Back to article page

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Libel on the Human Race

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Malthus: The Life and Legacies of an Untimely Prophet by Robert Mayhew
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The Rev. Thomas Robert Malthus liked to look on the bright side. True, that hasn't been the usual assessment: his *Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798) was intended to drench the parade of Enlightenment optimism about human possibility. The Radical writer Richard Price reckoned that an expanding population was a good thing, and that it would follow inevitably from more virtuous forms of government. Condorcet foresaw endless social progress, an egalitarian society in which technological advance would provide for an ever growing population, and in which death would be, if not eliminated, at least indefinitely postponed. William Godwin pointed to the enormous agricultural capacity of the world's yet unexploited land: mind would triumph over matter, and 'there will be neither disease, anguish, melancholy, nor resentment.' It was better that there should be more people rather than fewer, and there should be no worries about overpopulation, since our sex drive would wither away as we transcended our animal nature.

Malthus thought all this was nonsense: there was neither evidence from the past nor any plausible future prospect of social equality, plenty, demographic stability, freedom from want – or immortality. Malthus approved Pope: 'What can we reason, but from what we know?' And what we know is that life has always and everywhere been a struggle for existence on Hardscrabble Farm. Malthus acknowledged that his view of life 'has a melancholy hue', but pleaded that he drew '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'. For this bleakness, and for the austere social policies he recommended, Enlightened thinkers and their Romantic allies despised him. Shelley wrote that Malthus was 'the apostle of the rich', whose writings were 'calculated to lull the oppressors of mankind into a security of everlasting triumph'. To Southey, Malthus was a voider of 'menstrual pollution', who had written 'the political bible of the rich, the selfish, and the sensual'. Hazlitt said that Malthus revelled in 'the prospect of dearth and barrenness', thought of women as 'the devil', and supposed that 'all mankind ... are like so many animals *in season*.' Others damned him as a heretic for advocating abstinence and celibacy against God's command to be fruitful

and multiply. To Byron, Parson Malthus was a sexual and religious hypocrite, preaching asceticism to others – ‘turning marriage into arithmetic’ – while arranging his own domestic affairs on a more congenial basis.

The saddest testimony on the *Essay*’s power to erode optimism came from a doctor in Liverpool, who in 1804 described his care of a patient whose ‘reason gave way’ through obsessive speculation about human perfectibility. The physician, partial to Malthus’s views, pointed out to the madman that a happy and expanding population would eventually strain the limits of agricultural production. Unfazed, the patient suggested that an Act of Parliament be passed to enlarge the earth’s surface. The exasperated doctor discussed the case with the patient’s brother, who recommended that the unfortunate man be given Malthus’s *Essay* to read for himself so that he could see the force of rational argument and demographic facts. The patient did read it, not once but twice, after which he sank into sullen melancholia, withdrawing to his room ‘on the pretence of drowsiness’. Hours later, his caretaker entered and found ‘the sleep he had fallen into was the sleep of death.’ ‘At the moment I write this,’ the physician said, the madman’s ‘copy of Malthus is in my sight, and I cannot look at it but with extreme emotion.’

The assault on Malthus and his doctrines continued through the 19th century and beyond. Cobbett called him a ‘monster in human shape’, saying that he had never ‘detested’ anyone as much as Malthus. Carlyle found his views ‘dreary, stolid, dismal, without all hope for this world or the next’; ‘Nowhere ... is there any light; nothing but a grim shadow of Hunger; open mouths opening wider and wider; a world to terminate by the frightfullest consummation; by its too dense inhabitants, famished into delirium, universally eating one another.’ Secular socialists remarkably accused Malthus of immorality as well as error: Engels condemned his work as a ‘repulsive blasphemy against man and nature’; Marx accounted it ‘a sin against science’ and a ‘libel on the human race’ – little more than an apology by a ‘parson of the English State Church’ for his own class interest.

