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## A Bicentennial Malthusian Essay

### *Conservation, Population and the Indifference to Limits*

John F. Rohe

*A Bicentennial Malthusian Essay: Conservation, Population and the Indifference to Limits*  
(Traverse City, MI: Rhodes & Easton, 1997, \$18.95)

Reviewed by Sharon McCloe Stein

In 1798, an English clergyman published an essay about human population growth that served to define the terms of debate on this issue for the next two-hundred years. Today, as the debate continues unabated, John Rohe's new book provides a vital and fresh reading that does an excellent job of highlighting the contemporary relevance of the principles first enunciated by Thomas Robert Malthus. Much like *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, Rohe uses a series of short essays to examine, elucidate and elaborate on the central Malthusian tenet, "the power of population is indefinitely greater than the power in the earth to produce subsistence for man."

Malthus wrote his essay partially in reaction to the spirit of optimism and progress that characterized the growing power of the industrial revolution to expropriate the goods and services of the natural environment. And, like Malthus, Rohe's book is primarily directed toward those who believe that for humans all things are possible – even the impossible, unending growth in a finite world. Unfortunately, from his 18<sup>th</sup> Century perspective Malthus could not have foreseen the tremendous power of human ingenuity to create and use technology. This technology has given humans the power to exponentially expand their economy, and the corollary ability to use and pollute the natural environment to provide the means of not only subsistence but luxury. But, as Rohe so clearly demonstrates in this book, knowledge is not the same as wisdom.

The ability of technology to increase human economic throughput, such as the expansion of food production in the "green revolution," is commonly offered as proof that Malthus was wrong. Rohe carefully documents the dark underside and costs of human technological and economic triumphs. Like rivets being pulled from a plane in flight, the loss of biodiversity, the consumption of finite natural resources, the pollution of our environment, and anthropogenic induced change of geological proportions are moving us to the collective brink of

ecological collapse. A brink of dysfunctional environmental support systems so degraded that they cannot recover and so irreplaceable that our technology cannot come up with substitutes that can save us.

And thus, with human technological power comes the danger that its use may have long-term consequences that humans can neither manage, nor mitigate, nor escape. Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Such is the absolute power of the current global economy to consume – and corrupt – the Earth. And, such is the absolute power of exponential population growth to demand – and need – ever more of the natural resources and living environment that constitute the life support network of this planet. Rohe does an outstanding job of examining the details of this fundamental dilemma in the essays contained in "Parts: II, Population Growth" and "III, Economic Growth."

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Like an attorney arguing a case, he uses the short chapters as building blocks, first to explain key concepts such as exponential growth and carrying capacity. He then combines the key concepts with specific examples and powerful images such as that of the juggernaut to emphasize their stark reality and vital importance. Gradually, the reader comes to see the individual chapters as the links that define the fundamental relationships among human population growth, economic activity and a finite and fragile environment. The essays in "Part IV: Growth on the Land," examine yet another set of these relationships, that of human communities to the land, particularly those attitudes, laws, and institutions that

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govern how humans treat the land and other life forms. And once again, Rohe demonstrates how an indifference to limits shapes and in the end compromises our ability to sustain healthy and mutually beneficial relationships.

*A Bicentennial Malthusian Essay* is packed with facts, information and little vignettes that are wonderful educational devices. This book, by the way, is a superb educational resource, non-technical and written in language that older teens and young adults can readily understand. Throughout the book there is a strong sense of time, not just of past generations but of future ones to come, of long-term perspectives, of the world our children will inherit. "Over time" may be the forgotten fundamental of the sustainable development debate, but Rohe never loses track of the importance of the long haul in human and natural history. Like the lily pond on the book's front cover, Rohe reminds us that we may well be on the 29<sup>th</sup> day, the verge of that last doubling after which all will be changed. Within the more than four billion years of life on Earth, human existence is a brief interlude, and the recent period of rapid exponential growth merely the blink of an eye. But what a blink, a blink that when our eyes finally open will find countless species gone forever.

Rohe also includes essays that eloquently portray this sense of loss that human growth engenders. Today's cornucopians are quick to point out that the exponentially growing human population has increased six-fold since the time of Malthus, while the "power in the Earth to produce subsistence for man," has apparently been able to keep pace. For Rohe, our power is not "in" but "over" the Earth. Humans have been able to gain the power to wring from the

Earth all that most need and more. But, in gaining this dominance we are in danger of losing that most intimate relationship to Earth, our mother, our great sustainer, our partner with all other living beings in that much greater enterprise called life. As Malthus might have said in one of his sermons, what profiteth a man if he gain the Earth and lose his soul.

Appropriately, the book concludes by looking at four considerations that Rohe believes may well determine the human condition in the next 200 years. Numeracy: our ability to understand the power of exponential growth. Values: knowing what is important and what is not, and when more means less. Ethical compromises: understanding that good intentions are simply not enough and that sometimes tough choices, which take the long-term perspective, are necessary. And finally, associations: the recognition that the welfare of the human and natural world are bound inextricably together.

Ultimately, Rohe's book is about a paradigm shift that humans cannot ignore. From the dawn of humanity until the time of Malthus, scarcity was defined by the "limits" of the human economy to provide subsistence in a world of "virtually unlimited" natural abundance. Rohe's book seeks to delineate our brave new world where the "virtually unlimited" capacity of the human economic enterprise to exploit the Earth comes up against finite biological, ecological, and natural resource "limits." How well humans can overcome their indifference to these critical ecological limits and adapt their behavior, reproductive and economic, to the new paradigm will determine the fate of both humans and many if not most other life forms over the next 200 years.



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