



Malthus on National Public Radio

The following piece on Reverend Thomas Malthus aired on NPR Weekend Sunday on June 7, 1998. It was written and produced by NPR Correspondents David Baron in Boston and Liane Hansen in Washington, DC. It is Copyright 1998 by [National Public Radio](#).

LIANE HANSEN, HOST: 200 years ago today, British economist Thomas Malthus completed his essay "On the Principle of Population." It predicted that inevitable overpopulation would lead to starvation, pestilence, and war.

His book provoked fierce disagreement among scholars when it was first published.

And as NPR's David Baron reports, the dispute over its bleak forecast hasn't yet died down.

DAVID BARON, NPR REPORTER: Thomas Malthus was not the world's first prophet of doom, but he may be the most famous. His 1798 book presented a simple, profound, and pessimistic argument: "Human population," he wrote, "grows exponentially, like compound interest in a bank account, but farm output rises at a slower, arithmetic rate; the result, human population will inevitably and repeatedly outstrip its food supply."

The book caused an uproar. It later inspired biologist Charles Darwin and was vilified by socialist thinkers such as Karl Marx.

Now, with two centuries of hindsight, it seems fair to ask was Malthus right?

PAUL EHRLICH: He got it as right as anybody would have been likely to 200 years ago.

BARON: That's Stanford University ecologist Paul Ehrlich, author of the 1968 bestseller, "The Population Bomb."

He says Malthus got some details wrong. For instance, farm output has risen much faster than Malthus predicted. But Ehrlich contends the core of Malthus's argument was dead on.

EHRLICH: His basic thesis was that population can always outstrip resources. All you have to do is look at some parts of Southeast Asia today, look at sub-Saharan Africa. If you're in the right place, you can see it right now. Something like a billion people go to bed hungry every night.

BARON: Ecologist Garrett Hardin (ph) of the University of California at Santa Barbara adds that even in the developed world, we're depleting our fisheries, using up our ground water, and living off of nonrenewable resources.

GARRETT HARDIN, ECOLOGIST, UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA AT SANTA BARBARA: The oil that we're pumping up now can only be pumped up once. That's the end of it.

The same way, we're exhausting at not much a faster rate the natural gas and the coal.

BARON: Hardin and Ehrlich say the number of people on earth, almost six billion and rising, is unsustainable, and will crash, just as Malthus predicted.

But that's not the view of many other scholars.

DENNIS AVERY (ph), HUDSON INSTITUTE: Malthus' premise that we would populate ourselves into famine is wrong.

BARON: That's Dennis Avery, who studies global food issues for the Hudson Institute, a think tank known for challenging the views of the environmental doom-sayers.

AVERY: We have increased the calories per capita in the Third World by 35 percent during the biggest surge in population growth the world has ever seen because of modern high-yield farming.

BARON: And, Avery adds, human population growth is slowing, not because of famine, but because of affluence. As people move into the cities and become wealthier, they generally choose to have fewer children.

Ben Wattenberg is a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute.

BEN WATTENBERG, AMERICAN ENTERPRISE INSTITUTE: People are getting wealthier, living better lives, living longer, and the facts now as to -- that is put out each year by the United Nations are becoming more and more conclusive that the population explosion is over. What Malthus said was going to happen hasn't happened, and it's not going to happen.

BARON: So why can't the experts agree?

TOM DIETZ (ph), SOCIOLOGIST, GEORGE MASON UNIVERSITY: While there's been unending debate on this issue, in many areas, in particular population's relationship to environmental problems, there's been very little real research.

BARON: That's George Mason University sociologist Tom Dietz. He explains that population questions tend to fall between the cracks of academic disciplines. Ecologists focus on the constraints to population growth. They see resources running out, and know from studying animals that this situation leads to population crashes.

Dietz says the economists focus on how society responds to scarce resources, by developing new technologies and finding new resources to tap.

DIETZ: Economists have a great deal of faith in the market to provide solutions. And so they tend to be, if you will, optimists about these issues.

BARON: Dietz says what's needed is more cross-disciplinary work. Two new fields, human ecology and ecological economics, are just now beginning to bridge that gap.

There's another reason why scholars can't agree on whether the world will run out of room, as Malthus predicted. Joel Cohen (ph), a professor of populations at Rockefeller University in New York, says there is no simple answer to the question how many people can the earth support. It depends, on what kind of world we want to live in.

JOEL COHEN, POPULATIONS PROFESSOR, ROCKEFELLER UNIVERSITY: How do we value

the other species that we share the planet with? Do we want a world of people and wheat only? Do we want Jaguars with a capital "J", or jaguars with a little "j"? Or do we want some of both?

BARON: And, Cohen points out, the world is entering uncharted territory.

COHEN: It took from the beginning of time to 1830 to add a billion people to the earth's population. We added the most recent billion in 12 years. We are in a domain of experience that is completely novel.

BARON: So will Malthus' predictions come true? Cohen says the only honest answer is, no one knows.

David Baron, NPR News, Boston.

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