



No, The Green Revolution Is Not A ‘Stunning Success’

Description

Green sounded wonderful at first, but then it started to turn brown, then black. The Technocrats that started and maintain the “Green Revolution” have had a technological answer for everything, even if there are no demonstrable problems requiring a solution. ? TN Editor

One of the key myths of the twentieth century is the benign role played by international, American-led institutions after the Second World War. American liberals/progressives, fresh from imposing the New Deal in the thirties and planning and directing a world war, turned their eyes to international affairs: the United States had a world historic mission of messianic proportions: lifting developing countries into modernity by remaking them (and all other countries, for that matter) in America’s own image.

The Cold War era was rife with projects and organizations to carry out this vision, from Bretton Woods and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in the area of international finance to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in military affairs to the CIA-funded Congress for Cultural Freedom used to spread progressive, US-friendly propaganda. These organizations all had mainly deleterious influences—I have previously indicated how Bretton Woods and the modern international financial system can best be described as [financial imperialism](#)—but in one area American interventionism is to this day universally acclaimed as benign: the Green Revolution.

The Official History of the Green Revolution

Population growth was considered a major problem in the sixties. Paul Ehrlich of Stanford University in his 1968 *Population Bomb* predicted widespread hunger as soon as the 1970s and advocated immediate action to limit population growth. The world simply could not feed a larger human population. Although mainly focused on environmental damage from pesticide use, Rachel Carson’s famous 1962 book, *Silent Spring*, made similar points. Human population was bound to continue to grow, and this would result in untold suffering and environmental damage.

A key and imminent danger in the 1960s was India: always on the verge on starvation, only massive imports of American wheat kept the specter of mass death away. Then, in 1965, catastrophe struck: drought across most of the subcontinent caused the Indian harvest to fail. As the drought continued

into the two following years, it appeared that Ehrlich's and the other Neo-Malthusians' predictions had come true.

Then, a miracle happened: in stepped a man, a veritable demigod, to judge by the [worship lavished on him](#) by contemporary normies. Norman E. Borlaug, the father of the Green Revolution, had since the forties been researching and breeding new wheat varieties in Mexico, initially funded by the Rockefeller Foundation and after 1964 as leader of the International Maize and Wheat Improvement Center (Centro Internacional de Mejoramiento de Maíz y Trigo, CIMMYT, initially funded by the Rockefeller and Ford Foundations and the Mexican government).

Borlaug bred high-yielding dwarf wheat varieties that were widely adapted to different ecological environments. Since the early sixties, he had been working with M.S. Swaminathan of the Indian Agricultural Research Institute, and together they planted Borlaug's new dwarf wheat varieties in northern India. Success was immediate: 1968 returned a bumper crop, as the new wheat yields were the highest ever recorded in India.

It appeared that the population doomers had been wrong. So said Borlaug himself when he in 1970 received the Nobel Peace Prize: in his acceptance speech, [he proclaimed](#) victory in the perpetual war between "two opposing forces, the scientific power of food production and the biologic power of human reproduction." But the war was not over, he warned, and only continuous funding for technological research into food production and limits on reproduction could avert disaster.

Governments and philanthropists rose to the challenge, and capital poured into agricultural research of the Borlaugian variety as new international institutes were set up to continue the work Borlaug had begun in Mexico and in collaboration with the International Rice Research Institute in the Philippines (founded in 1960). The Green Revolution eradicated the scourge of famine, and since agriculture with Borlaugian technology had much higher yields, masses of land were liberated from agricultural use and returned to nature. A 2021 study in the *Journal of Political Economy* estimates that gross domestic product (GDP) per capita in the developing world would have been up to 50 percent lower had it not been for Borlaug, Swaminathan and the other international Brahmins ready and willing to guide the unwashed masses of ignorant peasants.

There is a twofold problem with this account of agricultural history: it is based on bad economics, and its connection to the actual history of Indian agriculture is tangential at best.

