

Malthus' Essay on Population at Age 200

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By John Bellamy
Foster

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John Bellamy Foster is associate professor of sociology at the University of Oregon. He is the author of *Marx's Ecology* (2000), and *The Vulnerable Planet* (1999, 2nd ed.). He is co-editor of *Hungry for Profit* (2000), *Capitalism and the Information Age* (1998), and *In Defense of History* (1996).

Since it was first published 200 years ago in 1798, no other single work has constituted such a bastion of bourgeois thought as Thomas Malthus' *Essay on the Principle of Population*. No other work was more hated by the English working class, nor so strongly criticized by Marx and Engels. Although the Malthusian principle of population in its classical form was largely vanquished intellectually by the mid-nineteenth century, it continued to reemerge in new forms. In the late nineteenth century it took on new life as a result of the Darwinian revolution and the rise of social Darwinism. And in the late twentieth century Malthusianism reemerged once again in the form of neo-Malthusian ecology.

Today Malthus is commonly presented as an ecological thinker—counterposed to a classical Marxist tradition which (in large part because of its opposition to Malthus himself) is branded as anti-ecological. Hence, even some ecological socialists, such as Ted Benton, have gone so far as to argue that Marx and Engels were guilty of “a Utopian overreaction to Malthusian epistemic conservatism” which led them to downplay (or deny) “any ultimate natural limits to population” and indeed natural limits in general. Faced with Malthusian natural limits, we are told, Marx and Engels responded with “Prometheanism”—a blind faith in the capacity of technology to overcome all ecological barriers.

It therefore seems appropriate, on the bicentennial of Malthus' *Essay on Population*, to reconsider what Malthus stood for, the nature of Marx's and Engels' response, and the relation of this to contemporary debates about ecology and society. Contrary to most interpretations, Malthus' theory was not about the threat of “overpopulation” which may come about at some future date. Instead, it was his contention that there is a constant pressure of population against food supply which has always applied and will always apply. This means that there is effectively no such thing as “overpopulation” in the conventional sense. Engels was perfectly correct when he wrote in 1844 that according to the logic of Malthus' theory “the earth was already over-populated when only one man existed.” Far from being an ecological contribution Malthus' argument was profoundly non-ecological (even anti-ecological) in nature, taking its fundamental import from an attempt to prove that future improvements in the condition of society, and more fundamentally in the condition of the poor, were impossible.

Malthus' *Essay on Population* went through six editions in his lifetime (1798, 1803, 1806, 1807, 1817, and 1826). The 1803 edition was almost four times as long as the first edition while excluding large sections of the former. It also had a new title and represented a shift in argument. It was therefore in reality a new book. In the subsequent editions, after 1803, the changes in the text were relatively minor. Hence, the 1798 edition of his essay is commonly known as the *First Essay* on population, and the 1803 edition (together with the editions of 1806, 1807, 1817, and 1826) is known as the *Second Essay*. In order to understand Malthus' overall argument it is necessary to see how his position changed from the *First Essay* to the *Second Essay*.

The First Essay

The full title of the *First Essay* was *An Essay on the Principle of Population as it Effects the Future Improvement of Society; with Remarks on the Speculations of Mr. Godwin, M. Condorcet and Other Writers*. As the title indicates it was an attempt to intervene in a debate on the question of the future improvement of society. The specific controversy in question can be traced back to the publication in 1761 of a work entitled *Various Prospects for Mankind, Nature, and Providence* by Robert Wallace, an Edinburgh minister. Wallace, who in his earlier writings had demonstrated that human population if unchecked tended to increase exponentially, doubling every few decades, made a case in *Various Prospects* that while the creation of a "perfect government," organized on an egalitarian basis was conceivable, it would be at best temporary, since under these circumstances "mankind, would increase so prodigiously that the earth would be left overstocked and become unable to support its inhabitants." Eventually, there would come a time "when our globe, by the most diligent culture, could not produce what was sufficient to nourish its numerous inhabitants." Wallace went on to suggest that it would be preferable if the human vices, by reducing population pressures, should prevent the emergence of a government not compatible with the "circumstances of Mankind upon the Earth."

