

Malthus, Thomas Robert (1766–1834)

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Abstract

Thomas Robert Malthus (1766–1834) was brought up in the ideology of progress, but made a complete break with progressive thought with his *Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798), in which he argued that it is useless, even dangerous, to provide relief for the poor, as this encourages them to reproduce. The success of this work provoked a heated discussion, obliging Malthus to expand and elucidate his ideas on population. This resulted in a second *Essay* (1803), markedly different from the first. This work established Malthus's lasting reputation; he was appointed to a chair in political economy – the first of its kind in Europe – and elected a member of the Royal Society. In 1820, he published another major work: *Principles of Political Economy*. Malthus's theory soon became known on the continent, particularly in France and Germany, but not without misconceptions or misinterpretations. Most of his opponents have only taken up a caricatural model according to which population always increases in a geometrical progression, while the means of subsistence only increase in an arithmetical progression. In fact, Malthus referred only to tendencies: demographic growth is always checked, be it preventively or positively. In the first *Essay*, these checks were identified as misery (in the wider sense) and vice; in the second *Essay*, Malthus introduced the notion of moral restraint (meaning late marriage). All this was embedded in Malthus's moral and theological reflection on progress and Providence; but the *Principle of Population* also implied pessimistic views on poverty and state assistance, meaning that Malthus's reputation – among socialists and progressivists at least – was permanently tarnished. This perception was quite unjustified, since Malthus was a liberal member of the Whig Party and in favor of reform. Malthus's intellectual legacy was extremely varied. On the economic level, the theory of effective demand, which he introduced in the *Principles*, was a lasting success; on the political level, the very term 'Malthusian' was coined as early as 1822 by Francis Place, who proposed a much easier and more effective method of checking population growth than moral restraint: the limitation of births within marriage. It is in this form, representing a complete break with Malthus' theory, that neo-Malthusianism became established in the nineteenth century, gaining wide acceptance after the Second World War, even at the United Nations.

The passions aroused even today by the name of Malthus bear witness to the eminent position – almost equal to that of Marx – which he still occupies in the history of ideas.

An Unspectacular Life

Thomas Robert Malthus was born on 13 February 1766, in 'The Rookery' in Dorking, near Wootton, Surrey, England. His father, Daniel Malthus, was a prosperous, brilliant, and educated man, a convinced progressive who corresponded with Voltaire and particularly with Rousseau, who visited him on March 9 of the same year.

Very much taken with new ideas, Daniel Malthus brought up his son in accordance with the precepts of *Émile*, and put him in the charge of two dissentient intellectuals: Richard Graves (1715–1804), who had to leave Cambridge as a result of a misalliance, and Gilbert Wakefield (1756–1801), a former pastor who taught classical literature at Warrington Academy and was imprisoned in 1799 for writing that the poor would have nothing to lose from a French invasion. To crown this educational career, Malthus, who had been admitted to Jesus College, Cambridge, in 1784, became a pupil of William Frend (1757–1841), who was dismissed from the university in 1793 for publishing three pamphlets against the Church. It was perhaps Frend who aroused Malthus' interest in economics and demography (Petersen, 1979).

In 1788 Malthus took holy orders, in 1793 he was elected a fellow of Jesus College and became rector of Oakwood Chapel (Surrey), 12 or 13 km from the village of Albury, where

his father Daniel had settled in 1787. Some years later, he wrote a first essay entitled *The Crisis, a View of the Recent Interesting State of Great Britain, by a Friend of the Constitution*. No publisher could be found for this work, however, and only extracts – published after Malthus' death by his friends William Empson and William Otter – survive (Otter, 1836). These reveal a very politically correct Malthus, an advocate of the provision of state assistance at home for those not capable of securing their own livelihood.

Two years later Malthus' polemic pamphlet was published, marking a complete break with the progressive ideas of his entourage: *An Essay on the Principle of Population as it Affects the Future Improvement of Society; With Remarks on the Speculations of Mr. Godwin, M. Condorcet and Other Writers*. The essay was published anonymously, but Malthus was recognized immediately as its author. The pamphlet established Malthus' name, but its central thesis, which was expressed with an apparent scientific detachment, that it is useless, even dangerous, to provide relief for the poor as this encourages them to reproduce, created a scandal.

Malthus, described by all those who met him as a gentle, courteous, sincere, and sensitive man, was thus drawn into a heated and interminable discussion, obliging him to expand and elucidate his ideas on population.

