

Back to Malthus

*Abraham Doron*¹

The current assault on social security payments in Israel is directed primarily against child allowances and other benefits to the needy population groups – such as income support payments. It evokes the critical attitudes articulated during most of the 19th century against the *poor laws* of the time. This criticism of poor relief was mostly influenced by the writings of Thomas Malthus. Arguments similar to those raised by Malthus are being raised anew and contribute to fueling the arsenal of the contemporary war against the poor.

Malthus and his supporters claimed that the *poor laws* provided over-generous assistance to the poor, and they thus demanded their dissolution. Their aim in attacking the *poor laws* was to prevent social protection programs from interfering in the free play of the market forces and thus assure a fully flexible labour market with regard to the setting of wages and conditions of work. The contemporary supporters of Malthusian theories in Israel seem to have similar aims.

The revival of Malthusian attitudes among significant parts of the Israeli elite can be seen, at least in part, as a reaction to the solidaristic view of society that expressed itself in previous years in the expansion of the welfare state and its growing range of welfare services. The attempt to revert to Malthusian theories can thus be viewed as a manifestation of the prevailing backlash against the welfare state.

However, the problem of poverty and demographic issues that Israel has to deal with cannot be solved by reverting to Malthusian economic theories of the 19th century. In order to cope with these problems, there is a need to increase the investment in public welfare, improve access to health care, make available better education services, and most importantly, reduce the incidence of poverty. These are the challenges of Israeli social policy – and not the return to Malthus.

1 The Paul Baerwald School of Social Work and Social Welfare, Hebrew University of Jerusalem