

July 19, 2021

Evolution of Demographic Thought and Concern for Human Well-being

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Demography has been detached from political theory and political economy, and population is now considered a part of the problem. A new chapter emphasising the economic value of a population is emerging, but the approach needs to be people-centric.

The idea of a demographic dividend has emerged in recent decades, as a new paradigm in the debate on the relationship between population and development. This idea emphasises the importance of the age structure of the population in economic progress, and not its size and growth.

Demography's virtue lies in widening human freedom and enhancing capability — the very essence of human well-being. Since the beginning of human civilisation, human well-being has been a concern of social and political thinkers. Population was also reckoned with by these thinkers, but not very precisely until the middle of the 17th century when William Petty (1623–1687) wrote *Essays in Political Arithmetick and Political Survey or Anatomy of Ireland* (1672). He argued that the strength of a kingdom lay not in the size of its territory, but in the quality of its people engaged in industry, arts, and related activities.

Petty was a friend of John Graunt (1620–1674), considered to be the father of demography, who wrote *Natural and Political Observations Mentioned in a Following Index, and Made upon Bills of Mortality* in 1662 (Hollingsworth 1969; Willigan and Lynch 1982). This work was a statistical analysis of mortality data compiled by the church on a weekly basis for the city of London. Following these two writers, the issues related to population and well-being were subjects of inquiry for several thinkers of 18th century such as Robert Wallace (1697–1771, Nicolas de Condorcet (1743–1794), and William Godwin (1756–1836).

Wallace argued in *A Dissertation on the Numbers of Mankind in Ancient and Modern Times* (1753) that a happy nation was likely to be well populated. He also entered into a debate with his friend David Hume (1711–1776) on the size of the population of a happy society (Luehrs 1987). During the same time, Condorcet — an ideologue of the French Revolution — argued in favour of the perfectibility of man, the progress of the human mind, and an indefinite prolongation of life. Life expectancy, in the future, would have no limit. Godwin wrote *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, attributing all vices of mankind to human institutions (Godwin 1793).

Malthus vehemently criticised his visionary predecessors, and also the concept of wealth put forth by Adam Smith because he could not see its link to human well-being.

Against this backdrop, Thomas Robert Malthus (1766–1834) published *An Essay on the Principle Population, as It Affects the Future Improvement of Society with Remarks on the Speculations of Godwin and M. Condorcet, and Others* in 1798 (Malthus 1798). As the title indicates, he vehemently criticised his visionary predecessors. He also criticised the concept of wealth enunciated by Adam Smith (1723–1790), who saw it as resulting from the application of labour to land and other natural resources. He was not able to see the link between wealth and human well-being.

Later thinkers such as David Ricardo (1772–1823) and Karl Marx (1818–1883) explained the role of labour in the creation of wealth through capital accumulation. This was the basis of the classical understanding on the relationship between population, poverty, and human well-being. But neo-classical economics, based on the marginal revolution, has divested population of its social content and relationship, introduced the individual as a unit of analysis, and defined value as a consumer's desire.

The recent resurgence of the paradigm of the demographic dividend has huge potential, but it is rooted in a neo-classical tradition, alongside neo-liberalism. A demographic epistemology based on the labour theory of value needs to take centre stage for defining and measuring a people-centric development.

Population, human progress and justice

In the past, a kingdom with a large population was considered to be powerful. This idea was strongly argued by Petty at the close of the 17th century and was sustained by many thinkers till Malthus's work appeared at the end of the 18th century (Hollingsworth 1969).

Gregory King (1648–1712), a contemporary of Petty, also showed an absorbing interest in political arithmetic in the 1690s and contributed to an understating of the size of the population, its social composition, and class structure in pre-industrial England.

Between the time of Petty and Malthus, Wallace, Hume, Condorcet and Godwin influenced and articulated demographic ideas linked to happiness and an ideal society.

At the end of the 17th century, political arithmetic emerged as a novel science with the advancement of reasoning by figures in matters related to the government (Holmes 1977). The 18th century was a period of great hope and enthusiasm, having just witnessed the American colonies revolt in 1776 and the French Revolution in 1789. The American Revolution coincided with the publication of *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* by Smith.

During the century between the works of Petty and Malthus, the ideas of several thinkers such as Wallace, Hume, Condorcet, and Godwin hugely influenced and articulated demographic ideas linked to happiness and an ideal society. While Wallace believed that a large population was an indicator of a happy society and earth becoming overpopulated was distant in the future, Hume argued that a happy and ideal society could sustain a large population. Hume went on to say that a happy and ideal society depended on a just and wise government and institutions. He pointed out that slavery was detrimental to populousness in ancient times (Hume 1977; Luehrs 1987).

