Philosophy (Take- home Final exam

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1. Do you think that Malthusianism is one of the best solutions to the environmental crisis we experience today?

Reverend Thomas Robert Malthus in the first edition of ‘Essay on Population’ asseverated his principle on population:

“Population, when unchecked increases in a geometrical ratio. Subsistence only in an arithmetical ratio”, (Malthus, 1966, p. 14)

Malthusian theory of population has been instrumental in exerting a major influence on the disciplines of biology, environmental sciences, politics, agricultural economics and various other discourses that impact the human circumstances in everyday life. This theory was originally propounded by Malthus in an attempt to disseminate understanding about the human demographics and population expansion. In the wake of changing dynamics, this theory gained wide recognition and crossed the boundaries in which it was originally advocated. The Malthusian theory has successfully landed a niche as a research paradigm in the horizons of dynamics regarding the general population. The growth of population in many parts of Europe and England since the advent of the industrial revolution can be accredited to increased technological progress and historically high levels of agricultural production. The rapid population growth pushed people to the boundaries of subsistence who were already fighting for resources in an impoverished environment. Climatic conditions were also unfavorable, and Europeans pushed agriculture into far-flung areas mainly in the country-side. The environment in the cities demonstrated a sheer lack of knowledge about hygienic practices which led to widespread endemic diseases, paving the way for high mortality rates. Thomas Malthus, at that time, was striving to find an instance of some ‘natural law’ so that he could propagate a righteous discernment about the perpetual nature of poverty. Accordingly, this principle of population advanced by him delineated that the increase in the human population is faster than that of food supplication for satisfying the physical needs of everyone. The occurrence of relative gain in the production of food predicts the stimulation of an even higher rate of population growth.

 Many environmentalists in the twentieth century utilized the Malthusian theory to emphasize on the assertion that the exhaustion of resources is inevitable if the population growth will not be controlled. This premise eventually constituted the neo-Malthusian way of thinking and many advocates mirrored this notion in their works. Many famous works at the end of the twentieth century, for instance, Limits to Growth and The Population Bomb predicted that rapid explosion in the population can be a disaster for humanity because of the rapid stripping of the resource supply. In the latter source, Ehrlich forecasted that millions of people would face starvation and there will be a sheer lack of possibilities to avoid this disaster. In both these books, the context urged the masses to strive for radical actions for limiting the increasing population (Pirages, 2005). Although the prediction of mass starvation in the last quarter of the twentieth century never occurred, the current global environmental crises and changing climatic patterns indicate the consequences of rapid population growth. Thomas Malthus and his contemporaries also failed to incorporate the technological improvements in their works, which led to the increasing rates of food production surpassing the levels of population growth.

The presence of Malthusianism is conspicuous in the contemporary quest for the solutions of environmental or ecological crises. Many sources have opined that one of the biggest pre-cursors behind the present era’s environmental problems is the human population. This is specifically true regarding the case of developing economies whereby the potential end to environmental destruction can only be brought by putting formal checks and balances to the population explosion. This measure is extremely difficult to impose because of religious and orthodox thinking and perspectives regarding the reproduction processes of mankind. Almost all the Abrahamic religions are pro-life and believe in the extensive propagation of humankind (Maguire, 2016). Various religious institutions across the globe also have penalties and punishments which they administer on those people, specifically women who bluntly reject pro-life ideas. These practices mirror totalitarian regimes that have highly adverse effects on the well-being of the human population, therefore, putting checks and balances on the reproduction rates and creating awareness about population control is a goal that cannot be materialized in the next foreseeable future. The main premise advocated by Thomas Malthus and the conclusions that he set forth were universal in their essence. The main drawback was that he failed to incorporate the significant role of agricultural and industrial revolutions. Furthermore, he also did not reinstate the regular signs of progress in the field of medicine and technological efficiencies which increased the quality of human life. Medical advancement enabled majority of human population to break the vicious circle of poverty and attain a decent standard of living. In spite of the predominant relationship and association between the linear growth of resources and the supposed exponential growth of the human population, Malthusianism also could not successfully depict the root causes and underpinnings of growth in resources for feeding large populations. The interactions between human population dynamics and the environment have often been viewed mechanistically.

As a scientific topic of interrogation and deeper inquiry, the study of population and associated resources have managed to become a part of a venerable tradition in the environmental sciences. An encrustation of graphs and various models depicting global trends in population, carbon dioxide (CO2) emissions, energy consumption, or deforestation has frequently been utilized to reflect on the impact population on the changing environmental conditions. During the last twenty years, geographers, demographers, economists, and environmental scientists have strived to respond to an intricate set of questions. One of the most important questions which also introduces the basic direction of this essay is that whether Malthusianism can be regarded as one of the best solutions to cope with contemporary problems associated with environmental crises and climatic challenges. In turn, population dynamics affecting environmental degradation will also be analyzed. Since the advent of industrial revolution and prevalence of technology in every aspect of life, similar questions have been answered with the help of effective tools and theories shedding light on the interactions between humans and the environment that they live in.