At the time he published the *Essay*, Malthus was indeed a parson – curate of Okewood in Surrey – and if, for Wordsworth, it was just then ‘bliss to be alive’ and ‘very heaven’ to be young, you couldn’t tell that from Malthus’s surviving early sermons: recycled, inoffensive homilies in which the revolutionary events in France were scarcely even noises off. (The mild young Malthus could have been a clergyman in a Jane Austen novel.) A younger son of an eccentric landowning father, ‘Bob’ was born with a cleft palate which made comprehensible speech difficult for him and which, according to an associate, rendered him ‘seemingly little fitted for the utterance of any doctrine which could be deemed dangerous to social welfare’. His father – a fawning admirer of Rousseau – gave Robert a progressive education and sent him off to Jesus College, Cambridge, encouraging him to value mathematics not in its pure form but in its practical applications. Robert, who evidently agreed, graduated ninth wrangler and was already well disposed to discovering mathematically-expressed natural laws in domains where the pertinence of such laws

hadn’t previously been suspected.

At the end of the 18th century, the average age at marriage for English men was around 26. Malthus’s own marriage was prudently postponed until 1804, when, at 38 and having acquired a position that allowed him at last to support a wife and family, he married his first cousin once removed, and then quickly fathered three children. Patricia James, the author of the still definitive biography *Population Malthus* (1979), speculates that Malthus’s domestic situation stamped itself on his demographic imagination – though many similarly placed younger sons among professional men at the time found the presumptions of his *Essay* repellent. Despite his handicap, Robert had charm and a gift for friendship; an admirer said that he led ‘a blameless life’ which ‘served him as a shield which arrows could not pierce, and on which dirt could not stay’; and even violent critics like Southey acknowledged that ‘Mr Malthus is said to be a man of mild and unoffending manners ... and exemplary conduct.’ But some critical mud did stick, and while subsequent editions of the *Essay* showed that Malthus was never shaken from the inexorable mathematical logic of his argument, he did defend himself against a range of charges, especially those connected with the religious implications of his views and with his claims about human sexuality. He had given the old ‘problem of evil’ a new frame, and was keen to establish its theological propriety.

Even if his critics were right that Malthus was a class-lackey, his dismalness doesn’t necessarily follow. (There were political economists peering out of the same, or adjacent, class pigeonholes who were more cheerful about human possibilities.) Malthus anyway thought that your view of the world shouldn’t be assessed according to whether or not it made you feel good: ‘The first business of philosophy is to account for things as they are.’ If you want to have any chance of making things better in the future, you have to face the facts about the past and the present – and what those facts tell us about the enduring nature of things. Optimism without realism is just a pleasant delusion: it’s rarely productive and it often leads to unintended bad consequences.

What had Malthus done to deserve all this abuse, as well as a more politically consequential degree of enthusiasm? The *Essay on Population* discerned two laws of the human condition: first, that like all animals we need food to survive; and second, again like the animals, that ‘passion between the sexes’ is a fundamental drive. It follows from our sexual nature that the human population tends to increase, resources permitting, in a geometrical progression: 1, 2, 4, 8, 16, 32. Malthus estimated that an unchecked human population would double every 25 years, and he used evidence from the new United States, with its vast storehouse of unexploited land, to support that estimate. Yet there was no historical evidence or conceivable future state in which the means of subsistence could long support this sexually-powered expansion. Malthus believed that, despite our most strenuous efforts, food resources can only grow in an arithmetic progression (e.g. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6), with population invariably expanding to soak up any increase in supply. For Malthus, it was all

about the needs of the belly and below, and those are the grounds on which the parson stood accused of lowering the moral tone.

Since food scarcity always limits the growth of human populations, and since inequality follows from the inescapable acceptance of the security of property, the mass of people are doomed to misery. It’s not their fault; they’re not morally inferior to the better-off; it’s just that the poor ‘are the unhappy persons who, in the great lottery of life, have drawn a blank’. We may act to ease misery from time to time, but many apparently soft-hearted attempts to uplift the wretched of the earth wind up increasing overall suffering. Poor relief only encourages its recipients to breed more of their like, so reducing each individual’s share of the earth’s produce. Real wages would always be driven down to subsistence levels. The Poor Laws needed to be more draconian, and the justification for that apparently cruel – but logically sound and ultimately prudent – social policy tapped Malthus’s richest rhetorical seam:

> A man who is born into a world already possessed, if he cannot get subsistence from his parents on whom he has a just demand, and if the society do not want his labour, has no claim 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.

