

The Rev. T. R. Malthus

The man, the myth, and what he really said

by Jack Parsons

[By the early 1970s, Jack Parsons had become very concerned about widespread ignorance and gross misrepresentation of Malthus' works, frequently reinforced by vilification — from both Right and Left — of that author as a person. In an attempt to kickstart a process of rehabilitation of the man and his writings, in 1977 Parsons wrote a pair of articles for *People*, then the house-organ of the International Planned Parenthood Federation. With only minor changes, and acknowledgments to the IPPF, these are here reprinted as a single article: "Malthus: the Man Behind the Myth," *People*, Vol. 4, No.3, pp.23-24 and "What Malthus Really Said," *People*, Vol.4, No.4, pp.29-30.]

Why are people still denouncing Malthus after nearly two centuries? No one attacks the phlogiston theory any more, Bergson's life-force, or scores of other old theories, yet practically the whole of an issue of Europe's *Regional Information Bulletin* was devoted to a two-fold attack on Malthus. Bonar says of him, "He was the 'best-abused man of the age...' and this might still be true: could it be that there is life in the old dog yet?"

Of course most of the diatribes are nominally directed at Malthus' population theory — or what is *imagined* to have been his theory (hardly anyone troubles to read what he actually wrote) but in fact the arguments are often *ad hominem*, the author is made to appear such a monster of depravity that every word emanating from his pen must be tainted with a poison more deadly than the curare on the primitive tribesman's arrowhead.

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Whatever the merits and demerits of his population and other theories (he wrote widely and on many topics) he was, according to his contemporaries, friend and enemy alike, someone with many endearing and indeed noble qualities of mind and character. Far from being the ruthless apologist for capitalist exploitation, the "...apostle of private property..." as Petric called him in the *IPPF Bulletin*, he was a "dangerous" liberal with radical views on many social topics. Let us take a brief look at some of the human dimensions of this controversial figure.

As a Child...

He was born on February 14, 1766, at the family house, "The Rookery," between Dorking and Guildford. His father, Daniel Malthus, was a very unusual and distinguished man, an optimist, reformer and author, a friend and ally of the radical French intellectual, Jean Jacques Rousseau, and the Scottish philosopher David Hume. Robert suffered from a hare lip and cleft palate and so had a marked speech impediment but in maturity his voice was said to be pleasing to the ear.

His childhood seems to have been extremely full and happy, the father devoting much time and energy to the education and individual development of his children in accordance with the liberal theories expressed in Rousseau's *Emile*.

Malthus went away to school from 1776 to 1782 where he was a pupil, one of about 40, of Robert Graves, the Rector of Claverton, near Bath, who affectionately called his brilliant pupil "Don Roberto" (his family nickname later became institutionalized as "Old Pop"). After school and before going up to Cambridge, he was coached for a time by a Unitarian minister who either instilled into him or fostered an already strong religious sense. Professor Empson later said of him in this connection: "...he was a clergyman, ...conscientious, pure, and pious. We never knew one ... so entirely free from the vices of his caste." (James, p.14).

As a Family Man

His population theory called for maturity and

economic viability before marriage and he certainly practiced what he preached, postponing his own wedding to Harriet Eckersall until he was 38. Malthus believed that love and the sexual drive were among man's highest gifts: (Again a central part of his population theory.)

After the desire for food, the most powerful and general of our desires is the passion between the sexes... Of the happiness spread over life by this ... very few are unconscious. Virtuous love ... seems to be ... the most powerfully calculated to awaken the sympathies of the soul and produce the most exquisite gratifications. Perhaps there is scarcely a man, who has once experienced virtuous love ... who does not look back to that period as the sunny spot in his whole life... (Fogarty, 2, p.154).

Again he seems to have practiced what he

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preached and by all accounts he was a very happy, devoted and tender husband and father. They had three children, one son, Henry, born prematurely only 10 months after they were married, and two daughters, Emily, born in 1806, and Lucy, in 1808, who died after a “rapid decline” at the age of 17. The slander that while preaching restraint he had 11 children himself is repeated even in the Fogarty edition of the second *Essay*, published in 1958.

As an Adult...

Perhaps the best source of material on Malthus the man is his travel diaries, not intended for any reader other than himself. They were laid aside after use, lost, and not published until 1966 after their recent rediscovery. Some are still missing but those extant show that he was interested in everything and everybody. Leaving aside his population observations and economic statistics the following few brief extracts are typical of the author's style and character.

In Hamburg: “The little girl who shew'd us the church had a very pretty face, and a most pleasing countenance, particularly when she said in her German, I don't understand you.” (P.35).

In Holstein: “We were particularly struck by the neat and cleanly appearance of the peasantry and the goodness of the houses (and) there is the most perfect freedom of opinion...”

In Sweden: “Went into some saw mills, and were pleased with the simplicity of the machinery...” (p.76).