After traveling with his Cambridge friends to Scandinavia (1799), France, and Switzerland (1802), and producing a new essay on price increases (*An Investigation of the Cause of the Present High Price of Provisions* 1800), thus demonstrating his talents as an economist, Malthus published a new book in 1803. This is regarded as a second edition of the 1798

Essay; and indeed entire chapters were taken from the first edition, but the 1803 edition differs fundamentally with respect to its complete title (*An Essay on the Principles of Population, or a View of its Past and Present Effects on Human Happiness with an Inquiry into our Prospects Respecting the Future Removal or Mitigation of the Evils which it Occasions*), its (four-fold) length and, above all, its content, now constituting moral and sociological reflections on population growth. Even during the author's lifetime, the new *Essay* was revised four times with additions and corrections.

In April 1804 Malthus, now 38, married his cousin Harriet Eckersall at Claverton, near Bath. Within four years, she had given birth to one son and two daughters (Petersen, 1979).

In 1806 he was appointed professor of history and political economy at the East India Company's college, which opened at Hertford before moving to Haileybury (Hertfordshire) several years later. He held this chair in political economy – the first of its kind – until his death, and publicly defended the college when its existence was jeopardized (Petersen, 1979).

For 14 years, Malthus produced little more than a variety of pamphlets – particularly on the importance of grain – but with the five successive editions of his second *Essay* he established such a reputation that he was elected a member of the Royal Society (1819), a corresponding member of the Royal Society of Literature (1824), and later an associate member of the *Académie des Sciences Morales et Politiques* and the Royal Academy of Berlin (1833). In 1821 he was one of the founder members of the Political Economy Club and, in the year of his death, of the Royal Statistical Society.

In 1820 Malthus's second *magnum opus* was published: *Principles of Political Economy Considered with a View to Their Practical Application*. Being of a concrete nature, it was opposed to the more systematic and dogmatic views of David Ricardo (Keynes, 1939).

After this, there is little to report apart from the publication of an article entitled 'Population' in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1824) and further trips to the continent and to Scotland. Having gone to Bath to spend Christmas with his family, Malthus died of a heart attack on 29 December 1834, at the age of 68. His grave is to be found in Bath Abbey.

Malthus's Contribution to the Sociology and Economy of Populations

What the general public, nonspecialists and, regrettably, many historians and economists have taken up of Malthus' theory is a caricatural model according to which population always increases in a geometrical progression, while the means of subsistence only increase in an arithmetical progression, thus making it necessary to limit births by all possible means.

In fact, Malthus' theory went through a complex evolutionary process, developing from one work to the next. His central ideas, however, were already present in the 1798 *Essay*.

Originally, this first *Essay* was merely a philosophical pamphlet intended as a criticism of the utopian optimism of Godwin and Condorcet. The author's main aim was to undermine the theory that it was possible for man and society

to progress. In the conclusion to chapter VII, he resumes his arguments as follows:

Must it not then be acknowledged by an attentive examiner of the histories of mankind, that in every age and in every state in which man has existed, or does now exist,

–That the increase of population is necessarily limited by the means of subsistence.

–That the population does invariably increase when the means of subsistence increase. And,

–That the superior power of population is repressed, and the actual population kept equal to the means of subsistence by misery and vice (Malthus, 1798).

In the preface, Malthus states that "(t)he following *Essay* owes its origin to a conversation with a friend (very probably Daniel Malthus, the author's father, who was to die two years later, taking his generous ideas and fabulous illusions with him to the grave) on the subject of Mr. Godwin's *Essay* on avarice and profusion in his *Enquirer*."

The discussion started the general question of the future improvement of society, and the author at first sat down with an intention of merely stating his thoughts to his friend upon paper in a clearer manner than he thought he could do in conversation. But as the subject opened upon him, some ideas occurred, which he did not recollect to have met with before; and as he conceived that every the least light on a topic so generally interesting might be received with candor, he was determined to put his thoughts in a form for publication (Malthus, 1798).

A generation gap? Certainly, but one which only acquired its full significance from the fact that it occurred at a turning point in history. Indeed, in the first chapter, Malthus refers to "the new and extraordinary lights that have been thrown on political subjects, which dazzle, and astonish the understanding; and particularly that tremendous phenomenon in the political horizon the French Revolution, which, like a blazing comet, seems destined either to inspire with fresh life and vigour, or to scorch up and destroy the shrinking inhabitants of the earth, have all concurred to lead many able men into the opinion that we were touching on a period big with the most important changes, changes that would in some measure be decisive of the future fate of mankind."

Malthus was well aware of the disillusionment and skepticism engendered by this first historical assault on the prevailing ideology: "The view which he has given of human life has a melancholy hue; but he feels conscious that he has drawn these dark tints, from a conviction that they are really in the picture; and not from a jaundiced eye, or an inherent spleen of disposition" (Malthus 1798).

