

# Malthusian Misery versus Abundance

I most gladly thank Jerry Bowyer for tipping me to the real target of Charles Dickens' ire in his famous *Christmas Carol*.

When Ebenezer Scrooge said "If they would rather die, they had better do it, and decrease the surplus population," he was parroting the idea of Thomas Malthus: that there are not enough resources for everybody. It is this principle which motivates Ebenezer's miserly attitudes and legendary stinginess.

Much of our political debate can be described as a battle between two competing ideas. Must my gain always come at your expense, or is it possible for both of us to benefit from the same voluntary exchange?

We find echoes of this idea in many areas. The Marxist contends that workers are exploited by their bosses; the Mercantilist, that we are exploited by foreign businesses. In each case, these folks believe that there is not enough to go around, therefore we must scramble to prevent others from taking "too much" of a fixed pie.

Contrast Malthus with many others - such as today's Dierdre McCloskey, who observed what she calls the Great Enrichment.

*Economic historians have discovered that until a couple of centuries ago the ordinary folk of Europe and Africa and Asia and the rest were about equally poor, stuck from the caves to 1800 at an average \$1 to \$7 a day, notionally \$3, pretty much regardless of where they lived. Our ancestors on average never approached the astonishing \$33 worldwide average of today, and did not come remotely close to the dumbfounding \$100 a day or higher that two billion or so of humankind now enjoys, and more and more every year. The change since 1800 is well labeled "The Great Enrichment."*

How is it that, in the same land, with the same physical resources, people now are well fed, dwell in comfort, travel with ease, and otherwise live in such abundance as would amaze not only their direct ancestors, but even kings and queens of centuries past? How is this possible when more people live today, than ever before?

Those physical resources were always present. If somehow today's great machines and

factories were transported to the past, and supplied with energy and materials, they would produce. No physical laws were altered or harmed to bring about this great abundance.

The alteration was in people's minds. Among these new ideas was that it is acceptable to try new things, to discover new information, to innovate, to find more efficient ways to use the resources of the earth. No, the idea runs still deeper: people had to imagine that it was possible to improve on the past.

They had to reject the notion that Malthusian misery was an inescapable feature of the world. They had to believe that it was possible to create, with their own hands and their own minds, a better future.

They had also to believe that people of diverse sorts could benefit from cooperative endeavors; that it was not necessary for one to suffer that the other might benefit.