

Malthus for the Twenty-First Century

GEOFFREY MCNICOLL

WITH BIRTH RATES FALLING, the last gasp of the population explosion may add as few as 2 billion more people to the world's population. Eight billion is the UN's peak population figure, attained by 2050, in the low/medium scenario of its 1996 projection series. (The medium trajectory plateaus at around 10.5 billion later in the century.) If 2 billion is all, however, most of them will come in the next two decades. And 2 billion is not chickenfeed: the world population in 1798, when the anonymous tract *An Essay on the Principle of Population* appeared, stood at about 0.8 billion—a number that is now being added to the world in a single decade.

The *Essay* acquired an author and transformed itself from tract to treatise. Earlier authorities on its subject were acknowledged and a steadily expanding pudding of country case materials was incorporated. But to most readers the original message still came through: there was a population–food race underway, with dire consequences for the imprudently prolific, whether families or nations. Malthus was, and is, known for little else.

Since then, Malthus's worries have of course been attended to, though belatedly and by vice rather than prudence. There was also a massive technological fix in the form of the agricultural and industrial revolutions, shifting the terms of debate on poverty and development away from resource constraints. Remarkable and sustained advances in incomes, education, and, in this century, health were achieved, even if not universal or unalloyed.

So, should Malthus therefore be retired, along with his opponents such as Godwin and Owen, with gratitude or disdain, but in either case with acknowledgment that the issue is all but dead—a piece of intellectual history rather than a continuing controversy? As with most important thinkers, the answer is no. A good part of the work retains current relevance, both where it seems on target and where it is blinkered. I shall sample

from both, discussing Malthus on the state and society, on distribution, and on nature.

Malthus on the state and society has, I think, fared well. The primitive population–food contrast of the *First Essay* matured, in the later editions, into nuanced discussion of how economic and demographic outcomes are influenced by social organization and government. A secure legal order ensuring civil and political liberty and a fairly minimalist state (public education favored, social security à la Condorcet not) was Malthus’s recipe for prosperity, backed by his observations on comparative development. This is what he wrote in *Principles of Political Economy* (1820, Ch. IV, Sect. 2 [WS 5, p. 184]):

No people can be much accustomed to form plans for the future, who do not feel assured that their industrious exertions, while fair and honourable, will be allowed to have free scope; and that the property which they either possess or may acquire, will be secured to them by a known code of just laws impartially administered. But it has been found by experience, that civil liberty cannot be permanently secured without political liberty. Consequently, political liberty becomes almost equally essential. . . .

The sentiment is a familiar one in English and Scottish political economy of the time and, after a lengthy period of statist backsliding, has reemerged in neoconservative garb. The individual planning, perhaps more than Malthus foresaw, was to encompass fertility.

But do we conclude, on the basis of such passages, that Malthus was an early Thatcherite, all but declaring that there is no such thing as society? Emma Rothschild (1995: 711), for one, would seem to believe so, casting him as one who took a “flint-hearted view of economic life, in which men and women are surrounded by incentives, and inspired by fear”—in contrast to the proto-welfare state views of Turgot, Condorcet, even Adam Smith. Yet how fair is this comparison? The tenth stage of human development, as set out in Condorcet’s *Esquisse*, was a frankly utopian vision of perfected society and morality. Drafted in hiding from the Jacobin Terror, it exhibited, as Malthus drily put it, “a singular instance of the attachment of a man to principles, which every day’s experience was so fatally for himself contradicting” (*First Essay*, Ch. 8 [WS 1, p. 54]). Condorcet’s ideas about social insurance are novel and impressive, but they are just that: ideas; what we actually have at the time, and for long after, are parish relief and the poor house. Governments early on can remedy the Dickensian extremes, but welfare state capability and affordability come much later in the course of development.

In the case of Adam Smith, the “moral sentiments” that balance his views on the nature and causes of the wealth of nations (with men and women inspired by greed rather than fear) are presented in a separate and

far less read work. Malthus should perhaps have written something kinder and gentler of his own as an offset: he does not seem in principle opposed to accumulation of social capital and a rich community life, provided that a core of individual responsibility is preserved. And by all accounts, for what it is worth, he was a most amiable person. The last chapter (Book IV, Ch. XIV) of the later editions of the *Essay* is guardedly optimistic, foreseeing a “gradual and progressive improvement in human society” (WS 3, p. 575). It ends:

The partial good which seems to be attainable is worthy of all our exertions; is sufficient to direct our efforts, and animate our prospects. And although we cannot expect that the virtue and happiness of mankind will keep pace with the brilliant career of physical discovery; yet, if we are not wanting to ourselves, we may confidently indulge the hope that, to no unimportant extent, they will be influenced by its progress and will partake in its success. (WS 3, p. 576)

In a prosperous society population growth could, of course, be afforded. Indeed, it was to be welcomed—filling up the world’s empty spaces with industrious souls. It is no small irony that modern supporters of birth control, concerned not with good government but with state-run family planning programs, invoke Malthus as a shorthand rationale for their work—or did so prior to the Cairo reformulation of their task. The methods of contraception they purveyed, and that Malthus condemned, had long since been described as neo-Malthusian.