Wallace's argument was strongly opposed by William Godwin in his Enlightenment utopian argument for a more egalitarian society, which he enunciated in his *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and its Influence on Morals and Happiness*. First published in 1793, it was followed by a second edition in 1795 and a third edition in 1797 (the year before Malthus' essay appeared). In answer to Wallace, who had claimed that excessive population would result eventually from any perfect government, thus undermining its existence, Godwin contended that human population "will perhaps never be found in the ordinary course of affairs, greatly to increase, beyond the facility of subsistence." Population tended to be regulated in human society in accordance with conditions of wealth and wages. "It is impossible where the price of labour is greatly reduced, and an added population threatens still further reduction, that men should not be considerably under the influence of fear, respecting an early marriage, and a numerous family." For Godwin there were "various methods, by the practice of which population may be checked; by the exposing of children, as among the ancients, and, at this day, in China; by the art of procuring abortion, as it is said to subsist in the island of Ceylon...or lastly,

by a systematical abstinence such as must be supposed, in some degree, to prevail in monasteries of either sex." But even without such extreme practices and institutions, "the encouragement or discouragement that arises from the general state of a community," he insisted, "will probably be found to be all-powerful in its operation."

Malthus set out to overturn Godwin's argument by changing the terrain of debate; rather than contending, like Wallace before him, that a "perfect government" would eventually be undermined by the overstocking of the earth with human inhabitants, Malthus insisted that there was a constant tendency toward equilibrium between population and food supply. Nevertheless, population tended naturally when unchecked to increase at a geometrical rate (1, 2, 4, 8, 16), while food supply increased at best at an arithmetical rate (1, 2, 3, 4, 5). Under these circumstances attention needed to be given to the checks that ensured that population stayed in equilibrium (apart from minor fluctuations) with the limited means of subsistence. These checks, Malthus argued, were all reducible to vice and misery, taking such forms as promiscuity before marriage, which limited fecundity (a common assumption in Malthus' time), sickness, plagues, and—ultimately, if all other checks fell short, the dreaded scourge of famine. Since such misery and vice was necessary at all times to keep population in line with subsistence any future improvement of society, as envisioned by thinkers like Godwin and Condorcet, he contended, was impossible.

Malthus himself did not use the term "overpopulation" in advancing his argument—though it was used from the outset by his critics. Natural checks on population were so effective, in Malthus' late-eighteenth-century perspective, that overpopulation, in the sense of the eventual overstocking of the globe with human inhabitants, was not the thing to be feared. The problem of an "overcharged population" existed not at "a great distance" (as Godwin had said), but rather was *always* operative, even at a time when most of the earth was uncultivated. In response to Condorcet he wrote "M. Condorcet thinks that it [the possibility of a period arising when the world's population has reached the limits of its subsistence] cannot .. be applicable but at an era extremely distant. If the proportion between the natural increase of population and food which I have given be in any degree near the truth, it will appear, on the contrary, that the period when the number of men surpass their means of subsistence [in later editions this was changed to "easy means of subsistence"—see note 2 above] has arrived, and that this necessary oscillation, this constantly subsisting cause of periodical misery, has existed ever since we have had any histories of mankind." In the 1803 edition of his work on population he wrote, "Other persons, besides Mr. Godwin, have imagined that I looked to certain periods in the future when population would exceed the means of subsistence in a much greater degree than at present, and that the evils arising from the principle of population were rather in contemplation than in existence; but this is a total misconception of the argument."

For Malthus, relatively low or stagnant population growth was taken as a sign of population pressing on the means of subsistence; while high population growth was an indication that a country was underpopulated. "In examining the principal states of

modern Europe," he wrote, "we shall find that though they have increased very considerably in population since they were nations of shepherds, yet that at present their progress is but slow, and instead of doubling their numbers every twenty-five years they require three or four hundred years, or more, for that purpose." Nothing else, in Malthus' terms, so clearly demonstrated the reality of a population that had reached its limits of subsistence.

Malthus' only original idea in his population theory, as Marx emphasized, was his arithmetical ratio. But for this he had little or no evidence. He merely espoused it on the basis that it conformed to what, he claimed, any knowledgeable observer of the state of agriculture would be forced to admit. Indeed, if there was a basis at all for Malthus' arithmetical ratio it could be found in his pre-Darwinian understanding of the natural world (as represented in his time by the work of thinkers such as Carolus Linnaeus and William Paley), in which he assumed that there was only limited room for "improvement" in plant and animal species.

