

NATIONAL REVIEW

The New New Malthusians

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The human race has a funny way of evading Armageddon. All the best people keep promising us a world-ending catastrophe, and all we get in the news is more Anthony Weiner pics. Admittedly, some would prefer a mass-extinction event to one more photo of Mr. Huma Abedin brandishing his unit at strangers on social media, but, so far, no dice.

The ur case of the-end-is-near thinking (of the non-awesome variety) is of course our old friend the Reverend Thomas Malthus, the adjective-inspiring Georgian economist who reminds us that the two most dangerous words in English are Latin: “*ceteris paribus*.” The Reverend Malthus calculated that human populations were growing geometrically while farm production was growing at a merely arithmetic rate, hence mass starvation was a mathematical certainty. Malthus, like a surprising number of our so-called free-market Republicans today, was an opponent of free trade and an advocate of the British Corn Laws, believing that if commerce were allowed to follow its own course the British people would starve themselves to death. It was a funny argument, and the eminent contemporary economist David Ricardo thought so little of Malthus’s work that he attacked his rival’s most famous book, *Principles of Political Economy*, with a book of his own, titled . . . *Principles of Political Economy*.

Malthus was wrong — *ceteris* did not turn out to be *paribus*, and both population and food-production trends evolved over time — but Malthusianism lived on.

For well over a century after Malthus’s death, variations on his prophecy — that growing human populations would eventually overwhelm the world’s natural resources, resulting in famine and other unpleasantries — thrived. They are, in fact, the most popular genre of political writing. Apocalypticism is the great survivor of the world of ideas, mutating as necessary: Many popular modern libertarian figures, natural enemies of the Malthusian creed, make a good living promising that disaster lurks just around the corner, and that it can be best weathered with a large investment in gold coins or freeze-drying equipment for your bunker. A form of Austrian economics (often half-understood) “guarantees” this outcome in much the same way that Malthus’s calculations “guaranteed” mass starvation some years ago.

Malthusian thinking, like a member of the Clinton family, can survive practically any public-relations disaster. In 1980, there was a famous bet between Paul Ehrlich, Malthusian par excellence and author of *The Population Bomb*, and Julian Simon, a fellow at the Cato Institute,

regarding the prices of a handful of widely used metals (chrome, copper, nickel, tin, and tungsten). Ehrlich believed that the Earth was running out of resources, and that scarcity would send the price of these metals higher, while Simon believed that human ingenuity and the creative power of capitalism would lead to abundance, and hence to lower prices for those benchmarks. Simon was right, Ehrlich was wrong. But there is almost no price to pay for being wrong if you are wrong in the service of that which is popular — see the case against free trade — and Ehrlich remains an important intellectual figure for progressives, especially for environmentalists.

Not long after the Ehrlich-Simon wager, there began to be a great deal of very energetic, sometimes hysterical, talk about “peak oil.” The intellectual vector will by now be familiar: Progressives, socialists, environmentalists, and sundry anti-capitalists did their best Chicken Little impersonations, argued that world petroleum production was at or near its inevitable peak, and that the steep slope on the other side of that peak would send us all tumbling into Malthusian catastrophe . . . unless we invested progressives, socialists, environmentalists, and sundry anti-capitalists with enormous political power, giving them control over the commanding heights of the world economy. Barack Obama, though usually more measured in his rhetoric, is clearly a product of this school of thought, and has spent a great deal of your money on his friends’ and supporters’ projects to jumpstart a fantastic green-energy economy, the first steps on a long march or great leap forward toward a post-petroleum world.

Petroleum production did not go into steep decline. A bunch of high-tech nerds led and inspired by an old-fashioned Texas oilman figured out how to pull oil and gas out of shale. Oil prices sunk so low over the past several years that the Saudis started talking like The Architect from *The Matrix* — “There are levels of survival we are prepared to accept” — and, for a while there, you could get a really good deal on a mansion in Houston.

The peak-oil gang had all sorts of crazy proposals, none of which will surprise anybody old enough to remember that a few decades before global warming was going to kill us we were all supposed to be dying in a new ice age, and that the same enviro-nannies had proposed *covering the Earth’s polar ice caps with soot to raise global temperatures*. We are, in retrospect, glad that we did not do that. Others proposed banning private automobiles, a Puritan-Malthusian reflex that was echoed in post-9/11 calls from the likes of Arianna Huffington to curtail Americans’ enthusiasm for big trucks and SUVs. Many are glad we didn’t do that, either.

But the internal-combustion engine may be going dodo nonetheless. Mike Fox, executive director of Gasoline & Automotive Services Dealers of America — i.e., the boss at the trade group that represents filling stations — recently told the *Wall Street Journal* that if the new Tesla 3 lives up to its promise, then his industry is going away. Tesla, which currently is building the fastest production car in the world and recently unveiled a new battery pack, intends to bring the price of its cars down from the \$100,000 range to the \$35,000 range. “If Tesla can deliver on its current promises with the Model 3, gas vehicles are history,” Fox said. “It’s horse and buggy days.”

The predominance of the gasoline engine is a minor question. But the major questions have a way of working themselves out, too. The Malthusians proposed all sorts of invasive and

occasionally nasty measures to limit population growth: Eugenics programs often were justified on population-control grounds, and Ruth Bader Ginsburg famously made some pretty creepy eugenic arguments for abortion rights, that they keep down the “growth in populations that we don’t want to have too many of.” We didn’t do very much of that, either, but most of the forecasts currently predict that the population of the world will peak around 2050 or 2055, and will decline slowly after that.

That’s going to be hard on the Malthusians.

So, meet the super-neo-*reverse* Malthusians!

The Reverend Malthus worried that natural resources would not keep up with population growth, that there would not be — could not be — sufficient production. Akin Oyedele, writing in *Business Insider*, is raising the alarm about “peak energy” — not peak production but peak consumption. With population growth slowing and then reversing, services playing a relatively larger role in advanced economies that had once been dominated by energy-hungry heavy industry and manufacturing, and technology producing advances in energy efficiency, the per capita consumption of energy (in real or cost terms) has been stagnating, and even declining at times. “There isn’t much more growth in the amount we can consume,” Oyedele writes.

We’ll see about that.

The super-neo-*reverse* Malthusians mainly are concerned with a different commodity: labor. We are getting so good at making things, they say, that there simply won’t be enough jobs in the future. Which is to say, they believe that we are going to make ourselves *poorthrough abundance*.

It may be the case that nothing in this world is truly unlimited, but one thing that certainly appears to be close to unlimited is the capacity and variety of human desire. What do we want? More. More and better material things, bigger and broader experiences, more extravagant and rarefied leisure, more more. If I were a betting man, I’d bet on our finding some use for all that energy that’s supposed to be sitting around doing nothing, and for all that labor, too.

What will those jobs look like? Nobody knows, any more than the Reverend Malthus could know what a modern farm would look like. In the 1950s, my father was employed as a butcher. If you could go back in time and explain to him that in 2016 there would be such a thing as a “celebrity butcher,” or that the smart and chic young things in Brooklyn and Los Angeles would spend their generous allowances on a chance to spend an evening with one, he’d have thought you insane. He probably still thinks that’s insane. But in the 21st century, we have a major industry based on the odd fact that men in white-collar jobs like to go home at night and watch men do blue-collar jobs, in automotive shops and pawn brokerages.

Reality television is one of the great indicators of our age of abundance. Naturally, one of its popular subgenres is shows about Armageddon, which is always right around the corner, after a brief word from our sponsors.