The Green Revolutionaries' Bad Economics

Celebrating the Green Revolution rests on two fundamental errors in economic reasoning: Malthusianism and misunderstanding agricultural economics.

Malthusianism is the mistaken belief that human population will grow faster than the food supply; in Thomas Malthus's formulation, population growth follows a geometric progression (2, 4, 8, 16 ...) and food supply an arithmetic progression (2, 3, 4, 5 ...). As a result, mankind is destined, apart from brief periods, to live at the margin of subsistence: only disease, war, and famine will limit population growth.

The problem with Malthusianism is that it's completely wrong, both as a matter of theory and of historical record. For one, food production and population growth are clearly not independent variables, since human labor is a key input in food production, a point made by Joseph A. Schumpeter. More

fundamentally, as Ludwig von Mises explained, the Malthusian law of population is only a biological law—it is true for all animal species, but men are not simply animals. With the use of reason, they can refrain from mindless procreative activity, and they will do so if they themselves must support the result of said activity. Malthus himself clearly saw this and amended his theory in the second and later editions of his famous *Essay on the Principle of Population* (Frédéric Bastiat, as is his wont, has a much better and more optimistic explanation of the population principle).

Neither do the technophiliacs understand the economics of agriculture and food production. Ester Boserup, who is a key inspiration for the following brief explanation, developed the correct understanding of this issue *in the 1960s, after studying Indian farming*. The ignorance of Borlaug and company and their cheerleaders today and in the past is thus hardly excusable: the exact same historical conditions that they saw as “Malthusian,” after all, inspired Boserup to lay out the correct understanding of the matter.

As population grows, the labor supply expands, and more labor is applied to agricultural plots. The land’s yield therefore increases, although the returns on additional labor input diminish—as per the law of returns. Once the return on additional labor input is insufficient to justify it, new land is instead brought into cultivation, and once the land has been cleared, the physical productivity of labor increases. Since clearing new land requires some additional effort, farmers always have to weigh the potential returns from new lands versus the returns from more intensive cultivation of already cleared lands.

We can see this clearly in monetary terms: as more labor is applied to working the land, wages fall and land rents rise. As land rents and land values rise, the potential value of unsettled lands increases, and as wages fall, the expenditure needed to clear the land falls. Once the expected return on new lands outweighs the estimated cost of bringing it into cultivation, labor will be applied to clearing new lands. Then land rents will fall and wages rise until bringing more land into agricultural use is no longer deemed profitable.

Thus, population and food production expand in unison, sometimes due to more intensive cultivation, sometimes due to an increase in the area cultivated. The same analysis holds under more capitalistic conditions (i.e., when farmers have more tools and other capital inputs available): the return on applying more capital goods to present land is compared to potential returns from applying capital goods to expanding the cultivated land area. Even the most primitive form of agriculture is, of course, capitalistic, as agriculture is a roundabout production process, in which productive effort is widely separated in time from valuable output.

Indian agriculture in the 1960s functioned well, except when it was impeded by government meddling and institutional barriers. Such meddling can be extremely destructive, as Mao Zedong had shown in China just a few years previously during the Great Leap Forward. However, there was nothing Malthusian about that episode nor, as we shall see, about the alleged famine in India in the 1960s.

The 1960s Indian Famine: Bad History

The 1960s famine in India launched the Green Revolution and the international fame of its main protagonist, Norman Borlaug. From the outset, however, the narrative was skewed by political considerations.

American agriculture was heavily subsidized in the sixties, resulting in huge surplus production. This surplus could not be sold at the market price, at least not without bankrupting American farmers. Under typical interventionist logic, the American government intervened to subsidize the export of American farm products to maintain an artificially high price in the domestic market.

India was thereby inundated by cheap American wheat in the early sixties, but as G.D. Stone writes, this did not alleviate India's food shortages—it caused them. In a simple case of farmers adjusting to their comparative advantage, Indians shifted their production to cash crops (such as sugarcane and jute) for export and thereby financed their imports of cheap American grain.