Condorcet's last and most important work, *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind*, was published by the French government in 1795 after his death. He argued that liberty and equality, both in terms of wealth and opportunities, would create conditions for the material, intellectual, and moral development of human beings.

Men will then know, that the duties they may be under relative to propagation will consist not in the question of giving existence to a greater number of beings, but happiness; will have for their object, the general welfare of the human species; of the society in which they live; of the family to which they are attached; and not the puerile idea of encumbering the earth with useless and wretched mortals. (Condorcet 1795)

In other words, in a society based on reason and just social institutions, there would be responsible parenthood.

Godwin knew the works of the French thinkers associated with French Revolution, and he saw inequality as a barrier to realising the goal of liberty.

A similar idea was expressed in England by Godwin in his work on political justice when he argued that a large population was the product of good governance and political institutions. His work was in line with the political theories of Plato, Aristotle, John Locke, Montesquieu, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (Rosen 1977). He knew the works of the French thinkers associated with French Revolution, including Condorcet. Inequality was seen as the source of all vices and a barrier to realising the goal of liberty. However, he believed society would go on improving due to the advancement of human intelligence and its capability to see the truth of real human happiness (Godwin 1793, vol 1; Bederman 2008: 280).

Godwin believed that population may not be a problem because humans had the ingenuity and intellect to change and adapt in ways that would stabilise it. He underscored that the institution of marriage would change with the coming of greater equality and freedom. This would result in a decline in passion between the sexes, and people would be more engaged in intellectual and moral pursuits for pleasure.

There were three premises in Godwin's treatise on population linked to political justice: (i) society could be perfected through human effort; (ii) men might learn to live longer; and (iii) his heterodox views on sexuality. Malthus devoted seven of the 19 chapters in his first essay on population to refuting these ideas of Godwin (Bederman 2008: 780).

Malthus's principles on population were very different from Godwin's premises.

- One, food is necessary for the existence of man. Two, passion between the sexes is necessary, and it will remain nearly in its present state.
- Population will grow geometrically while food supply will grow arithmetically.

- Equilibrium will be established through positive checks that increase mankind’s mortality from distress and other miseries. To get rid of this, mankind should practice celibacy or have preventive measures such as restraints on marriage.

Malthus believed in moral restraint and celibacy as a means of population control, unlike neo-Malthusians who believed in the use of contraceptives for birth control.

Malthus came on the scene when Europe in general and Britain in particular were in the early phase of industrialisation. There was rural to urban migration, and cities and towns turned into crowded places with high poverty. Malthus believed in moral restraint and celibacy as a means of population control, unlike neo-Malthusians who believed in the use of contraceptives for birth control. He believed that the poor had more children and that population growth was a necessary evil though it brought poverty and misery because of growing imbalances between food supply and population growth. He argued that population grows geometrically while food supply grows arithmetically. Thus it is agricultural growth that controls population growth and human well-being.

Malthus deduced the principle that population grows geometrically from scanty data quoted by Price on population growth in some of the American colonies. He also contested the view that a growing population was a sign of a happy and prosperous America. He stated that a geometrical progression meant that the population doubled itself every 25 years (Malthus 1798).

Malthus criticised many of his predecessors for their ideas of human progress and well-being, most notably Wallace, Hume, Price, Condorcet, Godwin, and Smith — all leading scholars of political theory and political economy at the time. He admitted that he was not advancing any new idea but simply asserting the principle that population was a natural and irrefutable phenomenon responsible for human misery and suffering, something his predecessors had overlooked (Malthus 1798: 3). Some scholars have argued that Malthus’s theory must not just be seen as a theory of population but also as a political theory (Rosen 1970).

Population and political economy

Many political economists of the 19th century supported the principle of population advanced by Malthus largely because it served their class interest (Sowell 1962; Rosen 1970). However, Malthus did not believe increasing wealth or capital could improve human well-being. Nor did he believe that the equalisation of property could advance human happiness (Malthus 1798: 59). He found a single reason for vices and miseries and it was shortage of food triggered by an exponential growth of population, which the poor were mainly responsible for.

Malthus said that a rise in manufacturing would lead to an increase in the wealth of a nation, but not to an increase in the food that maintained labour.

