

BOOK REVIEW

The Malthusian Century

Authors: Charles T. Stewart (Emeritus Professor of Economics, George Washington University, Washington DC, USA)

Charles Stewart is a polymath, a true Renaissance man. After a distinguished career as a professional economist, teaching primarily at George Washington University, upon retirement he branched out into many fields. He has published two volumes of poetry and trained himself as an artist, whose paintings have been featured in local exhibitions in the Washington area.

At the same time Charles Stewart continued to publish on such wide-ranging topics as economics of human resources, technological change, health care, and education. Among his post-retirement books are *Inequality and Equity* (1998) and *The Decline of Learning in America* (2008).

Now at the age of 91, when most mortals, if still on this planet, would be content to savor memories and relax in as much comfort as possible, Dr. Stewart has brought out his summa, *The Malthusian Century*.

This is an extraordinary work of a powerful and restless mind, a man of sharp wit, a voracious reader and researcher, freed from the constraints of academic specialization.

The Malthusian Century is a powerful synthesis, passionately argued, accessible to the general reader. Its range is truly global. Dr. Stewart will fearlessly tackle and write engagingly about everything from the Chinese language to Russian imperial ambitions to the particularities of the Brazilian economy, with detailed demographic analysis grown in. The United States, of course, is the principal villain and victim, and also the site of at least a few hopeful possibilities.

Dr. Stewart lays out many intractable problems with clarity and honesty, and occasionally offers wise suggestions as to what might alleviate them. His book is truly “An Inquiry into the Human Prospect,” to borrow the title of a major work by the late Robert L. Heilbroner, first published in 1974, third edition 1991, which could be considered a precursor to *The Malthusian Century*. Indeed it might be fruitful to read the two books in tandem, and ponder the similarities and differences in their conclusions and prognostications.

The structure of *The Malthusian Century* is an introduction, thirty-one short focused chapters, and a longer conclusion, “Farewell to Affluence,” that summarizes and synthesizes many of the previous arguments.

Politically Dr. Stewart is all over the map – it is hard to pin him down as conservative or liberal. Chapter 15, “Living on \$3,650 in the USA” includes some leftist recommendations on how to improve the tax code. At the same time there is plenty in this book to make conservatives happy

and to stimulate their reflection.

No single reader, I believe, will agree with all of Dr. Stewart's diagnoses or his remedies, but all of them should ignite thinking, and perhaps inspire a search for more persuasive counter-arguments, if they can be found.

To note five chapters that especially struck this reader: first, Ch. 17, "Is Democracy a Ponzi Scheme?" (I won't betray the answer here); then "Population Bust," Ch. 20, which offers an amazing combination of science fiction and reasonable prediction based on today's science. Ch. 24, "Solitude" is very powerful and poignant - no quantitative aridity here! It weaves seamlessly into Ch. 25, "On Living too Long," offering exceptionally strong and moving support for self-administered euthanasia. Finally, Chapter 26, "In Defense of Marriage" offers a witty yet deeply serious support of the argument that "Everyone should be married."

The Malthusian Century is a book that should be on the bedside tables of our political, economic, and military leaders.

Review provided by David L. Schalk, Kenan Professor of History, Emeritus, Vassar College