Later on, it is true, it became common to see the so-called law of diminishing returns to land of classical economics as the basis for Malthus' arithmetical ratio. But that theory—outside of the work of the gentleman farmer and political economist James Anderson, one of Malthus' most formidable opponents—did not exist even in nascent form before the end of the Napoleonic wars and does not appear except in vague suggestions in any of the six editions of Malthus' *Essay*. It therefore cannot be seen as the foundation for Malthus' argument. As the great conservative economist Joseph Schumpeter remarked, "The 'law' of diminishing returns from land...was entirely absent from Malthus' *Essay*."

Malthus' *Essay on Population* also appeared some four decades before the emergence of modern soil science in the work of Justus von Liebig and others. Hence, along with his great contemporary David Ricardo, he saw the fertility of the soil as subject to only very limited improvement. Nor was soil degradation an issue, as Marx, following Liebig, was later to argue. For Malthus, the properties of the soil were not subject to historical change, but were simply "gifts of nature to man" and, as Ricardo said, "indestructible."

The fact that Malthus offered no basis for his arithmetical ratio, as well as the admission that he was forced to make in the course of his argument that there were occasions in which food had increased geometrically to match a geometric rise in population (as in North America)—thereby falsifying his own thesis—did not pass by Malthus' contemporary critics, who were unsparing in their denunciations of his doctrine. In the *Second Essay* (1806 edition) Malthus therefore resorted to sheer bombast in place of argument. As he put it, "It has been said that I have written a quarto volume to prove that population increases in a geometrical, and food in an arithmetical ratio; but this is not quite true. The first of these propositions I considered as proved the moment the American increase was related, and the second proposition as soon as it was enunciated." As one of his contemporary critics responded, "These phrases, if they mean any thing, must mean that the geometrical ratio was admitted on very slight proofs, the arithmetical ratio was asserted on no evidence at all."

All of this meant that the *First Essay* was a failure in that the argument was clearly insupportable. The logic of the argument (even if one accepted Malthus' ratios) required that virtuous restraint from marriage either of a temporary or a permanent nature (and not attended by sexual liaisons of another sort) was an impossibility; and that virtuous limits to procreation within marriage were also impossible (Malthus never gave up his opposition to all forms of contraception). Such an argument could not stand in the face of reality, contradicting as it did the marriage pattern of the propertied classes in the England of that day. Hence, Malthus was eventually forced to concede in response to criticisms that some form of moral restraint (especially among the upper classes) was indeed possible—a moral restraint that he was nevertheless to define in extremely restrictive terms as “temporary or final abstinence from marriage on prudential considerations [usually having to do with property], with strict chastity during the single state.” For Malthus, the operation of such narrowly defined moral restraint was “not very powerful.” Still, once this was admitted his whole argument against Godwin and Condorcet lost most of its force.

The Second Essay

For this reason Malthus' *Second Essay*, in which he admitted to the possibility of moral restraint, is a very different work from the *First Essay*. Reflecting this the title itself changed to: *An Essay on the Principle 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*. No more is there any reference in the title to the question of “the future improvement of society” or to Godwin or Condorcet. The main thrust of the work in the *Second Essay* is an attack on the English Poor Laws, a theme which only played a subordinate role in the *First Essay*.

According to the great Malthus-scholar Patricia James (editor of the variorum edition of his *Essay on Population*), “it was the 1803 essay [the earliest edition of the *Second Essay*] which made the greatest impression on contemporary thought.” This was because of the severity of the attack on the poor to be found in that work. Although Malthus said in the preface to the *Second Essay* that he had “endeavoured to soften some of the harshest conclusions of the first essay” this related mainly to his introduction of the possibility of moral restraint (applicable chiefly to the upper classes). In relation to the poor (who, he believed, were incapable of such moral restraint) his essay was even harsher than before. And it is here, particularly in the 1803 edition, that the most notorious passages are to be found. Thus he wrote that, “With regard to illegitimate children, after the proper notice has been given, they should on no account whatever be allowed to have any claim to parish allowance.... The infant is, comparatively speaking, of no value to the society, as others will immediately supply its place.” In the same callous vein he wrote:

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. She tells him to be gone, and

will quickly execute her own orders, if he do not work on the compassion of some of her guests. If these guests get up and make room for him other intruders immediately appear demanding the same favour.... The order and harmony of the feast is disturbed, the plenty that before reigned is changed into scarcity.... The guests learn too late their error, in counteracting those strict orders to all intruders, issued by the great mistress of the feast, who, wishing that all her guests should have plenty, and knowing that she could not provide for unlimited numbers, humanely refused to admit fresh comers when her table was already full.