When the ‘table was already full’, the only ‘humane’ policy was to refuse ‘to admit fresh comers’. And, as Malthus wrote, the world’s table was indeed full: ‘The period when the number of men surpass their means of subsistence has long since arrived.’ (The world population was then less than a billion, a seventh of what it is now.)

Since the numbers of people can never exceed available sustenance, a range of ‘checks’ will inevitably come into play. The so-called ‘positive checks’ – famine, pestilence and war – increase the death rate: ‘If [a man] cannot support his children,’ Malthus coolly noted, ‘they must starve.’ ‘Preventive checks’ decrease the birth rate, especially by inducing people clever enough to realise they can’t support offspring to postpone marriage (as he himself did) and remain celibate. He also drew unambiguously disapproving attention to such additional preventive checks as the ‘improper arts’ of birth control, abortion and ‘vicious customs with respect to women’, and to the positive checks following from ‘luxury’ and the unwholesomeness of burgeoning urban forms of life. Cities bred disease, and the kind of unnatural fancy eating that tended to occur in great cosmopolitan centres contributed to early death.

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Malthus is now classified as a demographer and political economist, but he also saw

himself contributing significantly to moral philosophy and theology. The last two chapters of the 1798 *Essay* systematically used the evidence of the natural order to vindicate God's ways to man. Here's where recognising Malthus as some sort of optimist becomes plausible: you just have to get over the awkwardness of setting him within significant strands of contemporary religious thought and see him a bit like he saw himself. That's what the early parts of Robert Mayhew's fine book aim to do, while the later parts valuably trace Malthus's historical transformation into the cacophony of what was called 'Malthusianism' through the 19th and 20th centuries. Sydney Smith said of the *Essay* that it was a book 'much more talked about than read', both by admirers and critics; certainly the later career of Malthusian thought and commentary breaks free of detailed engagement with the late 18th-century pastiche of moral philosophy, political economy, demography, history and natural theology that Malthus assembled. Mayhew describes the continuously contested legacy of what it meant to be a Malthusian, to commend or condemn Malthusianism in the two centuries after the *Essay* was published. But his book is also inevitably about us – as we too are obliged to think about our numbers, about nature and its resources, and about policies for living in a finite world.

Malthus endorsed Bacon's dictum: 'Necessity has been with great truth called the mother of invention.' And since a limited sustaining environment is part of our necessary condition, it was everlasting scarcity that spurred human ingenuity to do what it could – temporarily and within natural limits – to improve our lot. Malthus's was a challenge-response theory of human progress. 'As he really is', man is 'inert, sluggish, and averse from labour'; 'The savage would slumber for ever under his tree unless he were roused from his torpor by the cravings of hunger or the pinchings of cold.' Remove the 'wants of the body' and it's more likely that the mass of people 'would be sunk to the level of the brutes, from a deficiency of excitements, than that they would be raised to the rank of philosophers'. Societies that inhabit the most abundant lands 'will not be found the most remarkable for acuteness of intellect'; need has 'not unfrequently given wings to the imagination'.

God intended no gain without pain: 'The Supreme Being has ordained that the earth shall not produce food in great quantities till much preparatory labour and ingenuity has been exercised upon its surface.' If the laws relating food to population had been other than what they were, humankind would have remained in a state of savagery. It was divinely designed that the work of producing food, and still more food, for a hungry population was necessary 'to rouse man into action, and form his mind to reason'. There was divinely ordained evil in the world (Malthus called it 'partial evil') and mass hunger and misery were indeed evil, but it is an evil that 'produces a great overbalance of good': 'Evil exists in the world not to create despair but activity. We are not patiently to submit to it, but to exert ourselves to avoid it.' Necessity begets rational thought and instrumental action, and it is reason that marks us out from the beasts:

> The constancy of the laws of nature is the foundation of the industry and foresight of the husbandman, the indefatigable ingenuity of the artificer, the skilful researches of the physician and anatomist, and the watchful observation and patient investigation of the natural philosopher. To this constancy we owe all the greatest and noblest efforts of intellect. To this constancy we owe the immortal mind of a Newton.

