

Living in our Globalized World: Notes 10
Malthusian view of population growth
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- Population growth: Malthusian views
 - World population is growing at an incredible pace
 - see the graph
 - But not all countries equally
 - by 2050, Europe, Japan, and China will be much more populated than now, but are expected to actually be declining from their peaks
 - the “developed world” is expected to peak around 2020, then decline
 - while the less developed countries will keep rising
 - This is presumably a serious problem
 - Robbins is not so sure...
 - Robbins argues that most of the discussion is flawed, ethnocentric, and self-serving for the interests of developed countries
 - peripheral populations are no longer
 - passively producing raw materials for the developed countries
 - nor consuming only what developed countries produce
 - so their growth now looks threatening, rather than beneficial, to developed countries
 - their growth as suppliers of materials and markets for our goods was “good”
 - now it is “bad”
 - is this self-serving of the developed countries?
 - Thomas Malthus (1798)
 - population increases geometrically (doubles, then doubles again, etc.)
 - but food production increases more slowly
 - so eventually, there is not enough food
 - and something happens to reduce the population to match the food supply
 - starvation
 - disease
 - war
 - Simple-minded neo-Malthusians
 - a country with rapid population growth cannot improve its standard of living
 - because improvements in technology, investments, etc. will just go to supporting the growing population
 - or may not even keep up
 - Yet India, with rapid population growth, and China, with much slower population growth, have had similar even more rapid economic growth
 - consumption rising faster than population means everyone gets to consume more
 - I am not entirely convinced by Robbins’ numbers
 - India had a relatively modest growth rate by the time its economic growth was measured at 4.5%
 - and China does indeed have a higher economic growth rate than India

- but let's grant Robbins' claim that there is no general negative correlation between population growth rate and economic growth rate
- so why were the neo-Malthusians wrong here?
 - 1. in fact, production has gotten more efficient rapidly enough to more than keep up with population
 - 2. people produce, as well as consume
 - and adults produce more than children
 - so when life expectancy is short, every new person adds lots of consumption (as a child) and only a little production (as an adult who dies young)
 - but when life expectancy gets to 50 years or more, each new person adds more production than consumption
 - so with longer lifespan, larger populations improve economic growth, rather than holding it back
 - this may be what happened with Europe and the US growing both in population and economic productivity from the mid-1800s on
 - 3. economies of scale... maybe
 - 4. population growth creates more consumption, thus economic growth... hmm.
 - 5. population growth forces intensification of agriculture
 - getting more crop per acre by putting in more labor per acre
 - weeding, irrigating, fertilizing, etc.
 - the returns to increasing labor (or energy) input decline
 - that is, it takes ever more labor (or energy) to produce a unit of food
 - but you do get more and more units of food per acre
- The problem of carrying capacity
 - **carrying capacity**: the number of some kind of organisms a finite environment can support
 - Neo-Malthusians say we are approaching the carrying capacity of the Earth
 - problem with applying this to humans: we can change our diets and ways of producing food
 - so is the Earth's carrying capacity 7.5 billion?
 - or 147 billion?
 - "Revisionists" argue that carrying capacity is high
 - it may even keep receding indefinitely
 - my view: there is not a simple threshold anywhere close to the current global population
 - instead, as population rises, life just gets ever more unpleasant
 - poor people starving
 - wars for land and water
 - preferred foods get more expensive
 - we accept ever more ecological damage to keep producing cheap food, etc.
- so the debate presented by Robbins is a bit artificial
 - really, it should be "at what world population will things get unacceptably unpleasant"?
 - that is even harder to estimate

- since it depends on how much we value blue skies, affordable beef, etc.
- Ideology of Malthusian views
 - regardless of scientific truth, ideas are acceptable or not based in part on how they fit with other aspects of culture
 - if we find that certain ideas are convenient or self-serving, we should be suspicious of them
 - that does not mean they are false
 - just that we should be very careful about accepting them as objective reality, rather than cultural constructs
 - the more an idea fits with other values, the more seductive it is
 - the easier it is to assume facts, or overlook contradictions
 - are Neo-Malthusian views acceptable because we are worried about the threat of the poor?
 - it isn't how many people, but how many poor people, that is worrying
 - maybe the problem is a capitalist system and consumption practices that cause many people to be very poor
 - rather than that poor people have too many kids
 - that is, are we trying to get the poor to have fewer children
 - instead of changing our own consumption habits?