This infamous passage, like the one quoted before it, was removed from later editions of the *Essay*. But the basic idea that it reflected—the claim that the poor were not entitled to the smallest portion of relief, and that any attempt to invite them to the “mighty feast” against the will of its “mistress” (who represented natural law) would only come to grief—remained the central ideological thrust of the *Second Essay* throughout its numerous editions. “We cannot, in the nature of things, “ Malthus wrote, “assist the poor, in any way, without enabling them to rear up to manhood a greater number of their children.” The essence of the Malthusian doctrine, Marx observed in 1844, was that “charity...itself fostered social evils.” The very poverty that “formerly was attributed to a *deficiency of charity* was now ascribed to the *superabundance of charity*.”

One of the harsher implications of Malthus’ argument from its inception was that since there were limits to the means of subsistence for maintaining workers in any given period, any attempt to raise wages in general would only result in a rise of prices for this limited stock of provisions—it could not procure for the workers a larger portion of the necessities of life. This erroneous doctrine—which in its more sophisticated versions became known as the “wages fund doctrine”—was then used to argue that improvement in the general conditions of workers by such means as trade union organization was impossible.

Marx was therefore perfectly justified when he wrote that “what characterises Malthus is the *fundamental meanness* of his outlook.” Moreover, for Marx this meanness had a definite source. Fighting on behalf of the working classes against Malthusianism and its attacks on the poor, William Cobbett leveled the fiery accusation of “*Parson!*” against Malthus in 1819—an accusation of both class domination and narrow-minded moralistic subservience to the doctrine of the established Protestant church. In Cobbett’s own words, “I have, during my life, detested many men; but never any one so much as you.... No assemblage of words can give an appropriate designation of you; and, therefore, as being the single word which best suits the character of such a man, I call you *Parson*, which amongst other meanings, includes that of Borough-monger Tool.” Marx in *Capital* was later to pick up this criticism, pointing out that discussions of population in Britain had come to be dominated by Protestant parsons or “reverend scribblers,” such as Robert Wallace, Joseph Townsend, Thomas Chalmers and Malthus himself. It was the recognized task of such “parson naturalists” in the days before Darwin to provide natural

law justifications for the established order. Malthus, as Marx observed, was lauded by an English oligarchy frightened by the revolutionary stirrings on the Continent, for his role as “the great destroyer of all hankering after a progressive development of humanity.”

Nowhere perhaps were these narrow, parsonian values more evident than in Malthus' view of women's indiscretions. Thus he sought to justify the double standard imposed on women who were “driven from society for an offence [‘A breach of chastity’ outside of marriage, especially if resulting in an illegitimate birth] which men commit nearly with impunity” on the grounds that it was “the most obvious and effectual method of preventing the frequent recurrence of a serious inconvenience to the community.”

In attacking the English Poor Laws Malthus argued that while limitations in the growth of food impeded the growth of population, society could exist under either low equilibrium, relatively egalitarian conditions, as in China, where population had been “forced” to such an extent that virtually everyone was reduced to near starvation, or it could exist under high equilibrium conditions, such as pertained in England, where the aristocracy, gentry and middle class were able to enjoy nature's “mighty feast”—though only if the poor were kept away—and where checks short of universal famine (and short of such practices as “exposure of infants”) kept population down. His greatest fear—which he helped to instill in the oligarchy of Britain—was that as a result of excessive population growth combined with egalitarian notions “the middle classes of society would...be blended with the poor.”

Such Malthusian fears (and the capitalist need to maintain a high rate of exploitation, i.e., the relative impoverishment of the masses) lay behind the eventual passage of the New Poor Law of 1834, which was aimed at ensuring that workers and the poor would look on exploitation in the workplace and even the prospect of slow starvation as in many ways preferable to seeking relief through the Poor Laws. Malthus responded to the issue of hunger and destitution in Ireland by arguing in a letter to Ricardo in August 1817 that the first object should not be provisions for the relief of the poor but the dispossession of the peasantry: “the *Land* in Ireland is infinitely more populated than in England; and to give full effect to the natural resources of the country, a great part of the population should be swept from the soil into large manufacturing and commercial Towns.”

