

Thomas Robert Malthus (1766–1834)

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An English cleric, scholar, and political economist who became one of the most influential—and most reviled—thinkers in demographic history. His 1798 work *An Essay on the Principle of Population* argued that human population grows geometrically (2, 4, 8, 16...) while food supply grows only arithmetically (1, 2, 3, 4...), locking humanity into perpetual poverty punctuated by famine, war, and disease.

The Core Argument

Malthus's central claim: population will always tend to outrun the means of subsistence unless checked by:

- **Preventive checks** — delayed marriage, abstinence ("moral restraint")
- **Positive checks** — famine, disease, war (the brutal reality)

He was a devout Christian who opposed artificial birth control, believing only self-restraint was morally acceptable. He also worried that contraception would be *too* effective, since a steadily growing population was then seen as necessary for social progress.

Who Promotes/Explains Malthus

Wikipedia — The Neutral Summary



"Malthusianism is a theory that population growth is potentially exponential, according to the Malthusian growth model, while the growth of the food supply or other resources is linear, which eventually reduces living standards to the point of triggering a population decline... According to this theory, poverty and inequality will increase as the price of assets and scarce commodities goes up due to fierce competition for these dwindling resources."

"Neo-Malthusians differ from Malthus's theories mainly in their support for the use of birth control. Malthus, a devout Christian, believed that 'self-control' (i.e., abstinence) was preferable to artificial birth control."

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Malthusianism>

Easy Sociology — Malthus as Foundational Thinker

“Thomas Robert Malthus (1766–1834) was a pivotal figure in the development of modern social thought and remains a foundational presence in the fields of sociology, political economy, demography, and environmental studies. While often characterised through his grim predictions about population growth and resource scarcity, Malthus's intellectual contributions go far beyond his popular image.”

<https://easysociology.com/sociology-theorists/the-work-of-thomas-robert-malthus/>

Socio.Health — Malthusian Theory Still Matters as a Warning

“More than two centuries after Thomas Robert Malthus published his Essay on the Principle of Population in 1798, his ideas continue to shape how scholars, policymakers, and planners think about people, food, and resources. While modern technology has softened many of his bleakest predictions, the core tension he identified, between a growing population and a finite resource base, has only intensified.”

<https://socio.health/population-theories-policies-programme/malthusian-theory-lessons-modern-demography/>

Investopedia — Theory Largely Dismissed by Economics

“His theory is now largely dismissed, as modern farming techniques have allowed food production to scale much faster than Malthus could have anticipated.”

<https://www.investopedia.com/terms/t/thomas-malthus.asp>

Who Refutes/Criticises Malthus

Scientific American — Michael Shermer (2016)

“The power of population is so superior to the power of the earth to produce subsistence for man, that premature death must in some shape or other visit the human race,” Malthus gloomily predicted. His scenario influenced policy makers to embrace social Darwinism and eugenics, resulting in draconian measures to restrict particular populations' family size, including forced sterilizations.”

"Ridley sums up the policy succinctly: 'Better to be cruel to be kind.' The belief that 'those in power knew best what was good for the vulnerable and weak' led directly to legal actions based on questionable Malthusian science. For example, the English Poor Law... was severely curtailed by the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, based on Malthusian reasoning that helping the poor only encourages them to have more children and thereby exacerbate poverty."

"The British government had a similar Malthusian attitude during the Irish potato famine of the 1840s, Ridley notes, reasoning that famine, in the words of Assistant Secretary to the Treasury Charles Trevelyan, was an 'effective mechanism for reducing surplus population.'"

<https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/why-malthus-is-still-wrong/>

Quillette — Robert Zubrin (2022)

"An employee of the East India Company College... Malthus's theory that poverty is caused by human reproduction outrunning resources provided useful justification for the brutal policies of his employer in India and allied interests in Ireland in his own time... has served as the ideological foundation for most of the worst human-caused disasters over the two centuries since. Setting all against all, and ultimately genocidal in its implications, Malthusian population theory remains today perhaps the greatest threat there is to the human future."

"While human numbers have quadrupled worldwide since the 1950s, in virtually every category human wellbeing has radically improved. Average personal income has risen 315 percent in the USA, 278 percent in the UK, 82 percent in sub-Saharan Africa, 690 percent in India, and 1,936 percent in China... So, whereas Malthusian theory would predict that per capita income would decrease when the population quadrupled, it actually multiplied fourfold—and total worldwide income increased sixteenfold."

<https://quillette.com/2022/09/08/in-defence-of-progress/>

Socio.Health — Academic Critique

“The strongest blow to Malthusian theory came not from philosophers but from farmers and plant scientists... Between 1950 and 1984, world grain production rose by roughly 160 percent, while population, though growing, never doubled every 25 years as he had predicted."

"Critics note that Malthusian theory is one-sided because it explains population growth as a rising birth rate, whereas in reality the dramatic growth of the last two centuries was driven by a falling death rate. People did not start having more babies, they simply stopped losing as many to infectious disease and childhood illness."

<https://socio.health/population-theories-policies-programme/critiques-malthusian-theory-validity-today/>

Marxist Critique (Monthly Review — John Bellamy Foster)

The Monthly Review's John Bellamy Foster argues that Malthus's real purpose was ideological: to blame the poor for their own poverty rather than the social relations of capitalism. Marx and Engels reserved "a number of choice epithets" for Malthus, seeing his theory as an apologia for the ruling class that naturalised inequality by making it a law of nature rather than a product of exploitation.

Hampton Institute — Anti-Imperialist Critique

“Critiques of Malthus and neo-Malthusianism offer pathways for a different theory of population rooted in principles of anti-imperialism and internationalism.”

<https://www.hamptonthink.org/read/populate-the-internationalist-movement-an-anti-imperialist-critique-of-malthus-and-neo-malthusianism>

Summary

Thomas Malthus's core insight—that population growth can outstrip resource production—is trivially true in a closed system and has influenced everyone from Darwin (who credited Malthus with inspiring natural selection) to modern environmentalists. But his specific predictions have been comprehensively wrong for 200 years.

Where he was wrong:

- He couldn't foresee the Green Revolution, synthetic fertiliser, industrial agriculture, or global trade networks that decoupled food supply from local population
- He assumed population growth was driven by higher birth rates; actually it was driven by falling death rates (medicine, sanitation)
- The demographic transition proved that prosperity *reduces* fertility, not increases it—richer countries have fewer children
- Modern agriculture has produced food faster than population has grown

Where his legacy is dark:

- His ideas were used to justify the brutal 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act (cutting food relief to the poor)
- British administrators during the Irish Famine actively blocked relief on Malthusian grounds, calling famine an "effective mechanism for reducing surplus population"
- His work provided ideological cover for eugenics, forced sterilisation programmes, and colonial brutality in India
- Neo-Malthusian thinking continues to underpin population-control narratives that target the Global South

What still resonates:

- The fundamental question of carrying capacity and planetary limits hasn't gone away—it's just shifted from food to climate, biodiversity, water, and energy
- Neo-Malthusians like Paul Ehrlich (*The Population Bomb*) were catastrophically wrong on timing but their underlying concern about resource depletion remains relevant in the Anthropocene
- The tension between infinite-growth economics and finite planetary systems is arguably the defining political question of our era

Malthus was wrong on the details, dangerous in his policy implications, but the question he posed—can human numbers and consumption outstrip what the planet can provide?—refuses to die, because it's the right question. The answer just isn't the one he gave.

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