In this first essay, Malthus's argument is backed up by few concrete examples but for a brief examination of the different stages of civilization through which humanity has gone (Chaps. III and IV), case studies of England (Chap. V), the new colonies (Chap. VI), and a note on the speed with which even the old states recovered from the ravages of war, pestilence, famine, and natural catastrophes. The main part of the work (Chaps. VII–XV) is devoted to a rebuttal of the ideas of Wallace, Condorcet, and particularly Godwin, who had just published the third edition of his philosophical treatise *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and Its Influence on General Virtue and*

Happiness (Godwin 1798). However, two chapters (Chaps. XVI and XVII) initiated the criticism of Adam Smith's economic theory, and two others (Chaps. XVIII and XIX, both omitted from the second *Essay*) seem to provide the key to Malthus' system of values.

In the tradition of the Scottish moralists – particularly Abraham Tucker – whose influence he had been exposed to at Cambridge, Malthus came to believe that the constant pressure that misery exerts on man leads to a conception of life in which hope is directed towards the afterlife (Tucker, 1776, in Dupaquier and Fauve-Chamoux, 1983). In contrast to these moralists, however, Malthus refused to see life on earth as a trial, but as 'a process necessary, to awaken inert, chaotic matter into spirit; to sublimate the dust of the earth into soul; to elicit an aethereal spark from the clod of clay' (Malthus, 1799).

Malthus went on to elaborate a theory of stimulation which anticipated that of Toynbee: "To furnish the most unremitted excitements of this kind, and to urge man to further the gracious designs of Providence by the full cultivation of the earth, it has been ordained that population should increase much faster than food ... consider man, as he really is, inert, sluggish and averse from labour, unless compelled by necessity ... we may pronounce with certainty that the world would not have been peopled, but for the superiority of the power of population to the means of subsistence The principle according to which population increases, prevents the vices of mankind, or the accidents of nature, the partial evils arising from general laws from obstructing the high purposes of the creation. It keeps the inhabitants of the earth always fully up to the means of subsistence; and is constantly acting upon man as a powerful stimulus, urging him to the further cultivation of the earth, and to enable it, consequently, to support a more extended population" (Malthus, 1798).

The Malthus of 1798 was a moralist, sociologist, and demographer, rather than an economist. He had begun to reflect on aspects of this domain, however. In his first *Essay*, he criticized Adam Smith's idea that any increase in revenue and capital leads to an increase in the size of the wage fund designated for the upkeep of the labor force, and referred to cases in which increasing wealth had in no way improved the living conditions of poor workers. On the same lines, addressing the problem of how correctly to define the wealth of a nation, he criticized the Physiocrats, and contended that the work of craftsmen and workers was productive for the individuals themselves, although not for the nation as a whole.

Malthus did not return to these thoughts in the first three editions of the second *Essay*, but the gradual development of his theory can be seen in *An Investigation of the Cause of the Present High Price of Provisions* (1800), his teachings at the East India Company's college, his article *Depreciation of Paper Money* in the *Edinburgh Review*, and his publications *Pamphlets on the Bullion Question* in the same journal, *Observations on the Effects of the Corn Laws* (1814), *Principles of Political Economy* (1820), and *Definitions in Political Economy* (1827).

How can Malthus' approach to economics be summed up in a few words? It is not a coherent, systematic and immutable whole: 'Yet we should fall into a serious error,' he wrote in the *Principles*, "if we were to suppose that any propositions, the practical results of which depend upon the agency of so

variable a being as man, and the qualities of so variable a compound as the soil, can ever admit of the same kinds of proof, or lead to the same certain conclusions, as those which relate to figure and number" (Malthus, 1820).

Overall, Malthus adhered to the principles of the classical school, but was critical of the idea that human needs and desires are indefinitely and immediately expansible. According to Joseph-J. Spengler, Malthus argued that population growth is conditioned by the 'effective demand' for labor, and not primarily by the productive capacity. "Such a demand in fact only tends to occur when adequate moral and political conditions coincide, when the social structure is flexible, the landed property correctly divided and commerce active, when a sufficient number of individuals are willing and able to consume more material wealth than they have produced, and when human beings are strong enough to compensate for the inelasticity of the demand for goods and services in terms of effort" (Malthus, 1798).

It is primarily where demography, sociology, and morality are concerned that the second *Essay* marks a development in Malthus' thought.

