

AMERICAN SYSTEM

American System economist rebutted Malthus—140 years ago

In a June 5 speech to the International Association of Energy Economists in Washington, Energy Secretary James Schlesinger recommended what he called the "Neo-Malthusian model" as relevant to today's economic problems. But the zero-growth Parson Malthus was laid to rest by the American school of political economists in the 19th century, who correctly viewed such "theories" as mere justification for British colonialism—exactly the purpose of "Neo-Malthusianism" today.

Friedrich List was a German political economist who played a key role in America's industrial development, working with Mathew Carey's Pennsylvania Society for the Promotion of Manufactures and the Mechanic Arts from 1825 to 1830. Returning to Europe, List wrote his groundbreaking "National System of Political Economy" in 1841, from which we excerpt his exposé of Malthusian quackery:

Only by ignoring the cosmopolitical tendency of the productive powers could Malthus be led into the error of desiring to restrict the increase of population, or Chalmers and Torrens maintain more recently the strange idea that augmentation of capital and unrestricted production are evils the restriction of which the welfare of the community imperatively demands, or Sismondi declare

that manufactures are things injurious to the community. Their theory in this case resembles Saturn, who devours his own children ... because it merely regards the present conditions of individual nations, and does not take into consideration the conditions of the whole globe and the future progress of mankind.

It is not true that population increases in a larger proportion than production of the means of subsistence; it is at least foolish to assume such disproportion, or to attempt to prove it by artificial calculations or sophistical arguments, so long as on the globe a mass of natural forces still lies inert by means of which 10 times or perhaps 100 times more people than are now living can be sustained. It is merely narrow-mindedness to consider the present extent of the productive forces as the test of how many persons could be supported on a given area of land. The savage, the hunter, and the fisherman, according to his own calculation, would not find room enough for 1 million persons, the shepherd not for 10 million, the raw agriculturalist not for 100 million on the whole globe; and yet 200 million are living at present in Europe alone....

Who will venture to set further limits to the discoveries, inventions, and improvements of the human race? ... Let us merely suppose that through a new discovery

we were enabled to produce heat everywhere very cheaply, and without the aid of the fuels at present known: what spaces of land could thus be utilized for cultivation, and in what an incalculable degree would the yield of a given area of land be increased? If Malthus's doctrine appears to us in its tendency narrow-minded, it is also in the methods by which it could act an unnatural one, which destroys morality and power, and is simply horrible.... It would elevate the most heartless egotism to the position of a law; it requires us to close our hearts against the starving man, because if we hand him food and drink, another might starve in his place in 30 years' time....

If in a nation the population increases more than the production of the means of subsistence, if capital accumulates at length to such an extent as no longer to find investment, if machinery throws a number of operatives out of work and manufactured goods accumulate to a large excess, this merely proves that nature will not allow industry, civilization, wealth and power to fall exclusively to the lot of a single nation, or that a large portion of the globe suitable for cultivation should be merely inhabited by wild animals, and that the largest portion of the human race should remain sunk in savagery, ignorance, and poverty.