

Module 8

Population Theories

Lecture 24: Theories in Historical Perspective

Slide 1

This module deals with canons of population theory. We will first discuss the theories of Malthus, Marx and a few others which have had the greatest impact on theorizing about population and development. Then we will discuss if there is any possibility of synthesizing some of these theories or whether different theories co-exist without competing with each other. This is followed by demographic transition theory which summarizes the empirical data on 19th and 20th century demographic processes in the North-West Europe. Finally, we discuss Gandhian theory of population which would be of some interest to Indian students of population sociology.

T.R.MALTHUS

The first major study of population was taken up by Thomas Robert Malthus. He produced his essay entitled *The Principle of Population as it Affects the Future Improvement of Society*, anonymously, in 1798. It created lot of controversy. Subsequently, to defend him Malthus produced six editions of the essay between 1798 and 1826. With his writings, an era of fear of over-population started (Paul, 1948). Malthus was Britain's first professor in political economy at the [East India Company College](#). In 1797 he had taken orders and become an [Anglican](#) country [parson](#). Being a clergyman Malthus seems to be guided by the idea that sex is at the root of all problems of man. He thought that passion for sex not only degrades and eventually kills a man but also degrades and kills human society. He was a pessimist and is called a doomsday philosopher.

Slide 2

Malthus started with two postulates. First, that food is necessary to the existence of man. Secondly, that the passion between the sexes is necessary, and will remain in its present state. Assuming these postulates to be true, he said that the power of population is indefinitely greater than the power of the earth to produce subsistence for man (Malthus, 1965). Unchecked population increases in a geometric ratio, but subsistence can increase only in an arithmetical ratio.

In the United States of America, where the means of subsistence have been more ample, the manners of the people more pure, and consequently the checks to early marriages fewer than in any of the modern states of Europe, the population has been found to double itself in twenty five years.

Malthus said that the human species would increase in ratio of – 1, 2, 4, 8, 16 ... and subsistence only as 1, 2, 3, 4 ..., creating a continuously rising imbalance between the size of population and availability of means of subsistence. For Malthus, animals and plants are all impelled by powerful instinct to reproduce. Man is no exception to this. Afterwards their growth is checked by want of room and nourishment.

Malthus thought that due to the basic conflict between sexuality and subsistence humans can never be happy and population is brought down to lower levels periodically. He divided all the factors leading to decline in the size of population into two categories: positive checks and preventive checks. If the population growth is not checked by human reason, it produces misery and vice, i.e., pestilences, famines, deaths, infant deaths, starvation, exposure, and customs such as homosexuality, prostitution, abortion and improper acts. The checks to population growth that has already begun are the positive checks. They manifest in the form of high death rates. Preventive checks appear in the form of vice (sexual practices not leading to childbirth) or moral restraints on sexual activities.

Slide 3

Ironically, Malthus was against use of birth control methods. He believed that there are several forms of voluntary restraints to human population which are oscillatory in nature. They change depending on the cycles of material conditions. Restraints increase when the population is more and food is less and decrease when population is less and food is plenty.

Malthus accepts that population growth is not the only factor that influences development. There are many other factors. Yet he maintains that in all animated life there is a constant tendency to increase beyond the nourishment, and this is the most important cause of human misery. The institutional changes alone – without preventing the growth of population – cannot solve the problem of poverty and destitution on a permanent basis.

To Malthus the natural inequality of the two powers – one of population, and another of production in the earth – and the great law of nature which must constantly keep their effects equal form the great difficulty that appears to be insurmountable in the way to the perfectibility of society. He says that all other arguments are of slight and subordinate consideration in comparison with this. He sees no way by which man can escape from the weight of this law which pervades all animated nature. **“No fancied equality, no agrarian regulations in their utmost extent, could remove the pressure of it even for a single century.”**

Malthus accepts that temporarily a number of other factors such as introduction or failure of certain manufacturers, greater or less prevalent spirit of agricultural enterprise, invention of processes for shortening labour without proportional extension of market, difference between nominal and real wages, and conspiracy of the rich class do affect the conditions of labourers, but their influence is temporary. The action of misery is constant.

