

Malthus and Darfur

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Hermann looks at Malthus' "An Essay on the Principals of Population" and directly applies Malthus' model to the current situation in Darfur. He concludes the Malthusian pressures of over population and limited resources has had a direct impact in the crisis in Darfur, but it is one of the many contributing factors in the conflict. [Abstract by editor]

The ongoing crisis in Darfur is not a simple one, and its causes are numerous and complex. Several causes are easily identifiable, including political bias, political mismanagement, and existing racial/tribal tensions. However, there is another possible cause, one predicted (in concept) over two centuries ago: shortages of vital resources, including land, food, and water. The ongoing crisis in Darfur can be at least partially attributed to resource shortages, as this idea not only reflects and conforms with the ideas first proposed by Malthus, but can also be directly observed and even confirmed by first-hand accounts. Malthus' ideas may be applied to the current situation in Darfur, and examination of numerous particular examples may confirm this.

In his 1798 work, "An Essay on the Principles of Population," Malthus proposes that populations are largely limited by the availability of resources, but also recognizes that populations will grow as production of resources grows. Further, populations can increase exponentially and can "out-pace" the increase of production of resources, and when this happens, the outcome is resource shortage (Elgin, et al.). This can result in forced population decline (a "population crash"), or negative social outcomes, including famine, poverty, and even violent conflict (Yanagizawa 2). While this is a relatively simple idea, it is especially compelling, largely because it is so simple, and the results are rather obvious and predictable; we have witnessed outbreaks of violence over trivial resources such as children's dolls and more valuable and necessary resources such as gasoline in our own country, and it is thus entirely understandable that conflicts would result in the quest for crucial resources such as food, land, and water. Malthus' proposal was highly influential and eventually helped to inspire Darwin's ideas on natural selection and competition; population growth and resource shortages lead to conflict and death, a situation where only some individuals survive to reproduce. Further, the idea of resource shortages leading to famine, death, and population decrease is a core concept in modern ecological biology. This model is relevant when examining the current state of Darfur.

The situation in Darfur clearly conforms with Malthus' model. Resource shortages exist, including shortages of land, food, and water, and the population is increasing drastically and unsustainably. The Darfur region is considered by many to be overpopulated (Fuller 217). The Darfur region has a high growth rate of 3.1% per year, which would lead to a population doubling period of only 25 years (Fuller 217-18). Past observations reflect this, showing a near doubling of the population from 1.3 million in 1955 to 2.2 million in 1971, a span of only sixteen years, and then another population surge to 3.0 million by 1983, a period of only twelve years.

This a research paper is from an English 141 section focusing on Darfur. The paper was turned in officially in April 21, 2008 to the instructor Julie Mullebrouck. The URJ received the paper in October 2008. Wesley Hermann is a current Senior at UCCS majoring is Organismic Biology.

Thus, the first condition of Malthus' model, population growth, is met in Darfur. It is also clear that the second condition of Malthus' model is met in Darfur. The production of key food items such as sorghum, millet, and others is decreasing significantly. Millet production in Northern Darfur dropped more than six-fold during the famine of the early 80s while yields (amount produced per unit area) fell by five-fold (Fuller 219). Yields of Sorghum fell similarly, with a decrease of nearly 90% for total amount produced, while yields fell by 60%. A long-term decrease in yields for sorghum, millet, sesame, and groundnuts has been established (Ayoub 493). It is thus clear that the second condition of Malthus' model is met. Famine, poverty (de Waal, "Famine", 21), and inflation of food prices (Bush 7-8) have all been noted in Darfur. These all conform with Malthus' model, as does the ongoing violence and conflict, which are well established and do not require repetition here.

In addition to this conceptual link, there are numerous examples of the direct link between resource shortages and ensuing conflict in Darfur. In "Counter-Insurgency on the Cheap," de Waal cites examples of tense cooperation during "normal" times between ethnic groups (in particular, the Jalul, nomadic Arabs, and the black Tunjur), including the use of racial epithets, although mutually beneficial cooperation including the sharing of resources is recognized (719). De Waal further describes how during times of resource shortages resources were no longer shared and valuable resources were kept among ethnic groups, leading to increased resentment and uneasiness between them (718-719). De Waal goes on to classify the situation as a "bitter struggle for diminishing resources" (719), a textbook example of Malthusian conflict. De Waal further notes an increase in violence, vigilantes, armed conflict, and killings, which he asserts are largely as a result of resource shortages (719-720). In a separate essay, de Waal argues that "society became more violent during famine" ("Famine Mortality" 20), which is, by definition, a type of resource shortage. These ideas are confirmed by Richter, who argues that resource shortages (specifically land and water) resulted in rivalries between farmers and nomadic herders (the former being mostly black, the latter mostly Arab) and eventually culminated in armed conflict.

Others, including Richter, have claimed that Malthusian pressures are not the sole factor contributing to the ongoing genocide, and that these do not excuse the actions or "force the hand" of those who perpetuate genocide (Richter, 336, 340). This is absolutely true, and individuals are ultimately responsible for their actions, regardless of contributing factors. Further, the current situation in Darfur cannot be solely attributed to Malthusian pressures, as racial/tribal tensions, political decisions and policy, economics, and other factors all played a part in shaping the current conflict. It was not the intent of this essay to establish Malthusian pressures as the sole cause, nor to exclude the possibility of other contributing factors. Rather, this essay intends only to establish Malthusian pressures as one among several contributing causal factors which contributed to the current situation in Darfur, and even those who have raised these objections will concede that Malthusian pressures have played a part in the conflict in Darfur (Richter 335, 336).

Thus, it can be legitimately concluded that the ongoing situation in Darfur fits the classic Malthusian model of resource shortages and increased population leading to conflict, which indicates a possible causal link. Further, this causal link can be strengthened by examining direct observations and testimony. It is thus clear that while there are certainly other contributing factors, Malthusian pressures have played a direct and significant role in creating the current conflict in Darfur and may even be considered a prime example of Malthusian pressures in the real world. While there is no simple answer to human conflict, it does not seem unreasonable to

suggest that, at least in the case of Darfur, lessening or elimination of Malthusian pressures may have, if not prevented, lessened the extent of the current conflict in Darfur.

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