Malthus of Malthusianism is the other and better-known side of this coin. Misery, once the *First Essay*’s simplicities are set aside, is bound up with misgovernment, a principal index of which is, or was, falling population. In the Ottoman Empire, for instance, the government’s “tyranny, its feebleness, its bad laws and worse administration of them, together with the consequent insecurity of property, throw such obstacles in the way of agriculture that the means of subsistence are necessarily decreasing yearly, and with them, of course, the number of people” (*Essay* 1826 ed., Book 1, Ch. 10 [WS 2, p. 110]). Overgovernment, undergovernment (relinquishing authority to tax-farmers or to a mafia, for instance), sanctioned rent-seeking, and sheer incompetence all have a part to play, often in unholy conjunction. Modern accounts that echo Malthus’s diagnoses in one or other respect include Mancur Olson’s *Rise and Decline of Nations* (1982) and Eric Jones’s *Growth Recurring* (1988). The *Essay* transposed to the present would have to allow for the fact that longevity now is such as to virtually rule out an actual diminution of population unless through sharply diminished fertility. With that proviso, it would find plenty of contemporary case materials of impoverished states and predatory regimes to replace the accounts of Persia, Hindustan, and Grand Tartary. The failed states of Robert Kaplan’s anti-travelogue *The Ends of the Earth* (1996) are cases in point. In contrast,

notwithstanding their current difficulties, the East Asian countries now charged with poor governance and bad policies got a lot of things right, not least in their major achievements in social development and population stabilization.

Appraising Malthus on distribution is a more controversial task. Here too one must distinguish (as many critics willfully do not) between cool discussion of how the world works and airy rhetoric on how it ought to work. Take, as a notorious instance, the passage on “nature’s feast” that appeared in the second (1803) edition of the *Essay*.

A man who is born into a world already possessed, if he cannot get subsistence from his parents on whom he had a just demand, and if the society do not want his labour, has no claims of *right* to the smallest portion of food, and, in fact, has no business to be where he is. At nature’s mighty feast there is no vacant cover for him. . . . If [the] guests get up and make room for him, other intruders immediately appear demanding the same favour. The report of a provision for all that come, fills the hall with numerous claimants. The order and harmony of the feast is disturbed, the plenty that before reigned is changed into scarcity; and the happiness of the guests is destroyed by the spectacle of misery and dependence in every part of the hall, and by the clamorous importunity of those, who are justly enraged at not finding the provision which they had been taught to expect. (*Essay*, Book IV, Ch. VI, 1803 edition only [WS 3, pp. 697–698])

Malthus was probably well advised to drop the passage from later editions, though his 1830 “Summary View” has a less inflammatory statement of the same sentiment: “[T]here is no modification of the law of property, having still for its object the increase of human happiness, which must not be defeated by the concession of a right of full support to all that might be born” (WS 4, p. 238).

Central here is the distinction between rights and performance. A declaration of a right may be satisfying and could even have some strategic utility in the long term, but as a practical matter it gets us precisely nowhere. As Malthus puts it: “The grand objection to the language used respecting the *right of the poor to support* is that, as a matter of fact, we do not perform what we promise . . .” (Summary View 1830 [WS 4, p. 238n]). The promiscuous multiplication and thus cheapening of human rights over the last half-century (a “right to development,” a “right to paid maternity leave,” a “right to enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health”—see UN 1995) would have attracted his withering scorn. He would substitute a dispassionate analysis of practice, with the aim of identifying better ways to achieve an agreed-upon societal good.

Thus we should read nature’s feast not as a moral fable about equity and exclusion but as a kernel of insight about the realities of distribution, at least where there is no supervening authority. It is a forerunner of the

familiar “tragedy of the commons.” Indeed, in the age of migration its applicability is more intra- than inter-temporal. In prosperous modern societies the claimants at the door who disturb the order and harmony of the feast are not so much the children of the “disadvantaged” (whose fertility may not be much higher than that of the rich) as the would-be economic refugees and asylum seekers metaphorically—and sometimes literally—at the border. Entry is sternly rationed, in part with an eye to the signals that any more liberal practice would give to potential further claimants. The same egalitarian-minded liberal who decries the local gated community takes for granted the need for gates at the level of the state. (The European Union, a supra-state gated community, is not conceptually any different.)

