

Malthus As Anti-Utopian

by Paul Gottfried

The two-hundredth anniversary of the publication of *An Essay on the Principle of Population* has brought forth reactions to Thomas Robert Malthus quite different from those of his own day. For someone long remembered as the somber parson who crossed swords with Enlightenment optimists, William Godwin and Marie-Jean Condorcet, Malthus in recent decades has been turned surprisingly into a voice for social planning. His admonitions about population exceeding natural resources have been recycled by zero-population-growth advocates and by those who wish to control human reproduction and ecological waste.

Malthus, meanwhile, has encountered the sneering hostility of those now described as conservatives. Today it is indicative of being against the Left, as witnessed by editorials in the *Wall Street Journal* and *Weekly Standard*, that one should downplay environmental contamination, favor open borders for the U.S. and Europe, and insist that world population will taper off between now and the middle of the next century. While there is nothing intrinsically conservative about any of these positions, they do serve as litmus tests when being “for large corporations” is one of the few allowable positions by which those on the Right can differentiate themselves. And though Malthus himself favored a free market economy and international free trade, neo-Malthusians typically do not. To whatever extent these are imagined to represent Malthus’ views, their supposed inspiration has not fared well among the proponents of expanding markets and limitless technological growth.

In a deeper sense, however, it was Malthus who expressed “conservative” views based on his

notion of an unchanging human nature. Note that Malthus’ *Essay*, as indicated by its subtitle, was intended to refute the predictions offered in the 1790s by Condorcet and Godwin about the “future improvement of society.” Unlike Godwin, who believed that the advance of mass education would diminish human sexual appetites, Malthus saw no reason to believe that the “vices and moral weakness of man could be eradicated.” Humans would continue to multiply on the basis of impulse and temporary material advantage, and the principle of population would remain subject to natural forces more than to human reasoning.

Malthus challenges Godwin’s opinion that “the greater part of vices and weaknesses proceed from the injustice of their political and social institutions and that if these were removed and the understandings of men were more enlightened, there would be little or no temptation in the world to evil.” While Malthus plainly does not deny that some can be taught, however laboriously, to show constraint and benevolence, he nonetheless accepts as a working generality his own restatement of the doctrine of Original Sin: that “the greater part of mankind, from the fixed and unalterable laws of nature,” must ever be subject to the evil temptations arising from want, besides other passions.”

“Want,” as used here, is not the result of absolute material privation. Otherwise Malthus would have to accept the happy future evoked by the Marquis de Condorcet, as that historical optimist awaited execution in prison under the revolution in France that he himself had encouraged. Condorcet imagined that the science of society combined with technological development would end human evil as well as material want. For Malthus, such an outcome was highly doubtful, inasmuch as “want” was related to a basic human condition. No matter how riches increased, humans would perceive themselves in relative want but, given the opportunity, would also continue to illustrate “the perpetual tendency in the race of man to increase beyond the means of subsistence.” In what seems a prediction of modern underclass behavior, though one extended to the “greater part of mankind,” Malthus assumes that humans place themselves in want while simul-

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taneously hungering for material acquisitions. Here one is reminded of Thomas Hobbes's definition of "felicity" in *Leviathan* as the "continued progress of desire from one object to another, the attaining of the former, being still but the way to the latter."

Despite his stated pessimism about human nature, Malthus does allow for the possibility of "limited" human improvement. On the material level, Malthus hoped that by "rendering productive" uncultivated farm lands, wealth would be "employed beneficially," particularly for "the lower order." Unlike the manufactures of industries, which he thought in the 1790s had not produced "a proportional increase in the funds for the maintenance of labor," Malthus thought that the agricultural revolution of his country would provide the key to general economic growth. Though wrong about long-range trends, Malthus may have gathered what were plausible impressions about the early seamy stages of the Industrial Revolution.

More significantly, he thought that human life was a formative experience, in which even "the partial pain that is inflicted by the Supreme Creator" was "as dust in the balance in comparison of the happiness which comes from the process by which the Supreme Being forms matter into mind" and by which we exert ourselves to remove "evil," which "exists in the world not to create despair but activity." Such moralizing, which runs through the *Essay* and is featured with particular prominence in the last two paragraphs, is not, however, a hymn to collective human improvement. It is targeted at individuals and families whom Malthus hopes to reach with his ideas about the "population principle," though it is also assumed that there are at least enough people endowed with enough natural grace and reasoning power to make the homily worthwhile. Also, Malthus clearly believed that "the sorrows of life are necessary to soften and humanize the heart." Adversity, he asserts, leads to better character for those who overcome it and for those who develop "social sympathy" as a result of witnessing suffering.