One reason for the hatred that Cobbett and working class radicals directed against Malthus had to do with the fact that Malthus' influence was so pervasive that it was not simply confined to middle-class reformers like John Stuart Mill, but even extended into the ranks of working-class thinkers and activists such as Francis Place. For Place, who adopted the Malthusian wages fund theory, birth control became a kind of substitute for class organization—though this was conceived by Place as being not in the interests of capital, but, in his misguided way, in the interests of the working class. The Malthusian ideology thus served from the first to disorganize the working-class opposition to capital.

It was because of this ideological service for the prevailing interests that, as Schumpeter said, “the teaching of Malthus' *Essay* became firmly entrenched in the system of economic orthodoxy of the time in spite of the fact that it should have been, and in a sense was, recognized as fundamentally untenable or worthless by 1803 and that further

reasons for so considering it were speedily forthcoming." With the acknowledgement of moral restraint as a factor Malthus did not so much improve his theory, as Schumpeter further noted, as carry out an "orderly retreat with the artillery lost."

More and more it was recognized that, as Marx stated, "overpopulation is...a historically determined relation, in no way determined by abstract numbers or by the absolute limit of the productivity of the necessities of life, but by the limits posited rather by *specific conditions of production*.... How small do the numbers which meant overpopulation for the Athenians appear to us!" For Marx, it was "the historic laws of the movement of population, which are indeed the history of the nature of humanity, the *natural* laws, but natural laws of humanity only at a specific historic development" which were relevant. In contrast, "Malthusian man, abstracted from historically determined man, exists only in his brain." As Paul Burkett has shown, Marx's own political-economic analysis was to point to an inverse relation between workers' wages and living conditions, on the one hand, and population growth, on the other—underscoring the kinds of relations that are now associated with demographic transition theory.

Social Darwinism

But while Malthus' doctrine became increasingly insupportable on rational and empirical grounds, it received an added boost in 1859 as a result of the publication of Darwin's *Origin of the Species by Means of Natural Selection*. In chapter three of his book, entitled "The Struggle for Existence," Darwin wrote,

A struggle for existence inevitably follows from the high rate at which all organic beings tend to increase. Every being which during its natural lifetime produces several eggs or seeds, must suffer destruction during some period of its life, and during some season or occasional year, otherwise, on the principle of geometrical increase, its numbers would quickly become so inordinately great that no country could support the product. Hence, as more individuals are produced than can possibly survive, there must in every case be a struggle for existence, either one individual with another of the same species, or with the individuals of distinct species, or with the physical conditions of life. It is the doctrine of Malthus applied with manifold force to the whole animal and vegetable kingdoms; for in this case there can be no artificial increase of food, and no prudential restraint from marriage.

Shortly after returning from his memorable five-year voyage on the HMS Beagle, Darwin, in 1837, had opened up his first notebook on what was then called the "transmutation of species." In October 1838, as he later recounted in his *Autobiography*,

I happened to read for amusement Malthus on *Population*, and being well prepared to appreciate the struggle for existence which everywhere goes on from long-continued observation of the habits of animals and plants, it at once struck me that under these circumstances favourable variations would tend to be preserved, and unfavourable ones to be destroyed. The result of this would be the formation of new species. Here, then, I had at last got a theory by which to work.

Darwin's claim to have derived inspiration from Malthus' *Essay on Population* in developing the crucial notion of the "struggle for existence," which was to underlie his theory of natural selection, was not missed by contemporary social theorists. For Marx it was significant that Darwin had himself (unknowingly) refuted Malthus by means of natural history. Thus in *Theories of Surplus Value* Marx wrote: "In his splendid work, Darwin did not realise that by discovering the 'geometrical' progression in the animal and plant kingdom, he *overthrew* Malthus's theory. Malthus's theory is based on the fact that he set Wallace's geometrical progression of man against the chimerical 'arithmetical' progression of animals and plants." A year later Marx wrote in a letter to Engels:

As regards Darwin, whom I have looked at again, it amuses me that he says he applies the "Malthusian" theory *also* to plants and animals, as if Malthus's whole point did not consist in the fact that his theory is applied *not* to plants and animals but only to human beings—in geometrical progression—as opposed to plants and animals. It is remarkable that Darwin recognises among brutes and plants his English society with its division of labour, competition, opening up of new markets, "inventions" and Malthusian "struggle for existence." It is Hobbes' *bellum omnium contra omnes*.