In Norway: “At dinner (in Christiana) I sat by a Mrs. Skilstrop who had been married only ten days to a young physician.... She had a most elegant person and a very pretty face, and something so particularly naive and pleasing in her manner that before the evening was over both Otter and myself were half in love with her.” (P.108).

The diaries were crammed with similar observations about all manner of subjects but clearly what interests him most is the state of the people.

The testimony of all who knew him bears out the self-portrait he unwittingly gave in the diaries. According to Bishop Otter he had a great “...taste for humor ... and a sense of infinite delight and pleasantry to his companions ... (which) ... often set the table in a roar...” (James, p.3).

He was fond of food and wine, in strict moderation, enjoyed music and the theater, both straight and comic, and he had a go at popular dancing on social occasions, although he thought that he “...made but a poor figure at the Walse.” (James, p.108). He enjoyed a day's shooting occasionally but seems to have liked it more for the fact that it brought him close to nature rather than for the thrill of the chase. He loved the countryside and waxed lyrical over the beauty of meadow and mountain, river and lake, and, not least, his garden at Haileybury:

...This house is in a cluster of tall shrubs and young trees, with a ... smooth lawn sloping to a bright pond, in which old willows are dipping their hair, and rows of young pear trees admiring their blooming faces....
(Bonar, p.420).

In more serious vein, Francis Jeffrey, lawyer, MP and man of letters — now chiefly remembered

as the founder of the *Edinburgh Review* — wrote to him:

God bless you, my dear Malthus. I have long been accustomed to quote you as the very best example I know of a wise and happy man.

His young colleague at Haileybury, Professor William Empson, said of him:

...as for hating, Mr. Malthus could hate nobody — which, considering the strength of his feelings, ... and the provocations ... he was perpetually receiving, was almost as wonderful a circumstance, as that anybody could be found capable of hating him. (James, p.13).

What is so remarkable about Malthus is that many of his strongest opponents also recognized his personal qualities, possibly something unique in the history of intellectual controversy. Both Marx and Engels spoke well of him on occasion, and the leader of the opposing school of thought, William Godwin, said of him:

...he has labored to excite neither hatred nor contempt against me or my tenets; he has argued the questions between us. For myself, I cannot refuse to take some pride in so far as by my writings I furnished an incentive to the producing (of) so valuable a treatise! (Bonar, p.359).

As a Radical...

Most people interested in ideas have spent so much time and energy denouncing Malthus' alleged population theory that they have not even noticed his social radicalism. Here are a few brief examples.

As an ordained clergyman he accepted, more than half a century before Darwin, that man is a member of the animal kingdom, subject to its basic laws, and rejected the Christian belief in eternal punishment for sinners in Hell. He accused the upper classes and the government of cheating the

masses out of their liberty and strongly advocated civil liberty for all, and the political liberty to make it possible. He favored social mobility and social and economic institutions which would compel the middle and upper classes to respect the workers.

He detested feudalism and advocated breaking up the large estates and subsidizing rural development. He believed in cash allowances for the parents of large families, and — perhaps most fervently of all — in universal education.

He felt so strongly about education that he even departed from his otherwise invariably courteous and scholarly approach; more than a life span before the introduction of universal primary education in Britain he ridiculed the reactionaries who argued that educating the masses — even letting them learn to read — would make them liable to be led astray by radicals.

The arguments ... against instructing the people appear to me not only illiberal, but to the last degree feeble... (Fogarty, 2, pp.212-3).

Could these be the writings of the Malthus you have come to know?

What Malthus Really Said

The “Malthusian” population theory which most of his opponents seem to believe in goes something like this: because it is a law of nature that there must always be more people than food, it is morally wrong as well as impractical to waste scarce resources trying to improve the life of the masses whose natural lot is poverty, hunger and misery. Therefore, in this jungle of squalor and violence, society must be organized to protect the interests of the rich and

powerful.

Even if that were what Malthus had in mind, commentators still would not be justified in subjecting the author to personal abuse. The most effective way of dealing with it — as with any unscientific and immoral theory such as Hitler's ideas on race — would be a cool, factual and systematic exposure of its basis, implications and

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values.

Malthus' "Total Population Theory" was far more complex than the simple man-food equation for which he is so often given credit — or discredit. He believed that man is subject to natural physical and ecological laws and cannot escape their consequences; that man is gifted with intelligence and foresight so that he can understand the workings of nature, and if he chooses, circumvent possible problems.

All living things have a *capacity* to expand their numbers at an enormous rate, much greater than can find expression in most circumstances. They also have a *tendency* to expand at a rapid rate in most, but not all cases, so as to fill up every ecological niche.

It was these last two points which are the source of the Malthusian myth: the perennial conquest of the feeble arithmetic progression of food production by the rampant geometric progression of population growth. Malthus pointed out that his use of this method was little more than a mathematician's gimmick to illustrate a point and he was quite explicit that the principle of population did not mean that large numbers had to remain at starvation level.

