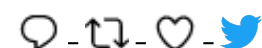


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My Authors

Last year I published a book on Malthus and Limits. Let me explain what I argued, and how it is relevant to current debates where the name of Malthus and his supposed false prophecy keeps popping up / THREAD





According to the standard story, Malthus posited that while food production can grow only arithmetically (1, 2, 3, 4), population grows geometrically (1, 2, 4, 8), predicting thus famines. Malthus, the story goes, underestimated the power of technology and was proven wrong. /2

Environmentalists today, this story continues, commit the same fallacy as Malthus. They predict climate disasters and resource depletion, but they underestimate the power of technology. They want to limit growth, but they will be proven wrong too. /3

This story posits Malthusians against cornucopians (environmentalists against economists/eco-modernists) either to posit that the former are wrong, or to argue that the truth is somewhere in between and technology can deliver the goods, but not automatically, not w/o limits. /4

In my book I argue that this scheme is wrong and past its due date. This is a scheme invented in the post-war era (mainly the 70s), where a legendary story about Malthus emerged, by some environmentalists, but mostly by economists who wanted to prove environmentalists wrong /5

Now, if one reads closely and without being biased from current debates the original Essay of Malthus, will find another story. First, Malthus did not 'predict' anything. He was not saying that in the future population will outstrip food, but that it potentially

always does /6

His arithmetic-geometric example is not a 'prediction', but an illustration of the constant potential of population to be in excess of resources. /7

Important: Malthus writes that there are no limits to resources or food production (!). In the Essay he explicitly states that these can increase indefinitely and without any limit, for ever and ever. /8

Indeed, as scholars who have studied Malthus show, Malthus was not a 'Malthusian'. He had a healthy dose of respect for technology, believed in growth, and posited that the greatest good for a nation is population growth - as closely to its geometric potential as possible. /9

What was Malthus, then, if not a false prophet of doom?

He was an economist, the first economist with a chair professorship, and the one who set the canon for the discipline, I argue in my book. /10

Malthus posited a propensity of people to have sex/children without any limit. With this weird assumption (humans have always controlled their strategies of procreation) Malthus asserted eternal scarcity. What we want is always in potential excess of what we can have. /11

He used this premise of scarcity to argue against redistributive policies. Unless the poor stay hungry, Malthus argued, they won't work hard to produce more. And unless food production grows, the population will not grow. If we want growth, then the poor should stay poor. /12

Malthus explained inequality away as a natural phenomenon, and purported to prove with mathematical logic that any attempt to reduce it will backfire - growth will slow down, less food will be produced, and more people will die as a result /13

His policy prescriptions sound like a lot of what we hear from liberal economists ever since. And Malthus's very model of scarcity, where wants are unlimited and means are limited is THE cornerstone of economics /14

Economists substituted consumption and then utility, for population. But the model is the same as in Malthus. If what we want has no limit, then what we have is by definition limited. Only thing we can do is keep growing what we have to satisfy evermore of what we want. /15

This ideology of growth as an antidote to a supposed scarcity that can never be fully resolved is with us ever since Malthus. / 16

Crucially though it all rests on a theology-meets-liberalism premise, that economists inherited from Malthus. That we can and should not shape or limit our wants because they are God given /17

Malthus's model rests on a strange assumption that humans cannot act to control how many children they have. A strange assumption, since this is what everyone around him was doing and he knew it as several passages in the Essay demonstrate./ 18

Malthus saw birth control, but deemed it ungodly and painful, since God wants us to multiply and populate. Malthus was against birth control & voluntary limits on population. Because this would reduce scarcity, and remove a necessary stimulus for industry (aka growth)! /19

So, the supposed prophet of overpopulation considered population growth the ultimate good, and rejected the one thing that could safely control population, which is simply ... paying a little bit more attention when having sex (or when to have)... /20

How is all this relevant today? The story that 'Malthus predicted disasters and was proven wrong' plays an ideological function. The story about Malthus is a myth, and Malthus is a mythical figure of modern times like say Oedipus or Sisyphus were for the Greeks /21

Understanding what Malthus really claimed instead, let us see the actual ideology that Malthus was a proud father of - the ideology, which tells us that we can (and should) never limit our wants. And that the only thing we can do is work hard and have technology save the day / 22

I am not denying here the role of technologies in improving our living conditions or handling environmental disasters of our own creation. But to go back to a supposed argument of Malthus to prove which technologies might or might not work today, is absurd. / 23

What I argue also in my book is that the best environmentalism is anti-Malthusian in that it puts in question the theological & liberal assumption that our wants are unlimited and our means limited – questioning the foundational (for capitalist civilization) myth of scarcity. /24

Radical greens are among the few who have kept alive a romantic spirit that questions capitalist/industrial civilization. Do we really need all that stuff? Wouldn't we live better if we limited ourselves in certain ways, so as to free ourselves in others? / 25

The romantics indeed were the fiercest critics of Malthus. They were the ones that made fun of his absurd assumption that people cannot make (and enjoy) love without having children / 26

We have come to see environmental battles as ones between 'prophets and wizards', in @CharlesCMann's beautiful formulation. My point is that this very division is part of the problem, as it frames the issue as one of scarcity, to which we should succumb or always overcome /27

Instead, many (most?) environmentalists are not just prophets and/or wizards – they are 'doctors' and 'nurses', 'poets' and 'pianists'. They recognize limits (death, keyboard), and want us to live well, creatively and abundantly within these limits / 28

In my book I defend this romantic, and somewhat anarcho-feminist spirit of radical environmentalism. The book is just 25,000 words long, so give it a try ☺
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