Malthus was opposed to the state helping the poor during the late 18th century on the ground that it was counterproductive as the poor were not in the habit of exercising sexual restraint. He attacked the laws meant for ameliorating the condition of the poor on the basis of this theory. In his own words,

To remedy the frequent distresses of the common people, the poor laws of England have been instituted; but it is to be feared, that though they may have alleviated a little the intensity of individual misfortune, they have spread the general evil over a much larger surface. (Malthus 1798: 24)

Malthus also differed from Smith, arguing that there was a difference between produce from the land and produce from labour. A rise in manufacturing would lead to an increase in the wealth of a nation, but not to an increase in the food that maintained labour. In such a situation, the price of food would also rise, nullifying the effect of more wealth. Thus the increasing wealth from labour is good for the well-being of a nation, but not for the individual. From this, he concluded that the increasing wealth of a nation could not improve the condition of the poor (Malthus 1798: 96).

Contrary to the arguments of Malthus and other contemporary political economists, Marx argued that the historic development of productive forces (technological development as well as skills of the labour force) was critical in influencing the evolution of the law of population in different stages of human society. That is, from primitive communism to slavery to feudalism to capitalism and ultimately to socialism/communism. According to him,

Every special historic mode of production has its own special laws of population, historically valid within its limits alone. An abstract law of population exists for plants and animals only, and only in so far as man has not interfered with them' (Marx 1967: 632).

Looked at this way, Marx criticised Malthus's theory as being ahistorical and pointed out that capitalist society through its reserve army of unemployed youth tries to appropriate surplus value by exploiting the labour force. Increasing profit and capital accumulation are the ways through which labour is integrated into the production process. Thus, in the Marxian framework, production and reproduction are dialectically related. Empirical studies based on the apparent attributes of population and economic growth ignore this. This was most evident in the works of Malthus who was one of the greatest empiricists of his time.

Increasing profit and capital accumulation integrate labour into the production process. In the Marxian framework, production and reproduction are dialectically related.

In line with classical economists like Smith and Ricardo, Marx explained the role of labour in the creation of wealth through capital accumulation. This was the basis of our classical understanding on the relationship between population, poverty and human well-being. However, neo-classical economics based on the utility theory of value has divested population of its social content and relationship. It has also resulted in converting people (a relational and animate category) into population (an inanimate object liable to aggregation unlike people).

The pre-classical and classical tradition of political arithmetic and political economy was abandoned in favour of individualisation and objectification of the human being. Population entered into the economic system as a denominator in almost all economic calculations, and was condemned to be a subject of control. This also led demography to serve as a tool of bio-politics and governmentality in both the colonial and post-colonial periods if we look at the issue from Michel Foucault's perspective (Foucault 2001).

This was an anti-people view on population and human well-being. We do see hope in a resurgence of the paradigm of demographic dividend in academic research recently, but a demographic epistemology based on the labour theory of value needs to take centre stage for defining and measuring people-centric development.

A demographic dividend emphasises the importance of the age structure of the population in economic progress, and not its size and growth.

In recent decades, the idea of a demographic dividend has emerged as a new paradigm in the debate on the relationship between population and development. This idea of the demographic dividend must not be misconstrued to mean that population growth is good for development. It is also not a paradigm that supports the political arithmetic view on population and development that existed in early modern times. In addition, it does not support the view enunciated by Boserup (1965) and Simon (1981) that population growth is an important factor in human innovation and technological advances.

A demographic dividend is essentially a neo-Malthusian paradigm that tries to reinterpret the relationship between population and development by highlighting fertility decline and the demographic transition this brings about. The ways to harvest the benefits of a demographic dividend are essentially couched in the vocabulary of a neo-liberal agenda. The crucial question remains whether the opportunity for a demographic dividend will be able to promote distributive justice. Nevertheless, it is remarkable that the paradigm of a demographic dividend has made the value of labour central to the development process.

Concluding remarks

Since the late 19th century, the evolution of demography has been detached from the paths of political theory and political economy. In the new paradigm, population began to be looked at independently as an objectified and inanimate thing, contrary to its characteristic as a collection of people. It became a subject of control. It had to be numbered, enumerated, and aggregated. It entered the economic system as a denominator in almost all economic calculations. It is considered a part of the problem, not as a part of the solution, and it has served as a tool of bio-politics and governmentality. This began during the colonial period in many developing countries but continued during the post-colonial period as well.

However, a new chapter in demography has been emerging, based on the paradigm of a demographic dividend, which emphasises the economic value of a population. Yet, this requires a change in the methodology of demography, turning it from population-centric to

people-centric.

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