He made clear that the ultimate limitation of human numbers by limits of food production did not necessarily mean a present limitation:

A man who ... is locked up in a room may fairly be said to be confined by the walls ... though he may never touch them.

All living things, he argued, are subject to checks on their growth in numbers, "positive" checks acting on the death rate — such as lack of food or space, violence and disease — and "preventive" checks acting on the birth rate. In the case of the lower animals, the preventive checks are the result of instinct and accident, whereas in the case of man they are intentional.

Subject to natural laws, the happiness and welfare of mankind are produced entirely by the quality of morality and social organization, particularly of government. One of the main social mechanisms in the regulation of population is the demand for labor, with the inevitable lags and tendencies to oscillation, a view barely distinguishable from that of Karl Marx. The main

aim of society is to raise living standards and increase happiness by means of a thriving agricultural and industrial system regulated by a just and democratic government.

Possibly, to an anti-Malthusian, the most surprising things about Malthus are his strong opposition to any policy of population control, and secondly, his pro-natalism, for he put forward the view, later taken up by Marx and Engels, that the world was severely underpopulated. On the first count he was not only against any social policy of

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population control but also opposed individual contraceptive methods of birth control. A deeply religious man, he put his faith in moral restraint and voluntary choice for late marriage.

In this sense one of the most advanced socialist societies in the present world, the People's Republic of China, is neo-Malthusian in both thought and deed (though not yet in word) insofar as it emphasizes both late marriage and moral restraints in regard to extra-marital sex.

Malthus' opposition to compulsion was absolute. In the second edition of the *Essay on the Principle of Population*, he wrote

If any person chooses to marry (even) without being able to maintain a family, he ought to have the most perfect liberty to do so.... I am most decidedly of the opinion that any positive law to limit the age of marriage would be both unjust and immoral....

On the second count, he was in favor of populations growing as fast as possible, consistent with the capacity of the environment and the economic system to support them.

The countries which unite great landed resources with a prosperous state of commerce and manufactures, and in which the commercial part of the population never essentially exceeds the agricultural part, are eminently secure from sudden reverses ... and there is no reason to say that they might not go on increasing in riches and population for hundreds, nay almost thousands of years

he wrote, adding for emphasis

an increase in population, when it follows in its natural order, is both a great positive good in itself, and absolutely necessary to a further increase in the annual produce of the land and labor of any country. [There is nothing] ... more desirable than the most rapid increase of population, unaccompanied by vice and misery ... there is not a truer criterion of happiness and innocence of people than the rapidity of their increase.

In essence, Malthus' view was that there are limits to all physical processes — including population growth, distribution and movement — which no type of social system or morality can circumvent, but that within these parameters *the possibilities for individual welfare and happiness are entirely under social control.*

Malthus' own index of socio-economic development, which reflects the quality of social control, was life-expectancy:

A decrease of mortality at all ages is what we ought to chiefly aim at ... as the best criterion of happiness and good government. Instead of the (number) of births ... the usual mode of judging, I have proposed the smallness of the proportion dying under the age of puberty.

Malthus has been described as “the apostle of private property” and it is true that the thought that at the level of evolution and socio-economic development prevailing in his day, private ownership and enterprise offered the best chance of producing wealth, but it is a far cry from this to the position of black reaction sometimes attributed to him. He thought, in fact, that private ownership of the means of production meant that output would always fall short of potential.

Malthus thought a man's labor his most sacred property, and that it would be a “violation” to

interfere with his command over it. He also believed that the existing distribution of property and wealth was unjustified and inefficient. He regarded laws and customs which perpetuated unequal distribution of land, as in feudal Europe, for example, as serious impediments to his two main criteria for a healthy society: a large population and a situation in which “poverty and dependence are ... but little known.”

Malthus supported not only a great and continuous increase in wealth and productivity, but also a much more equitable distribution. “It is the diffusion of luxury ... among the mass of the people ... that seems to be the most advantageous ... with regard to national wealth and happiness,” he wrote.

John Maynard Keynes wrote toward the end of his long and distinguished career: “If only Malthus, instead of Ricardo, had been the parent stem from which nineteenth century economics proceeded, what a much wiser and richer place the world would be today.”

It is a strange paradox that after two centuries many underprivileged individuals and groups — even governments — still publicly abhor the ostensible teachings of Malthus while their countries pursue population policies going far beyond anything he could have tolerated. It was recently affirmed by the United Nations Population Fund that some 80 percent of the population of the Third World lives under governments which are actively pursuing Neo-Malthusian policies of fertility control or of fostering contraception in the knowledge that fewer births will result.

Admittedly the goal is still the same: striking a balance between population growth and social and economic development, but the methods employed and now taken for granted would surely make Malthus turn in his grave. TSC

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