of the time into two groups. In countries like France, where population growth was declining, Malthus's proposals were strongly rejected, while in Britain and other countries, especially socialists supported birth control to eliminate the misery of workers. Malthus's views criticizing population growth were very popular in developing countries and were considered a prerequisite for economic development. In fact, as time passed, it became clear that Malthus's thesis was not correct, in fact the opposite was true. Economies grew rapidly, new areas were opened to agriculture, and completely different technologies were used in food production. In the twentieth century, a "New Malthusianism" approach emerged. The Neo-Malthusians, who do not consider the problem of overpopulation as a necessary consequence of political and economic conditions, argue that this problem is an internal problem of the oppressed countries, which are suffering from hunger and misery.

Criticism of the theses of Malthus and the neo-Malthusians was also on the agenda of socialists and Marx. Marx's criticism was that Malthus did not consider the population problem as a problem arising from the capitalist mode of production, and that he placed the blame on the working classes with a simple simplicity. According to Marx, both the mass accumulation of laborers on the outskirts of cities and the uncontrolled increase in births, as well as the conditions of unemployment and misery, are desired and created by capitalist production. In order for capital to intensive, workers' wages had to be suppressed, and for this a reserve army of unemployed had to be created. Marx did not underestimate Malthus's warnings about overpopulation in any place. On the contrary, he accepted the need to control an excessive population growth. But Marx criticized arguments that this was a defect of the unconsciousness of the working classes.

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