

Women and Population Politics

The relationship between economic growth, population, and technology has been present since before the Industrial Revolution. The definition of technology is complex, and it includes various “activities that create economic value” (Lipsey et al. 58). Technology has been present as long as humans have existed; however, with technological advances and a growing economy during the Industrial Revolution, there was an increase in population that followed “from an estimated 10 million to 1 billion” (Lipsey et al. 291). This rapid growth of the population and its prospective exponential increase has led women to be the focal point of population politics due to their involvement in reproductive labor. Hence, it is important to acknowledge that population control strategies make assumptions that disregard people's autonomy, especially regarding having children. They fail to account for the ‘baby bust’ as well as for the transition of a majority of women from the private to the public sphere of work. Thus, population control theories, such as Malthus’ theory, need to be unlearned as they fail to account for women's autonomy of choice in regard to entering the paid labour force and having children.

Women and Labour

Historically, women were seen to be involved in domestic labour and were not involved in the formal economy. Gardiner explains that “in the 1950s and early 1960s all the social science virtually ignored housework and domestic caring work,” so women's labour has only recently been studied (3). House and domestic work can be defined as “unpaid household activities which could be done by someone other than the person who actually carries them out or could be purchased if a market for those activities existed” (Gardiner 11). Domestic labour is viewed as part of the private sphere of activities since it is done in the home and is not

market-based, as its performance does not yield monetary transactions or exchanges. Further, domestic labour renders itself invisible to GDP due to its lack of monetary valuation. However, domestic labour and its knowledge are valuable to productivity as, without the performance of domestic labour, such as cooking and cleaning, the labour done in the public sphere will not be productive. The private sphere also includes child care and reproductive labour. Child care is often naturalized to women due to their perceived biological function of childrearing. However, it is socially constructed since “the ideas and practices of mothering are not universal and timeless but developed in specific historical and political conditions” (Gardiner 189).

Historically, women have done most of the child care due to the societal division of gender roles. Gardiner explains, “men perceive themselves as a backup for their wives and often resist an active engagement in parenting as a learning process for themselves” which further contributes to women performing most of child caring needs (192). “Children’s dependence on their mother can give women a sense of purpose lacking elsewhere in their lives and this can prevent women seeking to share parenting equally with their husbands” (Gardiner 192). Thus, women were tied into the private sphere by their own and societal influences which historically lead to a lower labour participation rate.

Moreover, this was not the case after the Second World War and the labour force participation rate of women increased with both married and single women seeking employment (Gardiner 194). The participation of women in the labour force increased due to the increase in income (Gardiner 41). However, “the time married women spent in the production of goods for the home and family, their labour supply choice was not simply between work and leisure” (Gardiner 41). Women were moving into the labour force and they were forced to choose between their household work and their work in the economic market. Women and men were

faced with different kinds of choices in the economy where women choose “between working in the home (and leisure) and working in the market” while men only choose between leisure and market work (Gardiner 43). While this may still be the case in some places, in the West today, we are moving towards a reliance on two-income households as expenses rise. However, most housework and reproductive labour is still done by women, thus yielding a double-burden.

Even though women entered the labour force later than men, they were still becoming a part of the labour market as they were “working longer hours” and taking more jobs (Crush and Williams 158). Older theories regarding population politics, for example, Malthus’s theory, did not account for the agency of women to go into the labour force and the need for multiple incomes to sustain subsistence wages. Since “domestic labour associated with children tends to reduce market labour supply, the extra financial cost associated with children tends to enhance it” (Gardiner 195). The cost of children continued to rise, which causes women, especially those of low income, to enter the labour force. Also, as children grew older, more and more women were compelled to earn money. Hence, the added expenses of children as well as other factors, like birth control methods, and the agency of women and their partners to control their family size, drew women into the labour market which were not taken into not take into account by population control strategies.

Fertility and the Economy

Moreover, population strategies, such as Malthus’s population theory, did not account for the ‘baby bust’ many developing and developed economies are currently experiencing (Eswaran 249). The population was on the rise in the 1960s but “a Malthusian crisis was averted as fertility more than halved in the developing world, from six children per woman to fewer than three

today, while both GDP per worker and GDP per capita more than doubled” (Chatterjee and Vogl 1440). Nonetheless, this is not the case everywhere as “in many African countries,” women are choosing to have more children “to provide more labour to farming, water fetching, and fuelwood gathering tasks” and more which will be discussed (Crush and Williams 155).