To quote:

Human institutions appear to be the obvious and obtrusive causes of much mischief to mankind; yet, in reality, they are light and superficial, they are mere feathers that float on the surface, in comparison with those deeper seated causes of impurity that corrupt the springs, and render turbid the whole stream of human life.

Slide 4

Malthus was aware of the relationship between population growth and the social inequalities too and showed a clear understanding of the class basis of pressures to exercise restraints on population and consequences of population growth. He said that even though all classes defer marriages to check the reproduction, the motives are different for different classes.

Among the lower classes, it is the fear of not providing well for the family, and among the higher classes, it is the fear of lowering their life condition. If a society is equal the misery due to population growth is for all, but in an unequal society, the misery is more for the poor people. The labourers have to work harder, the wages decrease, marriages are discouraged, freedom is lost, many of the poor persons are reduced to severe distress and the population becomes constant. (The positive checks are confined mainly to the lowest stratum of the society.) Poor people are malnourished and infant deaths among the poor are more than among middle and rich classes.

In the meantime, cultivators can use the cheap and efficient labour and increase the production of food. When the food-population balance is re-established the labourers can again live comfortably and the restraints to population are weakened.

Thus population and development maintain a cycle of growth and decline. Many people use the term Malthusian state to refer to a situation in which birth and death rates are high, population is more or less stationary, and there is a lack of development.

The most controversial aspect of Malthus's ideas was that he was **opposed to the Poor Law** which classified and supported various categories of the poor and destitute people in his time. According to him, Poor Law had eradicated the spirit of independence, caused population increase, drove more labourers to ask for support as their quantities of provisions declined, diminished the shores of more industrious and worthy members of society and encouraged dependent poverty. The poor people would not save in the presence of the Poor Laws even when they could, and would spend in drunkenness and dissipation. Poor Law cannot, therefore, improve the, living conditions of the poor people even when the money that is collected for them is well managed.

Slide 5

He suggested that to remove the poverty of the lower classes all parish-laws should be abolished, the wages of the agricultural labourers should be increased to the level of wages of labourers in trade and manufacturing, and country work-houses must be established for the cases of extreme distress where a person can do a day's work at market price.

In the views of Malthus societies by their very nature are divided into unequal classes: upper classes and the labourers. Between them the misery and vice caused by rapid population growth are observed mainly by the labourers.

...that a society constituted according to the most beautiful form that imagination can conceive, with benevolence for its moving principle, instead of self-love, and with every evil disposition in all its members corrected by reason and not force, would, from the inevitable laws of nature, and not from any original depravity of man, in a very short period, degenerate into a society, constructed upon a plan not essentially different from that which prevails in every known state at present; I mean, a society divided into a class of proprietors and a class of labourers, and with self-love for the main-spring of the great machine.

EVALUATION OF MALTHUSIAN THEORY

Malthus was heavily criticised for his pessimistic ideas. He revised his essay six times and by the time of last revision he had become more flexible and optimistic: he had accepted that growth of education and awareness among the masses may lead to population control. The main charges against Malthus are as follows:

- There is no empirical basis of his laws of population and subsistence.
- His theory became popular simply because after French revolution it attempted to divert people's attention towards population growth while the social institutions and unequal access to resources were the major reasons behind poverty and unemployment. Thus it helped to legitimize the capitalist system.

Slide 6

- History showed that population growth need not be negatively associated with development.
- There can be no natural law of population. All laws pertaining to human society depend on the socio-economic and cultural contexts.

Spengler attempted to make a modification in Malthus's theory by suggesting that a growing population can continue to escape deterioration in its average choices if it can orient its tastes away from relatively non-augmentable goods toward highly augmentable goods (Spengler, 1962). He argued that this can solve the problem to some extent in the short run the changing tastes will constitute an increasingly less effective means to improve a population's situation since substitutability is limited.

Peacock (1952) showed that the Malthusian theory of population as a theory of economic development is general and different patterns of assumptions about the relation between population growth and development can be considered within the Malthusian framework. It is not necessary to accept the Malthusian remedies along with the Malthusian analysis.

Undoubtedly, Malthus has had a very strong influence on thinking about relationship between population and society for a long time. All family planning programmes in the developing countries are based on a Malthusian understanding of population.