In his first *Essay*, Malthus barely touched upon demographic science or political arithmetics as it was known at the time. He knew his Hume, Wallace, and Price, cited King, Short, and Süssmilch, but, with the exception of the latter, overlooked the work of foreign scholars. He contented himself with rough calculations on 'the unhealthy years' and the relationship between the number of births and the number of burials. In his second *Essay* on the other hand, he devoted one chapter to the fertility of marriages, another to the effect of epidemics on population movements, and a third to emigration though this cannot be defined as demographic analysis.

Where sociology is concerned, the core of the second *Essay* consists in an analysis of the checks to population in the lowest stage of human society (Book I, Chap. III), among the American-Indians (Chap. IV), in the islands of the South Sea (Chap. V), among the ancient inhabitants of the North of Europe (Chap. VI), among modern pastoral nations (Chap. VII), in different parts of Africa (Chap. VIII), in Siberia (Chap. IX), in the Turkish dominions and Persia (Chap. X), in Indostan and Tibet (Chap. XI), in China and Japan (Chap. XII), among the Greeks (Chap. XIII), among the Romans (Chap. XIV), and in the various states of modern Europe: Norway, Sweden, Russia, middle parts of Europe, Switzerland, France, England, Scotland, and Ireland (Book II, Chaps. I–VIII).

For the most part, the sources of these reflections have been located (cf. the contributions of M. Godelier, N. Broc, and J. Stagl in Fauve-Chamoux *Malthus hier et aujourd'hui* (1984), and Malthus's interpretations – especially those concerning primitive societies – have been discussed, but the central element here is the new way of approaching the issue. Malthus, thus, emerges as one of the pioneers of the sociology of populations. It is on the moral and political level, in particular, that Malthus's theory is completed, confirmed, and substantiated in the second *Essay* and the successive editions.

In the first *Essay*, he asserted that the reproductive power of the human population could only be checked by misery and vice, the word 'misery' being used in the broad sense, and 'vice' in the sense of sexuality being deviated outside of the institution of marriage. While he did not yet use the term 'moral

restraint,' he further indicated that the pressure of providing for a family operates to varying degrees in all classes of society, and termed this a 'preventive check' in opposition to the 'repressive check' of misery.

In the second *Essay*, he introduced moral restraint explicitly as another of the checks preventing the population from increasing beyond the limits of the means of subsistence. Two chapters of book IV are devoted to moral restraint, the obligation to practice this virtue, and the effect this would have on society.

All this was embedded in Malthus's reflections on the lot of the poor and the principle of aid. While in 1796 (*The Crisis*) Malthus had defended the principle of state assistance at home, 2 years later in the *Essay* he asserted not only that the immense sums of money collected in conjunction with the poor laws would not improve the living conditions of paupers, but that 'they have spread the general evil over a much larger surface,' having encouraged the poor to reproduce.

In the *Essay* of 1803, Malthus went even further. In order to illustrate the idea that paupers had no right to aid, he conceived the famous analogy of the banquet, in which the theme was carried to a ridiculous extreme. This offending passage was cut out of following editions, but was unearthed in 1820 by Godwin, who had undertaken, rather late in the day, to refute the Malthusian doctrine (Godwin, 1820). In this, he was followed by most of the later writers, either in good faith or otherwise.

Petersen, in his famous book *Malthus Reconsidered* (1979), shows why Malthus is termed reactionary by ideologists, and points out the injustice of this accusation: "Malthus was an active member of the Whig Party, and the social reforms he advocated – in addition to the crucial one of universal schooling – included an extension of the suffrage, free medical care for the poor, state assistance to emigrants, and even direct relief to casual labourers or families with more than six children; similarly, he opposed child labour in factories and free trade when it benefited the traders but not the public. Apart from such details he was an honest and beneficent reformer, committed throughout his life to the goal that he shared with every liberal of his day – the betterment of society and of all the people in it."

The Impact of Malthus and Malthusianism

Malthus's theory soon became known on the continent, particularly in France and Germany. In France, while the *Essay* of 1798 was not translated until 1980 (by Vilquin), parts of the *Essay* of 1803 were presented in the *Bibliothèque Britannique* as early as 1805 by the Genevian Pierre Prévost, who was also responsible for the translation of the third edition in 1809. The *Principles of Political Economy* appeared in French in the year of their English publication. In Germany, Malthus was translated several times from 1806 onwards. In the rest of Europe (Italy, Spain, Russia), Malthus's works were not translated until the second half of the nineteenth century, but as philosophers and economists read them in English, French, and German, they were much discussed (Fauve-Chamoux, 1984).