So if you really want to bring about whatever progress is attainable, then you can’t rail against human need and misery and attempt to fix them through charity or paying labour more than the market rate. It’s been said that the optimist believes we live in the best of all possible worlds, and the pessimist fears this is true. Malthus managed to be both optimist and pessimist. Providence framed the laws of nature and these laws determine the balance of constant misery and civilising process. Malthus’s many critics thought that his invocation of God’s design was hypocrisy, but these modes of reasoning from the natural to the moral and political belonged squarely in the British natural theological tradition; such other divines as William Paley and Thomas Chalmers found Malthus’s interpretation of God’s design plausible enough.

Malthus was optimistic about human ingenuity as an effective response to environmental necessity, but most modern commentators think that he wasn’t nearly optimistic enough. As Mayhew tells the story of Malthusianism after the author’s death in 1834, developments in technology and resource-use indicated that the date for paying the supposed Malthusian debt could, at least, be greatly postponed. Malthus, it was increasingly thought, might be right on a point of principle – what is now called the earth’s ‘carrying capacity’ must have a theoretical limit – but wrong that there always had been and always would be a misery-producing crunch between population and food. Human inventiveness turned out to be far more powerful than Malthus imagined.

The best guide we have to the future may well be the past, but it’s an imperfect guide, and the future always surprises. Malthus knew that improvements in agricultural productivity were being made in Europe, but neither he nor any of his contemporaries predicted a range of frame-changing technological and social developments that were underway in Malthus’s own lifetime and accelerated after his death.

Malthus did not foresee the shift from a corn-based to a coal-based – and then oil-based – economy, which, among other things, boosted living standards and agricultural productivity, and which, together with empire and new modes of transport, brought cheap food to Britain from the ends of the earth. He did not foresee improvements in municipal water supplies, sewage management and public health, or the antibiotics and vaccines that greatly reduced the toll of infectious diseases. Malthus believed in something like the law of diminishing marginal returns: you might, through applying more labour and better methods, increase agricultural productivity, but after a while these interventions had less

and less of a positive effect. However, he did not predict anything like the new agricultural technologies coming down the road: the 1910 Haber-Bosch process for synthesising ammonia which, when turned into nitrogenous fertilisers, spectacularly increased agricultural yields; the breeding techniques that made food crops and livestock more productive; the introduction of herbicides and pesticides; the so-called Green Revolution of the 1950s; and maybe the yield-increasing, drought and disease-resisting effects of genetically modified crops (if we're willing to eat them). In Malthus's time, it took twenty thousand square metres of agricultural land to feed one person; now it takes just two thousand. Famines still happen, and an unconscionable number of people are hungry, but, as Amartya Sen has powerfully argued, modern mass starvation tends to result not from a shortage of food but from people's lack of access to it. There are also less cheering things that Malthus didn't foresee: water made scarce, and a stable climate made fragile, with possible effects on the production of food and other necessities of life.

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Mayhew's account shows that there never has been a historical moment unmarked by announcements of a coming catastrophe of too many people or by fears of too few. It was always a matter of what sorts of people were scarce and what sorts were said to be dangerously in excess of nature's capacity to sustain them. In the US, Theodore Roosevelt was one of many warning of Caucasian 'race suicide'; he vigorously opposed birth control, then widely tagged 'Malthusianism'. 'The chief of blessings for any nation,' Roosevelt said in 1910, 'is that it shall leave its seed to inherit the land ... The greatest of all curses is sterility, and the severest of all condemnations should be that visited upon wilful sterility.' How to encourage more fertility from the white, the intelligent and the fit, and how to discourage a flood of babies from Negroes, immigrant Irish, Italians and Jews? In Britain, the young Keynes admired Malthus immensely, worrying about the security of the nation's food supply in a 'cosmopolitan' marketplace, and citing competition for food in an overpopulated world as the cause of both the Great War and the Russian Revolution. 'Three-quarters of the world have never ceased to live under Malthusian conditions,' he wrote. He meant 'the East': drawing on his experience in the India Office, he noted that if Asia suffered from 'a surfeit of population', a plague, such as the one that killed 10 per cent of the population in the Punjab in 1901-11, might be regarded as a 'beneficent visitation'. His Bloomsbury associate Bertrand Russell observed that, while a falling birth-rate had 'destroyed the importance of [Malthus's] theory so far as the white races are concerned ... in Asia it remains important'.