Marx himself did not dispute the general accuracy of Darwin's theory of natural selection, but clearly relished the irony of Darwin's discovery of bourgeois society "among brutes and plants." What was illegitimate from a Marxist standpoint was the attempt, as Engels wrote in the *Dialectics of Nature*, "to transfer these theories back again from natural history to the history of society...as eternal natural laws of society."

This, however, is exactly what happened with the advent of the broad group of eclectic "theories" that we commonly classify as "social Darwinist"—but which had little in fact to do with Darwinism. These theories drew directly on Malthus, Harriet Martineau, Herbert Spencer, and various nineteenth-century racist thinkers (whose views were anathemas to Darwinism properly understood). In the United States the leading academic social Darwinist was William Graham Sumner who argued that, "The millionaires are a product of natural selection." This was simply Malthus, refurbished with the help of the Darwinian-Spencerian lexicon, and used to justify race and class inequality. Needless to say, this view was extremely attractive to the likes of such robber barons as John D. Rockefeller, James J. Hill and Andrew Carnegie. Rockefeller told a Sunday school class that "the growth of a large business is merely a survival of the fittest...merely the working out of a law of nature and a law of God." Internationally social Darwinism was used to justify the imperialist policy of mass violence and annihilation succinctly summed by Kurtz in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*—"exterminate all the brutes."

This general type of outlook is still prevalent within mainstream ideology, evident in the work of such influential establishment defenders as sociologist Charles Murray, author of the influential Reaganite tract, *Losing Ground* (a Malthusian-style attack on the welfare state), and coauthor (together with Richard Herrnstein) of the no less influential work *The Bell Curve* (a pseudoscientific, racist attempt to resurrect the old idea of a racial hierarchy

in mental capacity—in order to attack affirmative action programs). What Marx called the “fundamental meanness” of Malthus’ doctrine has thus been carried forward into the present, and given a more racial overtone.

Neo-Malthusianism

But it is in the wider realm of ecological theory—linked to a strategy of international domination—that Malthus has his greatest and most direct impact today. In the late 1940s Malthus’ long-dormant population theory was resurrected as part of new hegemonic ideology of imperial control—central to both the Cold War and the Green Revolution. A key role here was played by the wealthy Osborn family in the United States. Henry Fairfield Osborn of the American Museum of Natural History was one of the leading proponents of scientific racism and eugenics in the United States in the early part of the century. His nephew, financier Frederick Osborn, subsidized the International Congress on Eugenics (when his uncle was president), and was a key figure in the development of modern demographic policy, in conjunction with his wealthy colleagues in the Rockefeller Foundation and Milbank Fund. By the late 1940s open advocacy of racist views and eugenics lost much of its respectability as a result of the Holocaust. Nevertheless the general outlook persisted in more circumspect form, and was given renewed respectability by the likes of Henry Fairfield Osborn’s son, Henry Fairfield Osborn Jr., who wrote under the name of Fairfield Osborn, and who authored the best-selling ecological study *Our Plundered Planet* (1948). Fairfield Osborn rejected the explicit scientific racism of his father, turning instead directly to Malthus (with his more innocuous attacks on the poor and overpopulating masses). “Shades of Dr. Malthus! He was not so far wrong,” Osborn wrote in neo-Malthusian rather than classical Malthusian terms, “when he postulated that the increase in population tends to exceed the ability of the earth to support it.” Fairfield Osborn’s close associate, William Vogt, head of the Conservation Section of the Pan American Union, and author of the neo-Malthusian tract *The Road to Survival* (1948), was more explicit. Vogt argued that “one of the greatest national assets of Chile, perhaps the greatest asset, is its high death rate.” And in an infamous passage entitled “The Dangerous Doctor” he declared:

The modern medical profession, still framing its ethics on the dubious statements of an ignorant man [Hippocrates] who lived more than two thousand years ago...continues to believe it has a duty to keep alive as many people as possible. In many parts of the world doctors apply their intelligence to one aspect of man’s welfare—survival—and deny their moral right to apply it to the problem as a whole. Through medical care and improved sanitation they are responsible for more millions living more years in increasing misery. Their refusal to consider their responsibility in these matters does not seem to them to compromise their intellectual integrity.... They set the stage for disaster; then, like Pilate, they wash their hands of the consequences.