Neo-Malthusians, who adhere to their stipulations largely with Malthusianism postulate that if the exponential increase in the human population would be left unchecked, it will lead to the outstripping of resources present on the Earth. One of the predominant scientific paradigms in the inter-disciplinary fields of environment and human demographics is the analysis of this prediction. Many research scholars and scientists have nullified this forecast because it largely treats human beings in the same way as it treats all the other species on this earth, advocating that the lifestyle of humans will outgrow the current carrying capacity of the Earth. The adherents of Neo-Malthusianism have frequently been critiqued by virtue of failing to observe some important milestones in the history of humankind, for instance, trade openness, technological signs of progress, adaptations in culture and institutional reforms. These accomplishments have assisted groups of human populations in increasing their living standards. One of the prominent hypotheses in this regard is the Boserupain hypothesis, which entails that production of agricultural produce also increases intensely with the rise in population growth because of the deployment of greater capital and labor inputs (Boserup, 1987). Many studies have scrutinized the differences between theories proposed by Malthus and Boserup and reinstated that Boserup regards the factor of technology as endogenous to the overall model and Malthus saw it as exogenous to the model of interactions between population and resources (Demont, 2007). Following these approaches, it can be suggested that the inappropriateness of technologies and the frequent market failures are majorly responsible for the current environmental crisis compared to the increase in population growth.

One strand of literature also maintains that Malthusianism is not the only factor for driving the on-going environmental crises and its implications cannot be regarded as the only solution for environmental degradation. Rather, it is one of the many precursors that give rise to events that have an impact on the improvement or degradation of the environment. Other than exponential population growth, there are many factors and variables that are of vital importance for understanding the ecological crises. These factors are inclusive of institutional elements such as federal and local governance systems, access to the resources and various regimes of land tenure. Apart from this, socio-economic factors, for instance, lack of education primarily among females, income inequality, and disparate holdings of land between the members of the same society can also be attributed to the global environmental crises (Briassoulis, 2015). These additional factors give rise to the conception that population growth, according to Malthusianism, is not a sufficient or necessary decisive factor for the potential solutions or reasons explaining the dynamics of environmental degradation. Many pieces of research have established that exponential rise in population can be regarded as either a positivity in disguise as it assists the induction of intensified agricultural growth and on the other hand, it can also be taken as a negative factor as it exerts strain on the carrying capacity of the planet (Henderson, 2019).

The interrelated crises in the linkages between human populations and their environment has been the focus of many esteemed symposiums, research paradigms and an ever-increasing snowball of books and articles. Malthusianism can be regarded as one of the best solutions for the environmental crises because of a large strand of theories contributing to this paradigm. The politics revolving around the environmental issues are highly polarized in nature. Many research scholars who probe into the dynamics of population affecting the environment also suggest that one of the most consequential social evils, poverty stems from the deeply anchored inequalities between the developed and developing countries. This can be observed from the instance whereby refugees in the regions facing deforestation are victims of deception because they are unable to practice their rights in the country’s interior agricultural areas. Similarly, environmental scientists deliberate over land deprivation to the farmers as a result of reduced access to credit or other agricultural technologies before considering the adverse consequences of population growth.

Several theories frequently proposed by many demographers are also instrumental in explaining the impact of the population on the environment. Distortionary strategies, civil conflicts, and poor governance with increasing injustice are some of the associated untoward circumstances that simultaneously surface with the rise in population growth.

During the 1970s and 1980s, the literary debates in the public policy and academic circles predominantly focused on the problems associated with population growth. Many world-renowned international organizations, including a multitude of think tanks, were of the opinion that the developing countries, specifically the low-income areas are facing more deleterious effects at the expense of a rapid increase in population rates. Unprecedented levels of hunger, unemployment, and other social evils are some of the adversities linked with the global inability to meet the requirements of everyone. Population growth is also appealing in its essence to the natural and social scientists because unlike other variables and conceptual dimensions, the data on environmental change is easily available. Culture, institutional structures and frameworks, and the commonly prevalent values and norms are comparatively difficult to gauge; therefore, the projections of the human population towards environmental degradation are chiefly reliable (Lutz, 2017). Resultantly, the reductionist and empirical views of the interactions between the human population and its environment have been promoted. A growing and significant body of natural and social scientists are drawn towards the appreciation that various forms of correspondence between humans and their ecological surroundings have more than one interpretation. Although the statistics regarding the human population imply that population may exceed the natural resources and the carrying capacity of the earth, there is a symbiotic relationship between the two and is studied by many scholars in the contemporary arenas of environmental research. Malthusianism also fails to thoroughly analyze the underpinnings of the capitalist system in most economies and its detrimental effects on the environment (Amaral, 2018). This renders the followers of Malthusianism unable to pinpoint and identify realistic options and alternatives for the environmental crisis. Darwin's thesis is inherited by them, and they also propound that this disequilibrium between population growth and the corresponding increase or maintenance of the resources is beyond repair (Heath, 2017). Alterations in various frameworks and structures of society and their lasting effects on the behavior patterns of the population have been minimal attention by the descendants of Malthusianism. The deep issues and causes of environmental crises have also not been pro-actively examined by Malthusians because they have a tendency to overlook the fact that commodity production and prioritizing lucrative opportunities and profit margins is the true agenda of the capitalist system. Neo-Malthusians also structure their arguments mirroring the notions of political economists and pro-capitalist thinkers. The status of consumption is subordinate to all the production processes in the capitalist system. Therefore it can pose barriers to the propagation of environmental concerns among citizens of a capitalist economy. Many studies conducted to analyze the underlying factors of environmental degradation delineate that increase in ever-growing fictitious needs, and relentless mass production of various commodities are the actual causes that are further aggravating the situation. Opposing line of this approach, the neo-Malthusians stipulate that it is practically impossible for all the segments of society to live while earning the same level of income. The prevailing laws of the capitalist system are also overlooked by the adherents and followers of Malthusianism when they indicate the alteration of production and consumption patterns as an implication of Malthus's principle of population.