Firstly, bearing children involved opportunity cost and hence involved a lot of decision-making. If consumers were to have children, they would “have to make do with less of all other good” or give up economic activity to care for the child, which was previously discussed (Eswaran 250). If the cost of children increases, the substitution effect will be in a place where “the couple will substitute relatively cheaper goods for a more expensive good (children),” and the couple will end up poorer due to the increased spending on children (Eswaran 252). This contributes to the situation today where an “increase in the cost of children will decrease fertility” (Eswaran 253). Malthus predicted this in his theory, arguing that “in times of abundance, when income levels rise above subsistence levels, fertility rises”, suggesting that if people were to make more money, they would decide to have more children (Eswaran 253). However, he did not account for the “other factors [that] might intervene” with the decision to have more children, such as children becoming less desirable, birth control methods, and women entering the labour force (Eswaran 253). Furthermore, in lower-income countries, fertility rates tend to be high. This is the case due to a lack of available family planning and birth control options. Other reasons include “parents view[ing] children as vehicles for ensuring security in old age” and providing a “benefit” to the parents when the child becomes an adult and earns their own income (Eswaran 255-6). As a result, the decision to have children would depend on the couple's environment and other factors mentioned.

This further leads to the question of how economic development and fertility are related. Eswaran argues that “economic development...eliminat[es] the wedge between the private and the social net benefits of children, plays an important role in reducing fertility” (256). It does so by providing pension plans so that individuals are less reliant on their children to support them after retirement (Eswaran 256). Therefore, economic development and increasing social benefits provided by the government might serve as one of the factors to discourage having children. Further, when economic development raises income, higher income in a more economically developed society would be overwhelmed by the higher costs, which also contributes to the declining fertility rates. This, however, depends on the income of women as there is an opportunity cost “of the woman’s opting out of market work during and after pregnancy” (Eswaran 257). Hence, economic development will impact fertility choices made by couples.

Nevertheless, societal expectations and birth control methods have created choices for families about the number of children they could have and the prospect of having any children. As previously mentioned, children have become less desirable. Consumer “tastes can change to lower the direct utility generated by any size of family” (Lipsey et al. 314). They also “can become less productive” as child labour laws regulate that children would not work and that increased costs of having children may not make it seem worth it. This would account for the ‘baby bust’ as income rises and the population falls. In addition, birth control is more readily available than ever before in Western society. “Modern birth control technologies have given women a considerable degree of control over their own bodies” which gave women “freedom to unilaterally ensure that they do not become pregnant and, if they do by accident, they have resources to abortion” (Eswaran 275-287). Legalizing the use of birth control and abortion increases women’s bargaining power which contributes to their agency.

Agency

Female agency and the ability to make their own reproductive choices is a variable that was ignored by Malthus in his theory on population politics. Eswaran suggests that bargaining power, that is, the influence in decision-making that women have over their partners in heterosexual relationships, should have been considered in theories regarding population politics. Bargaining power is what gives women the autonomy to make decisions regarding fertility and other subjects. In the patriarchal society, bargaining power “in couples is tilted in favour of males,” which is assumed by Malthus. This contributes to his theory being centered around the male agency in fertility and labour, which was previously mentioned. Due to the wage gap being in favour of men as well as the “cultural and social norms”, women are often found in weaker bargaining positions. This contributes to lower female agency. Nevertheless, Eswaran also argues that because fathers spend less time with their children than mothers, they “prefer to have many children and devote little by way of resources to each of them” (264). Therefore they argue for the empowerment of women in order to give them more bargaining power to benefit children (Eswaran 264). This is a generalization and in Western society today, men may not possess the same views as Eswaran is describing. However, a key takeaway from this is that women may not possess enough agency over their decisions in households. This is in line with the patriarchal society that Malthus illustrated in his theory.

