

Module 2

Lecture 10

Topic

2.7 Malthus

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- The pessimistic speculation on population growth was quite prevalent even before Malthus. Malthus's contribution was to systematically present a population thesis whose predictions were not favored by many contemporary scholars.
- Malthus predicted that growth of economies will be constrained by population growth as food supply will be in shortage.
- Malthus's view was met with stiff resistance from his contemporaries. It was not only because the pessimism inherent in Malthus's doctrine, but also because Malthus's advocated against poor relief policies as they would encourage population growth.
- The first edition of Malthus's *Essay on Population* was published in 1798. The first decennial census was carried out three years later which revealed that the population of England was increasing at a rapid rate.
- Malthus however, while writing his essays was not aware of the population explosion and he shared the belief held by his contemporaries that population of England increased a little after 1680.
- Malthus maintained that human race like any other animal has the biological capacity to procreate. But there are checks which constrains the population growth.
- Malthus divided such checks in two categories. One set was called the *preventive checks*. This would include all the limitations on birth such as moral restraint. The other set was referred to as the *positive checks*. This category would include all causes of death.

- Malthusian theory can be essentially represented through the following propositions:
 1. The rate of population growth exceeds the rate of increase in food production. Sometimes this doctrine is presented as population grows in geometric progression while food production grows in *arithmetic progression*.
 2. Either of the two checks is always operative.
 3. Limited food supply imposes the ultimate check on reproductive capacity
- The doctrines presented above was neither based on any new factual discovery nor it was a clever theoretical argument. All he was doing was to bring a few pieces of common sense ideas together and deducting some logical consequences. But that precisely was the reason why Malthus shot to fame with this book.
- Malthus tried to defend his work partly by logic, partly by facts. But none of his defense had any scholarly rigour.
- His fundamental point was that food production can never grow as fast as population mainly because the total supply of land is fixed.
- He also argued that technological progress will never be sufficient to offset limitations in natural resources.
- He failed to understand that the principle of diminishing return is a static condition which is applicable when technology and other factors are constant.
- Hence, the doctrine of diminishing return is not relevant in the context of dynamic population growth which Malthus was concerned about.
- At a first glance, Malthusian doctrine cannot be empirically tested. Because he is contrasting a hypothetical rate of growth of population (which is never realized because of different checks) with an actual rate of growth of food supply.
- However, there is at least one verifiable implication which can be traced from his writings. He maintained unlike new colonies such as America, old countries can never have sustained rise in living standard along with population growth.

- But most of the statements made by Malthus were too general and therefore is not falsifiable. However, Keynes and Marshall paid their tributes to Malthus for being the first social thinker to apply inductive method to social science.
- Because of Malthus's lack of precise formulation it is difficult to see what he meant by over population. If it simply meant the level of population that cannot be fed using domestic supply, that can be resolved by importing food.
- Another way of looking at it is by assuming an optimum population (the level of population at which income per head is maximized) and subsistence wage.
- Suppose per capita income first grows with population and then drops down. Then the population at which per capita income touches the peak can be termed as optimum population.
- From the figure, the population before the point A is known as under population and population beyond B is over population.
- However, this formulation can also be used to show that technological progress can shift the curve upwards increasing the threshold for overpopulation.
- Even though Malthus' writing was unsatisfying from an intellectual standpoint and cannot be falsified, it has a long standing impact on the history of demography.
- There are neo-Malthusians and some of them have the extreme view that less developed countries cannot develop unless they can successfully control population growth rate. Marxists however are strong critiques of such extreme view. They maintain that population control without industrialization cannot take a country out of poverty. However, China being one of the most prominent socialist countries did not bother to impose a very strict *one child* policy.