The drought of 1965 and the following years was real enough, but its impact was not simply a failure of food crops. The jute and sugarcane crops suffered, leading to real hardship for agricultural laborers. But this hardship never amounted to widespread famine. This did not matter for the narrative, however: in 1965, the American president, Lyndon B. Johnson, was trying to get Congress to approve a new farm bill with increased subsidies for agricultural exports and foreign aid in the shape of the Food for Peace plan. Reports of Indian drought were a godsend: faced with a recalcitrant Congress, Johnson played up the specter of drought and mass starvation. His legislation duly passed, and even more American grain was shipped to India, which doubtlessly did help alleviate some hardship in the short term.

Playing up the dire situation in India naturally also fed the agenda of Borlaug and company. The special wheat varieties bred in Mexico were widely introduced across northern India, and as the drought conveniently ended, the first harvest yielded a massive crop. Borlaug took credit, quite undisturbed by the coincidence that nearly all crop yields were at record levels in India and in neighboring China. The alleged success of American technocracy also played into the wider political narrative of American progressive leadership of the “free world”: in 1968, the administrator of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), William Gaud, addressed the Society for International Development in Washington, DC, claiming that foreign aid and wise agricultural policies had fostered “a new revolution. Not a violent Red Revolution like that of the Soviets, nor is it a White Revolution like that of the Shah of Iran. I call it the Green Revolution.”

The Green Revolution, led by government and NGO technocrats and financed mainly by Western development agencies, was off to the races. The breeding of hybrid rice and wheat varieties by the International Rice Research Institute and CIMMYT, respectively, was the flagship of modernity in farming. But even on its own terms, this is misleading at best. What happened was that agriculture in the developed world as well as in the West shifted to a very intensive cultivation that required a lot of capital inputs. Borlaug's wheat varieties are a case in point, as Stone points out: only when large amounts of fertilizer were applied did these varieties outyield native Indian tall wheats. Technologies, it turns out, are not exogenous forces that are simply imposed and reshape the environment. The local people had developed crops and techniques suited to their situation, and it's unlikely that Borlaug's wheat would have been widely used had the Indian government (and foreign aid agencies) not at the same time massively subsidized the use of fertilizer and the construction of new irrigation systems.

The Reality of the Green Revolution

A last line of defense for the proponents of the Green Revolution's benefits is that it has resulted in efficient food production, liberated labor for nonagricultural work, and that we can now go on to use modern genetic technologies to increase the quality of food and avoid malnutrition. Thus, for example, otherwise sensible people like Bjørn Lomborg have long championed the introduction of "golden rice"—a rice variety genetically engineered to be high in vitamin A—as a solution to malnutrition in rice-growing countries.

But the technocrats and their cheerleaders forget to mention or ignore the fact that the Green Revolution has itself been a cause of malnutrition. As wheat yields increased in India according to Stone, for instance, the relative price of wheat declined, and wheat thereby outcompeted alternative food sources rich in protein and micronutrients. Malnutrition rates in India thereby rose as a direct result of the Green Revolution. A similar development occurred in developed countries, for different but analogous reasons.

When it comes to technology freeing up labor, what has really happened is that overinvestment of capital in agriculture has reduced the demand for agricultural labor, but this has not increased the demand for labor elsewhere. On the contrary, since less capital is available for investment in nonagricultural sectors, the demand for labor and wages elsewhere has not risen. Thus, the Green Revolution has been an important contributing factor in the growth of third-world slums where people subsist on low-paying jobs and government handouts.

All in all, as we should expect when dealing with technocrats driven by progressive hubris to intervene in the economy's natural development, the Green Revolution was not a blessing, the victory of wise scientists over the propensity of stupid peasants to breed uncontrollably. Rather, it has been an ecological, nutritional, and social disaster.

by Patrick Wood

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Date Created
09/24/2022