

(Neo)Malthusianism and AIDS

(text P. Bol for the 250 year Jubilee book of the Hollandsche Maatschappij der Wetenschappen, Haarlem, May 2002)

Thomas Malthus' book on population of 1798 was based on a study of the English population covering hundreds of years. His hypothesis had been, since mortality was so abundant, that the population was in a steady decrease. It was not so at all, and since territory was fixed and agriculture only moderately elastic, this induced his vision that the growing numbers would sooner or later meet their limits. For, as agricultural output showed a linear growth at its best, the people tended to double their numbers every generation, thus growing beyond sustainability. The four horsemen of the Apocalypse: starvation, war, diseases and natural disasters, would then wipe out the surplus. So, environmental pressure keeps the population at bay.

Malthus didn't want to predict disaster, he wanted to prevent it. He stated that a check on the population growth would provide the logical solution. He didn't direct himself to the happy few, since these could easily permit themselves a large offspring, but he addressed the masses of the poor ("At the table of Life, not everyone is served"). How should they limit their numbers? By marrying late and by restraining themselves, i.e. to refrain to a large degree from sexual intercourse. Other means of birth control were absolutely out of the question, according to the moralist Malthus. The neomalthusianism of the 20th century corrected this, and was zealously propagating control devices.

This was wise, since Malthus' advise was completely impractical. For it is only growing prosperity, educational level and awareness that induces a decrease in birth rates (as part of the demographic transition).

One can't expect the poor, uneducated and oppressed to start birth control, particularly not with his Spartan methods, witness as they are to high (infant) mortality. In fact, they share the original view of Malthus: the mortality is so high that a decrease of population is bound to be the result.

Apart from proposing impractical tools, much of his analysis unveiled real basic mechanisms. But up to now, in developed countries the agricultural and industrial output kept pace easily with the demographic growth, which itself showed an asymptotic curve thanks to the demographical transition. Dozens of underdeveloped countries however find themselves in a 'demographic trap'. One-sided interference like medical care, not coinciding with a parallel economic growth, have brought them into a vicious circle. The fast population increase absorbs the means for economic expansion and a stagnating economy and marginal incomes do not create an incentive for birth control. It is in these countries that the fastest increase of the world population takes place. Here, despite more interference, like medical and military intervention and food and post-disaster aid, Malthusian doom is impending.

The AIDS epidemic seems to some to be one of the large plagues that Malthus indicated as necessary scythes to cut the superfluous growth. The largest impact, so runs the argument, is seen in countries with the feeblest sustenance base. So the disease hits where it is most necessary, for it redresses numbers to a level more realistic according to the economical means available.

This is a vision which is – apart from a quite often concomitant racist connotation – totally missing the point. Let's first look at numbers.

Since the epidemic was noticed 20 years ago, about 40-50 million people have been infected by HIV; half of them have died in the meantime. The yearly death toll at the moment is several millions, a calculation that is complicated by the fact that most victims die from diarrhoeal diseases and tuberculosis. So, much mortality hides under the cover of such diseases. In a world where we count less than 60 million deaths per year and nearly 130 million births, AIDS is not offering any 'solution' to any problem.

For AIDS hits society right in its heart. Regarding both age classes and societal classes, its impact is right in the middle zone. In any developing country the young adults, and among them particularly the middle cadres, form the backbone of society. Their massive dying means: old people without support and forced to care for their grandchildren, plus many orphans without care, not unlikely to develop AIDS themselves. Such a situation is not at all a stimulus for birth control. In most societies with a high impact of AIDS, like Uganda and South Africa, births still more than counterweight the deaths, the net access is still positive. But by the selective elimination of the middle groups, the economical base is utterly menaced, and in the South of Africa already near collapse. So, much different from being an instrument favouring population control, AIDS has an impact that puts demographic transition out of reach in the most severely afflicted areas.

Literature

- ◆ King M. Health is a sustainable state. *Lancet* 1990; 336: 664-7.
- ◆ Malthus TR. *An Essay on the Principle of Population as it affects the future Improvement of Society*. 1798. *A Summary View on the Principle of Population*. 1830. Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin books, 1988.