In view of the frequency of misquotations, mis-readings, second-hand references, silly remarks, and invectives accumulated

by these commentators, however, one cannot help but wonder whether the majority of them, even Karl Marx, had really read Malthus's publications.

The most common misconception – particularly among economists – is that Malthus contended that the population really does increase in geometrical progression while the means of subsistence increase in arithmetic progression. In fact, Malthus referred only to tendencies, and refused to allow his theory to be reduced to the simplistic conclusion that population is regulated by subsistence.

An associated misconception casts Malthus as an enemy of demographic growth. In fact, as early as 1805 he made it quite explicit that "It is an utter misconception of my argument to infer that I am an enemy to population. I am only an enemy to vice and misery, and consequently to that unfavourable proportion between population and food which produces these evils." This misconception was soon so widespread that the adjective 'Malthusian' was coined to describe not only the practice of restricting births but, in the last half of the nineteenth century, the practice of limiting economic production.

As a rule, socialists have poured scorn on Malthus for his liberal ideas and his skepticism with respect to social intervention policies. In attacking Godwin, he had undermined the very basis of utopian socialism. This resulted in a vigorous, if somewhat delayed, reaction from Godwin himself (Godwin, 1820), to which Malthus responded the following year in the *Edinburgh Review*.

This debate came to a head in 1839, when Marcus (1939) accused Malthus of advocating the asphyxiation of 'surplus' newborns, a myth which was taken up and popularized in France by Leroux (1839) with expressions such as 'the somber Protestant of sad England' and 'the selfish defender of the propertied classes.' Karl Marx, champion of invective, is every bit as dismissive, denouncing Malthus as 'superficial,' 'a professional plagiarist,' 'the author of nonsense,' 'the agent of the landed aristocracy,' 'a miserable sinner against science,' 'a paid advocate,' 'the principal enemy of the people,' etc. (cf. Michelle Perrot, *Malthusianism and Socialism* in Dupaquier and Fauve-Chamoux 1983).

However, most socialists apart from Marx agree that there is a connection between overpopulation and misery, but distance themselves from Malthus with respect to the proposed causes and remedies. The most serious discussion of Malthus's theories is to be found in the work of Karl Kautsky (Kautsky, 1880). When neo-Malthusianism came to the fore at the end of the nineteenth century, however, socialist criticism once more became more radical. Where his doctrines are concerned, Malthus has had a large number of successors, many of them illegitimate – at least in the author's system of values.

The 'legitimate' successors to Malthus's works include the analysis of the causes, processes, and consequences of the growth of populations and, in political economy, the theory of effective demand, which Keynes revived (1939), affording it great topicality (*The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money*), as well as the references made to the *Essay on the Principle of Population* by Charles Darwin (1838) and Alfred Russel Wallace (1858).

The illegitimate successors – the neo-Malthusianists – are much more numerous and more visible, having remained in the forefront.

As early as 1822, the Englishman Francis Place, while adopting Malthus's conceptual framework, proposed a much easier and more seductive way of checking population growth than moral restraint: the voluntary limitation of births within marriage (Place, 1822). Knowlton also advocated this approach in the United States (Knowlton, 1833), and the idea met with the approval of scholars such as Carlisle and Stuart Mill.

In 1860 the journalist Charles Bradlaugh set up the Malthusian League in London. The organization went from strength to strength from 1877 onwards, when Bradlaugh and Annie Besant, one of the pioneers of feminism, were prosecuted for obscenity.

Neo-Malthusianism was taken to France by the anarchist Paul Robin, who founded the League for Human Regeneration in 1896, and to Germany by the social democrat Alfred Bernstein, who in 1913 organized two meetings in Berlin, causing quite a stir. However, the neo-Malthusians came up against not only the hostility of the authorities but the distrust of socialist theorists.

At the time, militant feminism was evolving all over Europe, and birth control was just one element of its main objective: the sexual liberation of women. The decisive turn, however, was taken in the US thanks to Margaret Sanger, who in 1916 had founded a birth control clinic in Brooklyn. In 1925 she organized an international neo-Malthusian probirth control conference in New York, and in 1927 the first international congress on population was held. This was the basis of the International Union for the Scientific Study of Populations, which however almost immediately dissociated itself from the neo-Malthusian network.

See also: Civilization, Concept and History of; Historical Demography; Political Economy, History of; Population Dynamics: Classical Applications of Stable Population Theory; Population Dynamics: Momentum of Population Growth; Population Dynamics: Theory of Nonstable Populations; Population Dynamics: Theory of Stable Populations; Population Forecasts; Ricardo, David (1772–1823); Smith, Adam (1723–90).

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