However, women are becoming more autonomous regarding their reproductive choices. Mayhew also argues for the importance of women’s autonomy when discussing population demographics. They discuss that “depressing the rate of child mortality, educating girls, empowering women and making fertility management ubiquitously available” are the first things to do in order for society to ensure that women are allowed to make autonomous choices

regarding reproduction (Mayhew 267). Many countries around the world have already “pushed against a socially and politically dominant culture profoundly opposed to birth control access and reproductive freedom, especially for women” (Mayhew 272). That was not the case during Malthusian times and “for most of the twentieth century” where the patriarchal structures are denying women access to autonomous choice-making, such as legal birth control and abortion (Mayhew 272). Though ironically, “the women’s movement and Malthusianism often overlapped” where the reduction of the population was one of the arguments used to push for the creation of new birth control technologies such as “the birth control pill and the intrauterine device (IUD)” (Mayhew 272). This gave women the autonomy to control the possibility of reproduction. This created the dominant view of the population today where “planning one’s family is a human right and hoping that growing acceptance of this stance will both empower women generally and reduce birth-rates” (Mayhew 281). Thus, agency in reproduction choices has transitioned to become a human right which was not considered in Malthus’ theory. This contributed to public policies being created to allow and promote contraception and family planning. This can be seen in international bodies engaging in the promotion of women’s reproductive autonomy where “Cairo 1994 was the last United Nations conference held specifically dedicated to population, perhaps because the policy positions that emerged from it, such as empowering women in fertility decisions, have become the reigning logic among non-conservatives” (Mayhew 284).

Feminist view - Rethinking Malthus

As previously mentioned, women are involved in economics now more than ever before, with an increased number of women entering the labour force. Nevertheless, neoclassical economics, which is one of the dominant economic theories, “deems itself... neutral, [but] its approach is fraught with unwarranted assumptions and male-centric biases that work to the disadvantage of women” (Eswaran 51). This has constructed challenges for women entering the labour force. The disadvantageous outcomes for women in the neoclassical theory are also evident in Malthus’ theory as it is rooted in naturalizing sexual desire and submission of women to men who are the only ones that can engage in autonomous choices. This is further observed by Robbins and Smith who argue that theories that relate to demography, were “patriarchal models that together re-instantiate hegemonic Masculinity” (McCann qtd. in Robbins and Smith 213). This can be seen in Malthus’ theory as he discusses only male autonomy, which perpetuates patriarchal ideas and hegemonic masculinity due to its male-centeredness. Moreover, demography and the way it is studied is “resistant to feminist scholarly innovations, owing to its wholly biological view of gender as a natural, inevitable, and determinant category” (Robbins and Smith 213). Therefore, even Malthus’ theory which tries to predict future demography, relies on societal categories to construct its arguments. Theory, as a technology, does not exist in a vacuum and depends on societal constructions. Thus, since “feminism insists on explicit discussion of the influence of power on knowledge production as well as the political nature of research”, it suggests that theories as technology are inherently biased from their creator (Robbins and Smith 210). Hence why Malthus’ theory could not exist outside his patriarchal beliefs during his time. Following this, a critical examination of his theory and his biases

provides a way for society to reflect on the intersectional influence of the author's identity on the theory.

Further, Robbins and Smith discuss the implications of Malthus' theory. They argue that "the reasons that demographic change has been overlooked... are numerous and justified, and linked to a resistance to a Malthusian legacy, one that attributes catastrophic effects of demographic growth and that reinforces patriarchal...logics of human and household behavior" (Robbins and Smith 201). This evidence reinforces that Malthus' theory has ingrained patriarchal ideas into the decision-making regarding reproduction that is done by families. They also suggest that "Malthusian logic [has] been unable to adequately predict resource conditions or scarcities, its deployment as [an] ideology has been consistently pernicious" (Robbins and Smith 201). This contributes to the argument of refuting Malthus' theory. This is further confirmed by saying that Malthus' theory is rooted in the ideas of the "state, colonialism, and the patriarchy" which will affect everything from "the conditions for rural farms, households, and family decisions, with implications for family size" (Robbins and Smith 202-3). His theory does not take into account peoples' relationships "between culture, everyday life, [and] state practice" (Robbins and Smith 205). Thus, Malthusian theory ignores people's intersectional background and the impacts it may have on choosing the number of children a couple will have, whether they will have one at all or whether will choose to adopt. This was also mentioned by Eswaran where they point out how "other factors" which are listed above "might intervene" in fertility choices that are not mentioned in Malthus' theory (253).