It is possible to mount a thoroughgoing opposition to this truncation of liberalism at national frontiers. Julian Simon, for instance, did so. Simon (1989: 347–348) espoused minimal restriction on international migration. He pointed to the economic benefits held to follow from greater factor mobility (Malthus did so on a smaller scale—opposing the restraints on settlement that parishes imposed to avoid having to support destitute settlers), but most likely he would have been for mobility anyway. In some respects, as Allen Kelley has remarked, Simon was a modern Godwin. However, Simon also acknowledged the political infeasibility of open borders; his fallback position, shared by some Chicago economists, was to call for the auctioning of immigrant visas—see Simon (1990: 289–294).

Malthus-as-political-realist extended to his views on charity, notably on the Poor Laws, for which he was also excoriated. Here too there is a modern-day resonance: “ending welfare as we know it,” the call for “workfare,” even the concerns expressed over possible pronatalist effects of particular designs of family assistance. Again, there is an international dimension as well: an inviting current target for attack in the vein of Malthus would be the institutionalization of humanitarian assistance as a self-interested, self-protective enterprise (see Maren 1997). A modern Malthus might find much to say about international development, along the lines, perhaps, of Peter Bauer or Deepak Lal. Here, for instance, is Lal (1991—see also Lal and Myint 1996) on contemporary anti-poverty programs:

[G]iven the unavoidable “bureaucratic failure” encountered by most direct methods of poverty alleviation, an unsurprising finding of many empirical studies of countries with the most widespread welfare systems is that, these programmes far from eliminating absolute poverty have often tended to institutionalize it.

Malthus would find many kindred spirits among present-day political scientists and international economists, if not among demographers and the foreign-aid community.

Turn now to Malthus on nature. Unsurprisingly, Malthus was no environmentalist. He fits squarely into the tradition of arrogance toward the natural world that Lynn White (1967), in a classic article, saw as a Judeo-Christian hallmark—of Nature as there to be conquered by Man. (Subsequent work has found similar destructiveness in some other traditions, indeed even among indigenous peoples.) Environmental degradation might appear in a modern *Essay*, but as an economic rather than an aesthetic or ethical matter and probably as a byproduct of government corruption or folly. J. S. Mill, only a few decades later, presents a quite different case in his eloquent plea that improvident breeding should cease before it threatens to destroy the “spontaneous activity of nature,” with “every hedgerow or superfluous tree rooted out . . . in the name of improved agriculture” (Mill 1848, Book IV, Ch. 6). Mill claimed to fully accept Malthus’s views on population, but that chapter, while it has echoes of the landed gentleman inspecting his estate, moves the population debate onto the significant new ground of aesthetics and environmental amenity.

There is a different route of progress in environmental ethics that is measured by expanding not the range of human preferences but the scope of the moral community—of those entities warranting moral consideration. Extension to the whole human population, through opposition to slavery, was straightforward enough even in Malthus’s day. Extension to the higher nonhuman species would not have occurred to Malthus—it does not, by and large, to modern demographers—although it had occurred to Jeremy Bentham a generation earlier and it is now a commonplace in the environmentalist literature. (Bentham, however, considerably diluted the import of this ethical innovation by a stance on human welfare that proposed weighting per capita wellbeing by population numbers—an extreme populationist position that Derek Parfit [1984] terms “repugnant.”)

As these comments suggest, Malthus’s alleged failings often permit substantive rejoinders in his defense. However, two major items common to many bills of particulars are less easily countered: his inattention to the early stirrings of the industrial revolution and the intrusion of moralistic strictures into a supposedly empirical treatise. His consequent blindness to the technological possibilities that were opening and his misjudgment of the readiness of people to embrace the “vice” of contraception were rather massive errors. On both matters, Condorcet was right—as has repeatedly been pointed out. Over 1820–1992, by Angus Maddison’s estimates, population grew threefold in Western Europe, around fivefold in the world as a whole; in the same period the European and world economies grew 40-fold (Maddison 1995: 20). Prescience is of course a useful attribute in a writer on the human condition, and moralisms often turn out to be time-bound and somewhat arbitrary in retrospect. (Malthus’s moralisms on vice are no quainter than the moral distinction some would still seek to draw between natural and artificial birth control.) But dismally failed predictions by emi-

ment thinkers can be found mere decades in the past. We can frankly acknowledge that Malthus got these bits wrong.