A new sorting of the too many and the too few appeared during the Cold War, when Aldous Huxley warned of 'overpopulation leading through unrest to [Communist] dictatorship' and described the Cold War world as 'Malthus's nightmare come true'. His brother, the biologist Julian Huxley, wrote that underdeveloped countries like Egypt, Haiti and India exhibited 'the general unwantedness of the swarming population'. The notion appealed to American

Cold Warriors who, Mayhew says, feared a causal sequence leading 'from overpopulation to undernourishment, from undernourishment to unrest, and from unrest to Communism': hence the appeal of tying foreign aid to birth control programmes. Too many people was not in itself the dreaded outcome; it was too many Communists.

Just now, the argument between too many and too few appears finely balanced. In 1968, *The Population Bomb*, by the Stanford biologist Paul Ehrlich, announced that the Malthusian endgame was nigh: 'The battle to feed all of humanity is over. In the 1970s, hundreds of millions of people will starve to death in spite of any crash programmes embarked upon now.' It didn't turn out that way. It's shocking and inexcusable that hundreds of millions of people now suffer from hunger and that starvation happens at all, but this miserable state of affairs is well short of what Ehrlich actually predicted: 65 million American and four billion world-wide deaths from starvation in the 1980s. 'By the year 2000,' he wrote, 'the United Kingdom will be simply a small group of impoverished islands, inhabited by some 70 million hungry people ... If I were a gambler, I would take even money that England will not exist in the year 2000.' The world's population has doubled since 1968, but Malthusian doomsaying still flourishes. National treasure David Attenborough now announces that population growth is 'out of control'; that human beings are a 'plague on the earth'; that unless urgent action is taken, nature will take its terrible revenge; and that 'sending bags of flour' to starving Ethiopians is 'barmy'.

At the same time, demographers and economists address fears about falling populations as stark as those canvassed a century ago. Writing recently in the *New York Times*, a demographer, Michael Teitelbaum, and a historian, Jay Winter, reminded readers that nearly half of all people now live in countries where women have fewer babies than are needed to maintain a stable population, and that this is no longer clearly a circumstance limited to the rich world. While populations continue to grow in sub-Saharan Africa, lots of poor countries, including India, Indonesia, Mexico, Egypt and Malaysia, have recently experienced at least a 40 per cent drop in fertility. The working-age population of China, they say, may have peaked in 2012, and in Japan there are anxious projections of perhaps thirty million fewer Japanese in 2050 than in 2010. Where are the young who will support the still growing numbers of the old? The political panic is now so pervasive that Teitelbaum and Winter reassure us that population decline will probably take place at a glacial pace and that it may actually be no bad thing. It's good for women, good for political stability and the quality of life, and probably good for the environment. Anyway, governments can always take steps – paying baby bounties, as they have in the past – to reverse any undesirable decline.

The notion that the earth's sustaining resources are limited was influentially attacked by Julian Simon, the 'doomslayer' economist, who from the 1980s acquired an enthusiastic libertarian following (Milton Friedman, Friedrich Hayek, Ronald Reagan). Increasing wealth shouldn't be seen as a drain on the earth's resources. Rather, wealth and new

technology call forth new supplies, new methods for finding and extracting them, and new alternatives to existing resources. More people means more innovative minds, more powerfully motivated problem-solvers and more effective solutions to the prospect of scarcity. One scarce resource we should worry about is people: there aren’t enough of us; we need more, not fewer brains to solve the world’s problems. The *Wall Street Journal*’s obituary of Simon in 1998 summarised his central point: ‘Natural resources are not finite in any serious way; they are created by the intellect of man, an always renewable resource.’ Predictions of Malthusian catastrophe are a fraud on the public, Simon wrote, and in 1980 he put his money where his mouth was, laying, and winning, a wager with Ehrlich that a specified set of allegedly scarce resources would decline in price over the subsequent decade. We need a happy ‘cornucopian’ economics, not dismal Malthusianism.

