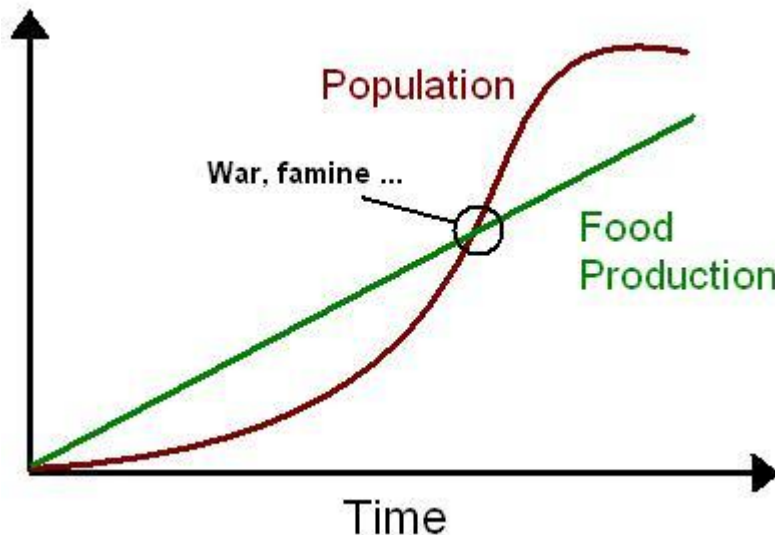


# Neo-Malthusian Theory of Population

Posted by [bhavishya kumar](#) at 28 Sep 17 10:26:37am

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The neo-Malthusian movement therefore was different from conventional Malthusian position on two counts: it stressed on birth control methods and also identified the working class with the problem of overpopulation. The overcrowded industrial slums were identified as sites of moral degeneration.

This diverted the debate on population from issues of poverty and unequal access to resources, to birth control per se. In fact, the assumption was that access to commons or availability of resources would give the poor little reason to abstain from having more children. Neo- Malthusianism thereby reinforced the ideology of private property, individualism and capitalism. The neo-Malthusian position found favour with the elite sentiments on the issue of overpopulation. The elite, threatened by the growing

numbers of commoners, considered birth control as an important means of checking future conflict over their property.

The French delegates tried to maintain a stance of ambivalence though they were wary of contraception on the grounds that it encouraged the idea of seeking sexual pleasure without taking the responsibility of the consequences of the act. According to them, it devalued the institution and sanctity of marriage and family values. For the Catholic Church, birth control was illicit and immoral and went against the basic tenet of Christianity. Till the 1920s, most medical opinion was also against birth control, as it considered it unhealthy and immoral.

The attitude started changing subsequently, as evidenced by the effort made by the British medical professionals in 1921 to appeal to the Anglican Church to reconsider their position on birth control in the light of existing medical knowledge. In America too, after a court ruling in 1929 that upheld the right of doctors to prescribe contraceptives for health reasons, birth control was included in medical curricula. Birth control clinics were set up in different parts of Europe and America and marked the new phase of the birth control movement. Birth control came to be popularised by taking recourse to the less “offensive” and more “social” terms like “family planning” or “planned parenthood”, and the emphasis was on spacing of children and women’s health.

In its bid to control sexuality and the domestic sphere of a person's life, birth control went against the modern values of individual freedom and the right of an individual to her/his privacy. On the other hand, it also questioned the orthodoxy of the times and presented birth control as an attempt to present a choice to the individual to have a child or not.

However, the source of the birth control debate was not whether individual freedom should be protected or not, but on how to control overpopulation, depopulation or under population and its consequent effect on the world. Central to the debate were the issues of migration, availability of labour, conflict over resources, and poverty. The concerns were developmental and political.

The erstwhile Soviet Union was the first country whose government attempted to make birth control advice and services freely available. Lenin, a key supporter of family planning, distinguished neo-Malthusian propaganda from what he termed as "the freedom of dissemination of medical knowledge and the defence of the elementary democratic rights of citizens of both sexes".

The socialists consistently maintained that the hue and cry over population was a way to divert the focus from the core issues of inequality and class struggle. For the socialists, the real issue was unequal access to resources than rising population. According to them, there was enough for everyone, provided resources are

shared equally. The problem lay in the lack of equal distribution, with the bourgeois and the propertied class unwilling to give up the large share of resources under their control.

After World War II, the situation altered with a number of newly independent states joining the United Nations. By then the neo-Malthusian demographic transition theory was well accepted. According to this theory, all countries pass through four stages of demographic evolution. The first phase is the pre-industrial stage, marked by a high birth and death rate and slow population growth. The second stage is characterised by a population explosion, with improvement in technology and social conditions of life.

The death rate is low but the birth rate remains high leading to a high population growth rate. The third stage marks the beginning of the decline in the birth rate due to socio-economic changes and the fourth stage stabilises this trend and establishes a low and steady population growth rate. The interesting aspect of the theory is that population growth was supposed to reflect the level of economic development of a society. It established a low population rate as a key indicator of an economically developed country.

The post-colonies or the countries of the 'third world' stood out in terms of the neo-Malthusian analysis. The countries that broke out of the ditches of colonial rule seemed to be undergoing the second stage of demographic transition, that is, they were experiencing

high birth rates and low death rates. With better medical facilities and infrequent famine conditions, population had not only stabilised but also increased at a rapid rate.

They were considered as backward, far behind the advanced societies in terms of economic development and technological growth, which was reflected in the persistent high rate of population growth rate. These were a matter of concern for the developed world. Years of colonialism had left these countries poor, with a large population to provide for.

Reduction of population became a priority with the UN. The focus was on raising nutrition levels in developing countries and providing better health facilities to women and children. The proposal to set up the Population Commission came up in 1945, which was opposed by former USSR and Yugoslavia on the grounds that another Commission would only confuse matters, given the proliferation of international bodies within the UN. But the main reason for opposing the Commission was because it focussed primarily on “population changes” and the impending doom following the population explosion, rather than on “growth”.

It ignored the role of global capitalist development in the production of economic backwardness in developing countries. The Commission was nonetheless formally established in 1946. Although it had no decision-making power, it worked in

collaboration with the other specialised agencies of the UN such as the International Labour Organisation (ILO), Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) and the World Health Organisation (WHO).

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