



University of New England

School of Economics

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No. 2001-3 – February 2001

Working Paper Series in Economics

ISSN 1442 2980

<http://www.une.edu.au/febl/EconStud/wps.htm>

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A History of Malthus Scholarship *

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Abstract

A survey of the secondary literature on Thomas Robert Malthus, and an attempt to predict what Malthus would have said about the world's population problem today if he had been able to address this conference.

Key Words: Malthus, T.R. (1766-1834); population; Malthusian League

* Paper presented at the conference, "Malthus and His Legacy: 200 Years of the Population Debate", National Library of Australia, 17-18 September, 1998

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A HISTORY OF MALTHUS SCHOLARSHIP

Anyone who chooses Malthus as an area of specialised study is confronted not only with Malthus' own voluminous output but also with an enormous list of secondary sources. A working bibliography I have managed to compile does not pretend to be comprehensive, but already includes 113 monographs and 460 articles specifically concerned with Malthus. To this, one would have to add the innumerable references to Malthus in general histories, and the many publications in foreign languages. And the number keeps growing. This conference alone will add a further 18 papers, and similar bicentennial conferences being held in England, America, Japan, and possibly elsewhere, will further augment the number.

Fortunately for me, and for you, I am not required in this history of Malthus scholarship to deal with them all - in 25 minutes. The publications I have selected to discuss in this brief survey reflect my own, perhaps idiosyncratic, view of the history of Malthus scholarship.

Malthus' earliest critics included such prominent literary figures as Coleridge, Southey, Byron, Peacock, Hazlitt and Shelley. Coleridge's copy of the second edition of Malthus' *Essay*, now in the British Library, contains marginal expletives by Coleridge and Southey, such as "Ass" and "Stupid Ignorance of the Man". Southey called Malthus a "mischievous booby" and a "philosophicide". Byron in his poem "Don Juan" described Malthus' *Essay* as "the eleventh commandment, which says, 'Thou shalt not marry', unless well". Hazlitt accused Malthus of wanting to abolish the poor-rates and to curtail propagation by paupers, so that the rich can maintain their horses and coaches. The character, Mr Fax, representing Malthus, in Thomas Love Peacock's novel, *Melincourt*, 1817, is given the lines "More men than corn ... is the sole and fruitful cause of disease, and war, plague, pestilence, and famine" - which is an unfair caricature, for Malthus nowhere said that overpopulation is the *sole* cause of the evils that afflict human beings or that all evils will be eliminated by population control. Shelley, in the Preface to *Prometheus Unbound* said: "For my part I would rather be damned with Plato and Lord Bacon, than go to Heaven with Paley and Malthus". He described Malthus as the "apostle of the rich" (Letter to Peacock, 15.2.1821), and argued that Malthus' remedy of moral restraint would oppress the poor while permitting the rich "to add as many mouths to consume the products of the labour of the poor as they please" (*A Philosophical View of*

Reform, VII, 32-3). But he also acknowledged that Malthus was "a very clever man, & this world would be a great gainer if it would seriously take his lessons into consideration" (Letter to Peacock, 8.10.1818).

We have no explicit reply from Malthus to his literary critics. But John Stuart Mill, who supported Malthus' principle of population, said of Coleridge's economics:

In political economy ... he writes like an arrant driveller, and it would have been well for his reputation had he never meddled with the subject (*Essays on Politics and Culture*, ed. G. Himmelfarb, New York: Anchor Books, 1963, p.162).

It is possible, however, that Malthus had Coleridge and others in mind when, in important Appendices to the 1806 and 1817 editions of the *Essay*, he responded to some unnamed critics and attempted to correct some misrepresentations of his ideas. Unfortunately, these Appendices have been omitted from some modern editions of the *Essay*, with the result that the misrepresentations persist. For example, he had been accused of contradicting the original command of the Creator, to increase and multiply and replenish the earth. In the 1806 Appendix he replied:

I believe that it is the intention of the Creator that the earth should be replenished; but certainly with a healthy, virtuous, and happy population, not an unhealthy, vicious, and miserable one.

In the desirableness of a great and efficient population, I do not differ from the warmest advocates of increase.

[some of my critics] proceed upon the very strange supposition that the *ultimate* object of my work is to check population, as if anything could be more desirable than the most rapid increase of population unaccompanied by vice and misery.