Finally, as a critic of various doctrines about

social and human improvement, Malthus makes a useful distinction between "unlimited improvement" and specific improvements within limits. While the "former is not applicable to man under the present laws of his nature," the latter is and is sometimes achieved. Thus it may be possible to increase foodstuff by more effective cultivation of the land or to decrease vice in some quarters by impressing upon those who are receptive higher moral practices. Malthus also scolds Godwin for seeking to inflict unnecessary suffering on the poor by denying them the market value of their labor. By positing a

visionary goal of a society of self-sufficient yeomen, according to Malthus, Godwin was led to believe that one could dispense entirely with a class of laborers. But, as Malthus points out, there was no feasible way that one could achieve the Godwinian utopia by following Godwin's advice, one took away the value of "the only property of the class of laborers," their saleable labor.

But while Malthus believed that some measures could be applied to relieving the "present great inequality of property" which he found neither "necessary nor useful," he doubted that "government could with advantage to society actually interfere to repress inequality of fortunes." Almost all political measures designed for this end would abet the vices they were intended to remove; and if carried to the extreme, would result in the tyranny that some of Malthus' acquaintances had mistaken for a birth of freedom. Like others of his generation, Malthus was stunned by the terror and brutality unleashed by the French Revolution. Some of the most forceful passages in the *Essay* are directed at that experiment then unfolding across the Channel. Like a "richer mould" that someone "would employ to increase the size of his plant" but that would "burst the calyx and destroy at once its symmetry," the "forcing manure used to bring about the French Revolution" had resulted in huge destruction. It had "burst the calyx of humanity, the restraining bond of all society" and had turned the body social into a "loose, deformed, disjointed mass."

Malthus' belief in a radically imperfect human nature and his revulsion for social experiment would

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have left him uncomfortable with his modern admirers and modern detractors alike. Characteristic of both groups is the hope of transforming human nature through either a techno-economic explosion accompanied by an American democratizing mission or massive political supervision aimed at controlling human reproductive activity and the use of the environment. It is doubtful that Malthus would have sympathized with either transformational enterprise, whether the world's population will rise to 7.7 or 9.4 billion fifty years hence.

In any case, the demographic-cultural problem facing Western countries at this point is not overpopulation from indigenous peoples but a form of collective suicide. Italians, Frenchmen, Germans, and most other Europeans have negative birthrates and if not for immigration, mostly from the Third World, would be losing population. Most U.S. population growth since the Immigration Act of 1965 has come from the same source, and given further immigration reform in the 1990s and the tendency among professional couples toward ever smaller families, this trend will likely continue. At the same time, the rise of multiculturalism, of a specifically non-Eurocentric and often anti-Western expansive pluralism as a public and educational ideology, has worked in most Western societies against the maintenance or restoration of a core culture. Whatever possibility may exist for absorbing non-Western immigrants into a cultural mainstream is greatly diminished when the host population rejects its own heritage.

What does remain relevant for our society about Malthus' *Essay* is his critique of hubris. In this respect those on the "Right," like anti-Malthusians Ben Wattenberg and the late Julian Simon, who blithely identify increased population with an expanded store of human intelligence and see no practical limit to environmental exploitation, are correct to dislike the Malthusian mind set. Malthus preached the need for self-imposed limits in our material lives — for moral reasons and not only because of the insufficiency of foodstuff to feed an overabundant population. But defenders of Malthus, like Robert L. Heilbroner, John Avery, and Paul Ehrlich, who invoke Malthus in support of global social planning, are questionable Malthusians. The stringent governmental controls they advocate

would not have pleased Malthus, who believed neither in the usefulness nor in the morality of political actions proposed in his own time to ameliorate poverty. Given Malthus' stated opposition to strenuous governmental solutions to the pollution problem, it is erroneous to treat him as the progenitor of today's socialist planners. Nor is it likely that someone who raged against the French Revolution would now welcome a global collectivist state established to intervene in all vital human relations.

The world to which Malthus belonged and that he addressed in his writing and teaching was a middle-class society inured to Protestant morality. It was not the post-Christian, post-bourgeois world out of which social planning that calls itself neo-Malthusian has emerged. Malthus' disqualified admirers do him no service by conferring on him an identity and a worldview that belong to their culture, not his. Though he saw birth control as an alternative to the "misery" caused by overpopulation, Malthus characteristically referred to contraception as "vice." In the second edition of his work in 1803, self-restraint was brought up as further (in this case pro-Victorian) check on excessive population growth.

It has been noted that in *Principles of Political Economy* (1820) Malthus amended his warnings about political intervention in economic affairs to advocate public works and the production and consumption of luxury goods during times of acute depression. But it was clearly palliatives, as he himself explained, that he was suggesting in order to avert the dire effects of mass poverty. The attempt by John Maynard Keynes in the thirties to claim Malthus for his own pump-priming approach to government economic policy, using passages from *Principles of Political Economy*, should not be given excessive importance. Keynes, in a biographical study, presented the later Malthus as a *forerunner* of his economic theory but never tried to decontextualize his subject. Only since mid-century has the effort been made to attach to this self-conscious anti-utopian global engineering projects he never intended — and in all likelihood would never have countenanced.