Through the Rockefeller Foundation and later the Ford Foundation, as Eric Ross has explained, neo-Malthusianism was integrated into U.S. policy, first in response to the Chinese revolution, and then as part of a more deliberate policy of counterrevolution in

the countryside (a new period of primitive accumulation) under the rubric of the Green revolution. In 1948, Princeton's neo-Malthusian ideologue Frank Notestein, who had been patronized by Frederick Osborn, was sent to China (where the Rockefeller family had extensive business interests) on behalf of the Rockefeller Foundation. He reported back that overpopulation was the chief reason for the revolution, which could be combated more effectively through contraception than land reform. It was quickly recognized, however, that a more drastic approach was needed. And during the years that Robert McNamara was president of the World Bank, the Rockefeller Foundation and the Ford Foundation launched the Green Revolution, the commercialization of land in the third world using the model of U.S. agribusiness—a ruthless form of “land reform” (i.e., land expropriation) which was legitimated by reference to Malthusian population tendencies.

By the late 1960s, with the development of the ecological movement, this emphasis on overpopulation came to be the main explanation for not only hunger in the third world, but all ecological problems (in a manner prefigured by Osborn and Vogt). Paul Ehrlich, the author of the best selling *Population Bomb* (1968), was to credit Vogt as the initial source for his interest in the population issue. The eugenicist Garrett Hardin, who became renowned within contemporary environmentalism for his article “The Tragedy of the Commons” and for his advocacy of “Lifeboat Ethics,” penned a piece “To Malthus” in 1969 in which he wrote,

Malthus! Thou shouldst be living in this hour:
The world hath need for thee: getting and
begetting,
We soil fair Nature's bounty

This resurrection of Malthus as an ecologist was an attempt to give ecology a conservative, pro-capitalist rather than revolutionary character, and required that Malthus' actual argument be ignored. This was the same Malthus who had made a point of emphasizing that his argument did not have to do with the eventual overstocking of the earth with inhabitants but rather with the *constant* pressure of population on food supply (true throughout history); who had avoided the term “overpopulation” which made no sense within his strict equilibrium model; who was adamantly opposed to the use of contraceptives; who was the principal advocate within classical economics of the idea that the earth or soil was a “gift of nature to man” who in contrast to James Anderson in his own day had made no mention of the degradation of the soil; who subscribed to the view (enunciated by David Ricardo) that the powers of the soil were “indestructible” and who said that the peasantry should be “swept from the soil.” In spite (or in ignorance) of all of this Malthus was gradually converted, in neo-Malthusian thought, into an “ecological” thinker—the fountainhead of all wisdom in relation to the earth.

Malthus, we are frequently told, emphasized the scarcity of resources on earth and the limitations of human carrying capacity throughout his argument. Yet this flies in the face of the arguments of the real Malthus who wrote in his *Essay on Population* that “raw materials” in contrast to food “are in great plenty” and “a demand...will not fail to create

them in as great a quantity as they are wanted." Malthus, in contrast to Marx, had failed to take note of Lucretius' materialist maxim "*nil posse creari de nihilo*," out of nothing, nothing can be created. Nor did Malthus escape the pre-Darwinian notion that the capacity of organic life to change and "improve" was extremely limited. As Loren Eiseley observed: "It is perhaps worth noting, since the biological observations of Malthus are little commented upon, that he recognized like so many others, the effects of selective breeding in altering the appearance of plants and animals, but regarded such alterations of form as occurring within admittedly ill-defined limits."

There can be little doubt that the real aim of this neo-Malthusian resurrection of Malthus, then, was to resurrect what was after all the chief thrust of the Malthusian ideology from the outset: that all of the crucial problems of bourgeois society and indeed of the world could be traced to overprocreation on the part of the poor, and that attempts to aid the poor directly would, given their innate tendency to vice and misery, only make things worse. As Hardin put it in his essay, "Lifeboat Ethics: The Case Against Helping the Poor," any attempt to open up international granaries to the world population or to relax immigration restrictions in the rich countries would only create a situation where: "The less provident and less able will multiply at the expense of the abler and more provident, bringing eventual ruin upon all who share in the commons." Charity for the poor would not help the poor, he argued, but would only hurt the rich.