These statements show that he was not opposed to population growth *per se*, but was opposed to it only when it is not matched by a proportionate growth of the food supply.

Can these pro-populationist views be logically reconciled with the anti-populationist arguments for which he is so famous? Or was he guilty of self-contradiction, and is this just another example of

"muddle-headed Malthus"? The reconciliation lies, I believe, in what Malthus called the "doctrine of proportions", by which he meant the traditional ethical notion of the just mean, or the middle way, or the happy medium, or in modern terminology the concept of the optimum. It is a methodological principle that he applied to virtually every problem he discussed - in particular to the key problem in Keynesian economics of the relative importance of saving and consumption as stimulants to economic growth.

But Malthus' most vehement critic in his lifetime was probably William Cobbett (1763-1835) who began his pamphlet entitled *Letter to Parson Malthus*, 1821, with the words: "I have, during my life, detested many men, but never any one so much as you", and who lampooned Malthus in his melodrama, *Surplus Population*, 1831, where the villain, Peter Thimble, is described as the "great Anti-Population Philosopher" and declares that the procreation of the human species is "a great national scourge".

Another strong early critic was James Grahame who, in his book *Inquiry into the Principle of Population*, accused Malthus of arguing that "the vices and follies of human nature" - such as famine, disease, and war - are "benevolent remedies" for over-population (p.100). In the Appendix to the 1817 edition of the *Essay*, Malthus asserted "I never can have considered vice and misery as themselves remedies ... Vice and misery, and those alone, are the evils which it has been my great object to contend against". With untypical anger, and showing that he was a match for Cobbett when it came to invective, he accused Grahame of "the most perverse blindness".

Grahame further angered Malthus by asserting that Malthus had recommended recourse to "the restraints prescribed by Condorcet", viz. contraception, to which Malthus replied:

This is an assertion entirely without foundation. I have never adverted to the check suggested by Condorcet without the most marked disapprobation. Indeed I should always particularly reprobate any artificial and unnatural modes of checking population, both on account of their immorality and their tendency to remove a necessary stimulus to industry. If it were possible for each married couple to limit by a wish the number of their children, there is certainly reason to fear that the

indolence of the human race would be very greatly increased;
and that neither the population of individual countries, nor of the
whole earth, would ever reach its natural and proper extent.

Malthus regarded moral restraint as the "rational and proper remedy" for the vice and misery resulting from over-population (1989, II, 285), but he acknowledged that moral restraint would be a difficult virtue to acquire, and that there would be failures. Referring to our two duties "to defer marriage till we can feed our children" and "not to indulge ourselves in vicious gratifications", he said "I have never expected either, much less both, of these duties to be completely fulfilled" (1989, II, 221). In saying this he was perhaps speaking from personal experience. In a letter to a publisher dated 16 December 1804 he apologised for his delay in replying, explaining that his wife had that day been "brought to bed before her time". He did not say how long before, but Patricia James in her book *Population Malthus*, 1979, noted that the Malthuses' first child was born eight months and two days after their marriage and suggests a pre-nuptial conception.

As we now know, other methods of birth control have proved to be more acceptable to his Malthusian followers and more successful. Active promotion of the practice of contraception had already begun in England in his lifetime, with the writings of James Mill, Francis Place, Richard Carlile, and others, and the movement began to gather real momentum with the work of the Drysdales, Charles Bradlaugh, Annie Besant, and the Malthusian League. George Drysdale (1825-1904) in his *Elements of Social Science*, the second part of which was entitled "Sexual Religion", argued (citing French medical authorities) that Malthus' preferred checks of sexual abstinence and delayed marriage were hazardous to the health of women - they were said to be the main cause of hysteria in women and also harmful to the health of the children they might later bear. A frequent saying at the time was "A puny child is an old maid's child". The publicity surrounding the trial of Charles Bradlaugh and Annie Besant under the Obscene Publications Act further promoted the contraception cause, and led to the formation of the Malthusian League in 1877. This raises the interesting question: Was the Malthusian League justified in appropriating Malthus' name? They argued that they were pursuing his essential aim - the prevention of overpopulation - and merely differing from him on the preferred method of achieving it. But they could be accused of falsifying the historical Malthus, even if they call themselves "Neo-Malthusians".