On top of that, Mayhew and Dzelzainis point out how the Malthusian essay was "conducting an implicit critique of the gender politics of the men's wives" (156). This further showcases how he constructed women as being subordinate to men. "As Deborah Valenze has

argued, Malthus's Essay did much to reinforce the notion of separate gender spheres in that it assumed women's dependency on men" (Valenze qtd. in Mayhew and Dzelzainis 157). This furthers the patriarchal ideas of naturalization of the two sex categories that are illustrated in his theory. Another point that Mayhew and Dzelzainis made is that the theory came from a philosophical point of view rather than one grounded in social science (157). Due to this, he was able to construct "the natural laws governing the universe and such knowledge was a source of power" (Mayhew and Dzelzainis 162). This allowed only men to have access to such power as Malthus' theory only gave the power to them and did not promote "egalitarianism" in society (Mayhew and Dzelzainis 162). Further, the theory also "construed the sexual double standard" where women who had children without getting married were more "disgraced" than men. This created a stigma around women's autonomy in having children without a partner since the theory was grounded in a patriarchal society.

In conclusion, due to the reasons stated above, Malthus' theory of population politics can be refuted as it is centered on patriarchal ideas. The bases of this theory are rooted in the stereotypical preconceptions of gender roles that undermine women's reproductive labour as well as patriarchal ideas of the superiority of men and the subordination of women. The theory does not take into account women's intersectionality or agency in regard to birth control and parenting options. Therefore, it is crucial that we unlearn these theories on population control and adopt a feminist outlook on population politics. Nevertheless, this paper also has limitations and opportunities for further research. Firstly, in a world of 8 billion people, Malthusian theory propositions keep arising. Our capitalist society has invented a way to produce food, however, as evident by environmentalists and climate change activists, it is not sustainable. The environmental impact of our agricultural production, which was mentioned in a few research

appears, has been another cause for the revival of the Malthusian argument (Crush and Williams; Hodgson and Watkins; Mayhew; Robbins and Smith). This is one of the limitations of my paper. This will be important in the future when humanity will look back on the planet's resources and its sustainability. The impact of climate change on sustaining 8 billion people on one planet may eventually decrease our quality of life but we cannot be sure. Secondly, another limitation of my paper is the assumption of heterosexual relationships being used to reproduce. The research used failed to mention how homosexual relationships or the adoption of children will factor into reflection on Malthus' theory. The way that gender roles are shared in homosexual relationships will also impact the opportunity cost of children, which would create more opportunities for gathering data to find out how homosexual relationships are impacted to make choices regarding possible reproduction. This could be an opportunity for further research.

Bibliography

- Chatterjee, Shoumitro, and Tom Vogl. “Escaping Malthus: Economic Growth and Fertility Change in the Developing World.” *American Economic Review*, vol. 108, no. 6, 2018, pp. 1440–1467., <https://doi.org/10.1257/aer.20170748>.
- Cinnirella, Francesco, et al. “Malthus in the Bedroom: Birth Spacing as a Preventive Check Mechanism in Pre-Modern England.” *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 2012, <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2152263>.
- Crush, Jonathan, and Gavin Williams. “Modernizing Malthus.” *Power of Development*, Routledge, London, 2005, pp. 153–169. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203975985>.
- Eswaran, Mukesh. *Why Gender Matters in Economics*. Princeton University Press, 2014.
- Gardiner, Jean. *Gender, Care and Economics*. Macmillan Press LTD, 1997.
- Hodgson, Dennis, and Susan Cotts Watkins. “Feminists and Neo-Malthusians: Past and Present Alliances.” *Population and Development Review*, vol. 23, no. 3, Sept. 1997, pp. 469–523. *JSTORE*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2137570>.
- Malthus, Thomas Robert, and Philip Appleman. *An Essay on the Principle of Population*. 2nd ed., W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1974.
- Mayhew, Robert J., and Ella Dzelzainis. “Malthus, Women and Fiction.” *New Perspectives on Malthus*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, United Kingdom, 2016, pp. 155–181, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139939485.007>.

Mayhew, Robert J., et al. "Malthus Today." *New Perspectives on Malthus*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, United Kingdom, 2016, pp. 267–293,

<https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139939485.011>.

Lipsey, Richard G., et al. *Economic Transformations: General Purpose Technologies and Long-Term Economic Growth*. Oxford University Press, 2005.

Robbins, Paul, and Sara H. Smith. "Baby Bust." *Progress in Human Geography*, vol. 41, no. 2, 2016, pp. 199–219., <https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132516633321>.