



Malthus + 200: Disastrous 'Correction' Looms Ahead, Cornell Scholar Warns In Bicentennial Essay

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ITHACA, N.Y. -- Two hundred years after the essay that put "Malthusian" in the lexicon, the consequences of overpopulation are more dire than ever, warns Cornell University anthropologist David Price.

"Since the productive capacity of the planet is finite, a disastrous Malthusian correction looms ahead," Price says, referring to T.R. Malthus' seminal "Essay on the Principle of Population." This dire outcome, says Price, is a possibility that no one wants to accept as an inevitable consequence of natural forces.

On June 7 scholars around the world will be commemorating the 200th anniversary of the first publication of the essay. Price, a research associate with Cornell's Population and Development Program, is marking the occasion with an essay, "Of Population and False Hopes: Malthus and His Legacy," in the journal *Population and Environment* (Vol. 19, No. 3).

According to Price, Malthus' legacy is the observation that population expands to the limits imposed by means of subsistence. Malthus believed, says Price, that the tendency for population to outstrip its means of subsistence is counterbalanced by "preventive checks" such as infanticide, abortion and contraception, and by "positive checks" such as famines, plagues and wars.

In the intervening 200 years, world population has grown to about 6 billion from around 1 billion in Malthus' time -- despite the many millions lost to famines, plagues and wars. Proportionately more will be lost, now that the stakes are higher, Price fears.

"Almost everyone urges measures to avert the crisis, although strategies differ," Price concludes in his essay. "Whether human beings can, in fact, take such control of their destiny remains to be seen."

Price's essay examines the context in which Malthus developed his ideas and their influence on subsequent thinkers. Price points out that Malthus was not "just a country parson," as he is sometimes portrayed, "but a man in touch with the economic and political issues of his day who spent his professional life involved with research and teaching, like modern professors."

Although Malthus did not claim to have discovered the relationship between population and means of subsistence that now bears his name, he popularized it through six editions of his essay, the Cornell anthropologist notes.

"Malthus was convinced that the growth and collapse of population are consequences of natural forces beyond human control," Price says. "This view is part of a debate between those who think humans are in charge of their destiny and those who think not. The debate was going on before the time of Malthus and has continued, unresolved, to the present day."

Price also points out that Malthus thought of himself, and was thought of by others until about 50 years ago, as an economist. Many of his practical ideas have a familiar ring to modern ears. Malthus opposed giving money to the poor (because, he thought, that would drive up the price of food) but favored finding jobs for the needy. Malthus also argued for universal education, and supported late marriage as a way of limiting the number of children a couple might have and of providing more adequately for their needs.

More recently, Price suggests, Malthus has come to be seen as a demographer. "In his own day, few censuses had been taken and little hard data were available. "Malthus could only guess at the population of England," Price says, "because the government feared that a careful head count would reveal the strength of its army to its enemies."

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