The history of Malthus scholarship is greatly indebted to his biographers - as much for their interpretations of his ideas as for their information on the events of his life. The first important biographical contributions came from William Otter and William Empson. Both were close friends of Malthus. Otter was a lifelong friend from undergraduate days at Cambridge; his daughter, Sophia, married Malthus' son, Henry. And Empson had been a colleague at the East India College for over 10 years. They both paid warm tributes to their friend's integrity and love of truth. The memorial tablet in Bath Abbey (where Malthus is buried), apparently composed by Otter, refers to him as

one of the best men and truest philosophers of any age or
country ... devoted to the pursuit and communication of truth.

Further biographical works were published by Bonar, Payne and Keynes, culminating in the great biography by Patricia James in 1979 - an amazing feat of historical research conducted over more than twenty years during which she uncovered a wealth of previously unknown dates and facts.

One might think that of an author born 232 years ago, all that could be known would by now be known. But in Malthus' case, new information keeps coming to light. Ricardo's letters to Malthus had been made available to James Bonar by Colonel Sydenham Malthus (Malthus' great-nephew; the grandson of his elder brother, Sydenham), and published in 1887. Malthus' side of the correspondence remained lost for a further fifty years until rediscovered by Ricardo's great-grandson in the 1930s. Both sides were brought together in 1952 in four of the eleven volumes of Ricardo's *Works and Correspondence*, 1951-73. They provide a remarkable insight into the ideas and characters of the two friends and opponents, as they grappled with the fundamental concepts and theories of the emerging science of political economy.

The diaries Malthus kept of his travels in Scandinavia in 1802 and in Scotland in 1826 were made available by his great-great-nephew, Robert Malthus, and published by Patricia James in 1966.

In 1983 the publication of a catalogue of his library provided information on the sources he used in his writings, and on his general reading. The library was donated to Jesus College, Cambridge, by the Bray family of Shere, in Surrey, who are descendants of his youngest sister.

In 1985 the official documents relating to his ecclesiastical career were rediscovered amongst the archives of Winchester Cathedral where they had lain unnoticed by Malthus scholars for over 200 years. In 1986 an important unknown letter dealing with his views on protection for British agriculture was published for the first time, having been found in the archives of Mrs Marcet in Switzerland; and further unknown manuscript letters keep appearing from time to time in rare book auctions. Also in 1986, further manuscripts were found when the estate of Robert Malthus was being auctioned. Described by the auctioneer as "A Box of Old Documents" they included: 75 letters to and from his parents, his wife, and a number of contemporaries; the texts of four sermons that provide interesting insights into his theological views (including what was probably his very first sermon as a curate in 1789 and one delivered towards the end of his life at the East India College on Good Friday, 1832) - no other sermons are known to have survived; a set of his lectures on the history of the Dark Ages; and another very interesting travel diary, kept during a three-week tour on his own of the Lake District in 1796. These manuscripts were acquired and are being published in two volumes by Kanto Gakuen University in Japan. In 1994 the ledgers of his bank account were rediscovered in the vaults of a London bank.

These exciting rediscoveries of primary sources have supplemented and further stimulated the unending flow of secondary material. A major Malthus conference in Paris in 1980 attracted over 500 participants from 61 countries and resulted in the publication of three volumes of papers selected from the 164 papers presented. In 1986, Professor Wrigley and David Souden published the *Works of Thomas Robert Malthus* in eight volumes; also in 1986 John Wood published four volumes of selected articles on Malthus; and all six editions of the *Essay* have recently been reproduced in facsimile. Variorum editions of the *Essay* and of the *Principles* were published in 1989. In 1987 Professor Donald Winch of Sussex University published his *Malthus* in the "Past Masters" Series of OUP, followed in 1996 by his *Riches and Poverty*, half of which is devoted to Malthus. In 1997 Samuel Hollander published *The Economics of Thomas Robert Malthus*, in 1071 pages.

The interest and controversy aroused by Malthus thus continue unabated. The publications may not be increasing by geometric progression, but their arithmetic progression has a substantial common difference.

Is it possible to identify any themes that emerge from his own writings or from the history of Malthus scholarship, that would enable us to predict, if he had been invited to address this conference, what he would say about the state of the world's population today? Let me hazard a few suggestions which I think are not inconsistent with the ideas and attitudes to be found in his life and works.

Malthus the inductivist, and a forerunner if not the founder of the historical or institutional school of economics, would not be basing his population prescriptions for Australia and the world today on *a priori* principles. He would not approach the problem with a mind already made up that population growth is *always desirable*, or that population growth is *always undesirable*, or that zero population growth is necessarily the best policy in all circumstances.