What might be the comparable oversights of a 1998 *Essay*? We still tend to be linear thinkers, concerned more, for instance, with a steady global warming trend of a few degrees in a century than with much nearer-term possibilities of a climate thrown sharply out of kilter (Holling 1986), or concerned more with slow advances in disability-free life years than with threats of a global pandemic from transplanted viruses or prions (Lederberg 1988). *Technological* oversights today are likely to be on a much larger scale than Malthus's: much of the present world population, after all, is living in conditions that would not look so strange to him, but *our* visions of 2198 hold virtually no information content. One need only note the radical indeterminacy of a future in which the human genome is likely to be in play along with the human environment—with eugenics, once disgraced, re-emerging as an exercise of parental interest in a competitive environment.

To what degree *institutional* design is in flux is harder to gauge: many present-day issues of governance and administration are also no different from those Malthus described. Perhaps this reflects constancies of rules of social organization and collective action. The hazards of institutional expectations that go against such rules are illustrated by the fate of another document recording a significant anniversary in 1998—a sesquicentenary rather than a bicentenary: the Communist Manifesto. But the emerging needs for global-level institutional innovation, stimulated by new environmental crises and old political ones, may be generating a truly new situation. Changing population relativities may be doing so too: a world population in 2100, according to the UN's regional breakdown, that will be 56 percent Asian, 25 percent African, 9 percent Latin American, 6 percent European, and 4 percent North American.

Two billion (possibly 4 billion) additional inhabitants have to be accommodated on the planet over the next several decades, most of them in poor countries; at the same time, vigorous efforts will be underway to bring average consumption up to a level of at least moderate prosperity, without a wholesale despoliation of the environment or dislodgment of global ecosystems. Utopian visions are not of much help in these demanding tasks. A solid empirical stance and a clear-eyed, skeptical assessment of institutional possibilities seem to be the main hope for negotiating a route forward. Malthus, impelled into print by a disbelief in human perfectibility, would make a dour companion—but an invaluable one.

Note

Prepared for the Panel Session, Population Growth and Material Progress: The Bicentenary of Malthus's *First Essay*, Population Association of America, Annual Meeting, Chicago, April 1998.

References

- Malthus references given as WS are to volume and page number in the Pickering edition. See *The Works of Thomas Robert Malthus*, ed. E. A. Wrigley and David Souden (London: William Pickering, 1986, 8 vols.).
- Condorcet, Marquis de. 1795. *Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain* (Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind). English translation by June Barraclough. London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1955.
- Holling, C. S. 1986. "The resilience of terrestrial ecosystems: Local surprise and global change," in W. C. Clark and R. E. Munn (eds.), *Sustainable Development of the Biosphere*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Jones, E. L. 1988. *Growth Recurring: Economic Change in World History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kaplan, Robert D. 1996. *The Ends of the Earth: A Journey at the Dawn of the 21st Century*. New York: Random House.
- Lal, Deepak. 1991. "The political economy of poverty, equity and growth in 21 developing countries: A summary of some findings," mimeographed paper.
- Lal, Deepak and H. Myint. 1996. *The Political Economy of Poverty, Equity and Growth: A Comparative Study*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Lederberg, Joshua. 1988. "Medical science, infectious disease, and the unity of mankind," *Journal of the American Medical Association* 260: 684–685.
- Maddison, Angus. 1995. *Monitoring the World Economy 1820–1992*. Paris: Development Centre, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.
- Maren, Michael. 1997. *The Road to Hell: The Ravaging Effects of Foreign Aid and International Charity*. New York: Free Press.
- Mill, J. S. 1848. *Principles of Political Economy*. Boston.
- Olson, Mancur. 1982. *The Rise and Decline of Nations: Economic Growth, Stagflation and Social Rigidities*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Parfit, Derek. 1984. *Reasons and Persons*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Rothschild, Emma. 1995. "Social security and laissez faire in eighteenth-century political economy," *Population and Development Review* 21: 711–744.
- Simon, Julian L. 1989. *The Economic Consequences of Immigration*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- . 1990. *Population Matters: People, Resources, Environment, and Immigration*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.
- United Nations, Department of Public Information. 1995. *The United Nations and Human Rights 1945–1995*. New York.
- White, Lynn, Jr. 1967. "The historical roots of our ecological crisis," *Science* 155: 1203–1207.