



Defenders of Malthus Warn of America's "Addiction" to Economic Growth

by John Omicinski
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WASHINGTON - Almost 200 years after British Economist Thomas Malthus predicted an expanding human population eventually would run out of food, modern-day Malthusians wonder why his ideas still haven't caught on.

With nearly 6 billion on the globe and some scientists still predicting a Malthusian disaster, population control isn't a hot item on political agendas.

Marking the approaching anniversary of the 1798 "An Essay of the Principle of Population..." some Malthusians met at the National Press Club this week to ponder why Americans continue to reject Malthus and, in the words of one, persist in a "frightful addiction to economic growth."

They concluded that the "grasping, squeezing Scrooge-like image" of Malthus's idea is largely to blame for keeping people and politicians from embracing him 200 years later.

"It's not a very pleasing image for a politician," said John Rohe, a Malthusian whose new book, "A Bicentennial Malthusian Essay" praises the British economist and demographer whom some dismiss as a killjoy. "It's a very hard sell for one generation to tell another that you can't have as much as we had," said Rohe.

Americans remain "indifferent to limits," he said.

"Why is it that population is not on the national radar screen?" he asked.

An answer came from Lester Brown, head of Worldwatch Institute, whose papers and annual report on global indicators reflect a Malthusian outlook and a push for limits on growth.

Brown said that though more people have been born since 1950 than in the previous 4 million years, humans generally don't respond except in crises. "We're essentially hunter-gatherers," said Brown.

"We respond to immediate threats. With anything that happens gradually, we generally put it off until the next term of office."

Others at the conference were critical of environmentalists who haven't embraced Malthusian population control as a cause.

But some seemed to see it as a stealth issue that lurks, unspoken, below the surface of many debates. "Population is the most influential undiscussed issue in American life," said Dan Stein of the Federation for American Immigration Reform.

Malthus's 1798 study was the first to note that food supply expands arithmetically (1,2,3,4) while the numbers of people expand geometrically (1,2,4,8,16).

In his anniversary book, Rohe says Malthus "was not accurate in all respects" but was "more right than wrong." Rohe said Malthus may not have "fully anticipated human ingenuity and resourcefulness in manipulation food production," nor did he envision the openings of the continents of North America, South America, and Australia.

Two years before he produced the famous essay on population, Malthus wrote an anonymous pamphlet praising the establishment of workhouses for the poor. Many believe he was an archetype for the heartless Ebenezer Scrooge in "A Christmas Carol," by Charles Dickens.

Malthus's writings were a reaction to the optimism of utopian philosophers - including his father - who were gaining ground after the French Revolution.

Malthus influenced 19th century evolutionist Charles Darwin and ever since has inspired Malthusians and Darwinians.

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