"Malthus the moderate" (to use Professor Winch's phrase) would be found still clinging to his favourite and distinguishing "doctrine of proportions". He would still be stressing that population growth is desirable up to a point and undesirable beyond that point; but along with all the other economists, demographers and ecologists of today would still be having difficulty in defining that optimum point.¹

Malthus the theologian would have had to do some serious thinking by now about the ethics of contraception. Would he have moved doctrinally with his church in abandoning ethical objections to contraception, or would he be found deviating from current theological orthodoxy, as indeed he did in 1798 in the last two chapters of the *Essay* where he questioned the existence of Hell, the concept of original sin, the omnipotence of the Creator, and the essential immortality of the human spirit?

Malthus the proto-Keynesian would surely by now have relinquished his fear that contraception, by making birth control too easy, would take away the incentive to work, and cause the human race to sink into a state of lethargy and torpor. Having read Veblen on conspicuous consumption, he would by now have realised that he had underestimated the power of what Adam Smith called "the desire to better one's condition", and would probably wish to retract his statement that the tastes and wants

of the great mass of the people are "a plant of slow growth". He would have seen that consumerism, based on technological innovations, fostered by advertising, and facilitated by bank credit and lifelong mortgages, provides an effective antidote to indolence - even for small, planned families.

Although Malthus' arguments were expressed mainly in terms of the relationship of population to the *food supply*, there is no doubt in my mind that he would be concerned today not just with the food supply but also with the wider ecological consequences of over-population. The word "food" was for him a shorthand expression for food, clothing, housing, heating, children's education, adequate leisure and other necessities; and he referred frequently to the desirability of providing working class families with conveniences, comforts, and even luxuries. His concern was thus with what we would now call the "quality of life", not with mere existence.

But in paying a bicentennial tribute to the *Essay* we should not exaggerate its merits or ignore its deficiencies. He underestimated the world's agricultural potential; and overestimated the ability of ordinary people to control family size by prudential and moral restraint. He was not able to quantify the optimum population point. And he did not *explicitly* broaden the concept of an optimum population from the material well-being of the existing population to include inter-generational and ecologically-sustainable considerations.

But these omissions do not detract from his great achievement. Whereas previous generations had almost universally regarded population growth as an unmixed blessing, and procreation as an economic, military and religious duty, Malthus countered the literal interpretation of the Biblical injunction to go forth and multiply, by advancing the revolutionary idea that the Creator would not wish children to be born into a life of vice and misery and premature death.

Following the publication of Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, historians of thought have argued about the existence of revolutions in economics - have there been any and, if so, what were they? Most attention has been directed to the alleged revolutions of Adam Smith, William Stanley Jevons, Alfred Marshall, Karl Marx, John Maynard Keynes, Milton Friedman, etc. The *revolutionary* nature of the change effected by Malthus in the way we think about population is often overlooked, perhaps indeed because it has been one of the most successful and most

permanent revolutions in the history of ideas. Other revolutions have tended to follow a cyclical pattern, to cancel one another out, each being a reaction to the preceding. But so far, although some critics have disagreed on the immediacy of the threat, there appears to have been no lasting challenge to Malthus' message - in its stark but frightening simplicity - that population can be inversely related to progress.

Endnote

¹ If Malthus' causal relationship between population and economic welfare were to be represented diagrammatically, it would take the form of a parabola, showing that until an optimum population level is reached economic well-being is directly proportional to the size of the population and inversely proportional behind that point. The popular view usually recognises only the latter side of Malthus' population parabola. Today, when all the talk is of the dangers of overpopulation - and rightly so - it is easy to forget that it is possible for a population to be too small; that a declining population can also create economic problems; and that at some stages in the human development process, population growth is desirable and even necessary as a cause of economic growth. Malthus' parabolic relationship applies not only to economic growth but also to scientific, technological, intellectual and cultural growth. If instead of apples Adam and Eve had found condoms on the Tree of Knowledge and had decided to pursue a policy of zero population growth, begetting just enough children to ensure a stable adult population of two, and if all their descendants ever after had made similar use of the condom tree, what are the chances that in the sixteenth century one of the descendants would have been a Shakespeare or a Michelangelo? What are the chances that in the nineteenth century one would have been a Beethoven? And what are the chances that in the twentieth century one would have discovered penicillin?