So one thing we might do with the materials that Mayhew assembles is to ask the apparently straightforward question: ‘Was Malthus wrong?’ But that question isn’t really so simple: all predictions should come with a settlement date, and if they don’t come true in the short run, they may still do so eventually. In the long run, as Keynes once said, we’re all dead; at issue here is not our individual fates but the future flourishing of human societies. Since Malthus’s time, we’ve got away with doubling the world’s population over ever shorter periods, and some demographers think that one more doubling is already baked in. We may get away with it, or we may not. ‘Perhaps this is a special moment in history,’ the environmentalist Bill McKibben wrote some years ago, ‘the moment when we run out of margin.’

The enduring Malthusian debates are one form of apocalyptic thought. Understood that way, they long ago became detached from the *Essay* and whatever intentions Malthus himself may have had. In 1798, the first British census was three years in the future; he was writing at a time when many people believed that the world had become less, not more, populous over historical time; he knew that he was short of all sorts of demographic data and he immediately set out on a tour to Scandinavia to collect a lot more. Today, claims about population, the environment and the economy mobilise the forces of Big Data, and some of the fastest supercomputers are kept busy crunching the numbers. Modern Malthusians and anti-Malthusians draw on masses of disciplined facts, organise the facts statistically, and devise computer models to infer the future from data about past and present. And yet there is still controversy among experts over what the future holds: optimists war with pessimists as they always have, and passionate disagreement proceeds both on what the facts are and how the facts ought to be projected into the future. We shouldn’t be surprised by that conflicted state of affairs: the numbers and inferences involved in Malthusian debates belong as much to our moral and political life as they do to science. How bountiful is the earth and who has the rights to nature’s goods? How is wealth shared and is that allocation natural or artificial, mandated by the gods or maintained by custom and coercion? What do the gods intend for us, or, absent the gods, what is in the

natural order of things? Are there too many of us; if so, of what sort are there too many? What *is* human nature; can it be changed; and if so, how and to what extent? Is our current conduct in accord with nature or does it violate nature? Is human behaviour, or the behaviour of some sorts of people, in for a good whipping or is it benign? It’s not that the data have nothing to do with it; it’s that the data can’t decide moral judgments, and our moral discussions now take place on a field overpopulated by data and rational inferences. Malthusian debates belong to scientific inquiry, but it’s an inquiry that is itself embedded within ongoing moral conversations – and we rarely expect consensus to emerge from those.

Mary Douglas once asked rhetorically whether we can ‘know the risks we face, now or in the future’. ‘No, we cannot,’ she answered, ‘but yes, we must act as if we do.’ The game of predicting future states is wracked with uncertainties, and it’s always good to remember that, but it’s a game that has to be played, and one can’t imagine the shape of any present drained of its envisaged futures – predicted, prepared for, dreaded, anticipated with delight. So, in acting, we have a choice of optimistic or pessimistic frames of mind. Will something always ‘turn up’ to save us from catastrophe? Noam Chomsky once recommended optimism as a motive to action: ‘Optimism is a strategy for making a better future. Because unless you believe that the future can be better, you are unlikely to step up and take responsibility for making it so.’ But optimism comes in different flavours, and one currently popular environmental optimism is, by another name, complacency about the seriousness of our predicament and whether bad outcomes will occur soon enough to affect ourselves or our children. Some good things may not ‘turn up’ unless we wrap our minds around the necessity of urgent and concerted action. So pessimism about the nature, scope and seriousness of our problems can be far more productive than complacent optimism. If necessity is the mother of invention, fear is its grandmother. Be afraid.

Vol. 36 No. 11 · 5 June 2014 » Steven Shapin » Libel on the Human Race
pages 26-29 | 5073 words

 ^ Top