In a system where interactions between humans and their environments are studied, lasting impacts are reciprocal contrary to common understanding that there exists a uni-directionality between them. For instance, the effects of environmental change on the occurrences of morbidity and mortality are topics of scientific inquiry that are growing areas of interest. The environmentally induced increased rates of mortality have also attempted to look at the changing demographics of the various projections of population. For example, habitats that predominantly pave the way for life-threatening diseases like malaria have been studied as an implication of health impacts from environmental changes. Heat stress or famine as direct outcomes of environmental degradation, endangering the precious lives of human beings have also been examined through the lens of the Malthusian theory of population (Campbell-Lendrum D, 2006). A growing interest in the research on the interactions between human beings and their environments utilizes new and innovative sources of data of bio-physical and geopolitical nature. Furthermore, spatial statistics and geographic systems of information have also been identified and deployed as new technologies in the pursuit of deconstructing the human population in further parts. This also enables researchers to understand the social and economic institutions with all their complexities. Policies made by the governmental authorities improving or degrading the environment can also be studied under the light of these models and theories. The degree of mediation by these policies in decreasing the impact of human population on the natural environment is also analyzed through these studies. The use of natural resources and generation/disposal of waste material is also comprehended by these research studies and associated implications. A lot of studies in the paradigm of association between the human population and environment are also triggered by the largely prevalent broader and necessary concerns for sustainability. The sample populations have been employed both on a regional and global scale to study and analyze the effects in-depth. Regardless of the scale at which these studies are conducted, these implications also shape the thought process of Malthusian adherents and those people who view the increasing trends of the population as a threat to the carrying capacity of this planet. Distributional justice has also been analyzed from various perspectives in this regard illustrating that a major portion of citizens in the developing economies are in the pursuit of raising their living standards. The unprivileged segments of developing economies want to transition their lifestyles from a low-income to a middle or upper-middle income lifestyle. It is also implied by a plethora of studies that the cost of adapting to a climate change and the conservation of biodiversity cannot be borne by the lower income groups. On the other hand, they seem to be the most vulnerable groups facing the disadvantages and adverse impacts of the climatic changes (Curran, 2004).

Irrespective of the results of growing literature illuminating the association between human population and environment, which can either prove the presence of negligible or dominant effects by humans on the outcomes of environmental degradation, the issue is still largely up to the discretion of humans. The pursuit of seeking long-term solutions following the approach of Malthusian theory and addressing the prevalent inequalities between the patterns of production costs and conspicuous consumption is impossible without deeper reflection on all the other factors which are firmly anchored in the dynamics of a global society. Attainment of sustainable development and the transition from worsening environmental degradation to a fairly acceptable environmental quality cannot be truly realized without proper research on the alternative options for various economic systems and Malthusianism.

The ethical foundations of capitalism must be critiqued upon so that various emancipatory alternatives can be presented to deconstruct the root causes of ecological crises. Another imperative is to meticulously reflect upon the lasting consequences of dispensable patterns of consumption and production. Various instances, whereby the interactions between the human population and its nature fortify the inherent sense of human disengagement from the respect and potential maintenance of nature can also prove to be instrumental in proving the efficacious nature of Malthusianism as a solution to overcome the ecological problems.

 Finally, it can be suggested that an extensive anatomization of the true character of the interactions between human society and its nature is also required to understand how Malthusianism can be differently interpreted as a solution to overcome the problems arising from the environmental crisis. There is a need to explore new possibilities as the Malthusian paradigm has been scrutinized from various perspectives and appears insufficient for the research scholars of human demographics and environmental sciences in their attempts to view it from a corrective lens.

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