For neo-Malthusians of this sort, like Malthus before them, the future improvement of society was therefore impossible, except in the form of the accumulation of wealth among the well-to-do. Malthus—himself an eighteenth-century Parson—would have fully understood the Vicar of Wakefield's observation that, "the very laws of a country may contribute to the accumulation of wealth; as when those natural ties that bind the rich and poor together are divided." But he would have disagreed with the Vicar's (i.e., Goldsmith's) anti-acquisitive and paternalistic philosophy, believing instead that the rich and poor are naturally opposed, and that the rich ought to concern themselves simply with their own aggrandizement. Over the last 200 years Malthusianism has thus always served the interests of those who represented the most barbaric tendencies within bourgeois society.

All of this is not to deny that there are radical, even revolutionary ecologists who have drawn inspiration from Malthus (though in this respect they are well-deceived). Nor is it to deny that population growth is one of the most serious problems of the contemporary age. But demographic change cannot be treated in natural law terms but only in relation to changing historical conditions. The demographic transition theory, which emphasizes the way in which population growth depends on economic and social well-being, is therefore a more reliable guide to these issues than Malthusianism. Even famines cannot be explained in terms of a shortage of food in relation to population, as Amartya Sen has definitively demonstrated, but in each and every case arises as a result of differential "entitlement" emanating from the nature of the capitalist market economy. Where threats to the integrity of the biosphere as we know it are concerned, it is well to remember that it is not the areas of the world that have the highest rate of population

growth but the areas of the world that have the highest accumulation of capital, and where economic and ecological waste has become a way of life, that constitute the greatest danger.

The Necessity of Malthus

As Marx wrote, “The hatred of the English working class for Malthus—the ‘mountebank-parson,’ as Cobbett *rudely* called him...—was thus fully justified and the people’s instinct was correct here, in that they felt that he was no *man of science*, but a *bought advocate* of their opponents, a shameless sycophant of the ruling classes.” Although Marx has been criticized for the intemperance of his remarks with respect to Malthus, a close examination of both Malthus’ ideas and the subsequent development of Malthusianism in both its social Darwinist and neo-Malthusian phases can hardly produce any other conclusion. (It is no doubt for this reason that supporters of Malthus rarely examine his ideas closely—at least in public). Malthus represents the class morality (and the race and gender morality) of the capitalist system and in this sense Malthusianism is a historic necessity of capitalism. To censure Malthus, then, is not enough; it is also necessary to censure the system which brought him into being and which, through its own actions, perpetuates his memory.

Notes

Most citations contained in the original text of this article have been removed. For a complete set of notes please contact Vicki Larson at *Monthly Review*.

1. Ted Benton, “Marxism and Natural Limits,” *New Left Review*, no. 178 (November-December 1989), pp. 58-59, 82. In referring to Malthus as an “epistemic conservative” Benton accepts at his word Malthus’ early rhetorical claim that he found the utopian visions of society offered by Condorcet and Godwin attractive, but was forced to reject them as incompatible with the human condition on earth (a rhetorical device common in Malthus’ time). Given the nature of Malthus’ class alliances and the character of his work as a whole it is clear that Malthus was being disingenuous here. He was an early ideologue of capitalism, not a disappointed representative of revolutionary Enlightenment thinking. For a critique of Benton see Paul Burkett, “A Critique of Neo-Malthusian Marxism: Society, Nature and Population,” *Historical Materialism*, no. 2 (Summer 1998), pp. 118-42. For a reply to the charge of Prometheanism see John Bellamy Foster, “Marx and the Environment,” in Ellen Meiksins Wood and John Bellamy Foster, ed., *In Defense of History* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1997), pp. 149-62.
2. Malthus was very consistent in avoiding references to the overpopulation of the earth in the modern sense, even correcting those few passages in his work where he had inadvertently left the impression that human population had surpassed the means of subsistence, changing this to “easy means of subsistence.” See Edwin Cannan, *A History of Theories of Production and Distribution in English Political Economy from 1776 to 1848* (New York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1917), p. 108.

3. See Sven Lindqvist, *Exterminate All the Brutes* (New York: The New Press, 1996).
 4. Eric B. Ross, "Malthusianism, Counter-revolution and the Green Revolution," *Organization & Environment*, vol. 12, no. 1 (December 1998), pp. 446-450.
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