

A Malthusian Perspective *Current population and environmental concerns viewed through Malthus' eyes*

Book Review by Wayne Lutton

Thomas Robert Malthus is irrevocably linked with the great dilemma he identified in his famous *Essay on Population*, namely, that the prospects for continued improvements in the general condition of mankind was always at risk because population growth could at some future date outstrip the food supply. At the time Malthus was writing, popular philosophers promoting the Enlightenment "Idea of Progress" argued that a large and growing population was a major contributor to both economic advancement and national power. Malthus rebutted the assertion that population growth was always desirable. On the contrary, Malthus cautioned, populations cannot expand forever and a limit must be reached. He feared that populations would increase until they exceeded their food supply, thus leading to a deadly population crash. His *Essay* was intended as a fair warning. As he remarked in the first sentence of his final paragraph, "Evil exists in the world, not to create despair, but activity." He hoped to spare mankind from a miserable future by encouraging restraint.

In the years since his *Essay* was first published, "Malthusian" has become a permanent part of our vocabulary. It is today most often heard in debates over population growth and by environmentalists concerned with the balance between population and exhaustible resources.

Wayne Lutton, Ph.D., is associate editor of *The Social Contract*. His most recent publications include chapters in *Human Rights—Opposing Viewpoints* (Greenhaven Press, 1998) and in *The Real American Dilemma* (New Century Books, 1998).

John Rohe, a lawyer with a long interest in environmental and population issues while living in a Northern Michigan resort community, asks if Malthus's 1798 *Essay* raised questions that should concern a late twentieth century audience. As the title of his new book, *A Bicentennial Malthusian Essay*, suggests, Rohe contends that Malthus broke new ground by drawing attention to the inter-related challenges of population theory and economics, with their associated social, ethical and moral dimensions.

To Rohe, society at large seems incapable of appreciating that population and economic growth cannot go on perpetually. Perhaps because of our biological time frame, the delayed consequences of some of our actions has led to a general indifference to limits.

After first providing a brief overview of Malthus' upbringing and identifying his key concepts,

Rohe then considers current controversies in the areas of population and economic growth. The author employs the effective device of introducing each chapter with a quotation from the *Essay on Population*, which serves as a further reminder to his readers that "Malthus speaks to us!" — that he has a still-current message which contradicts those who promote unlimited growth for its own sake. As the author puts it:

By championing the cause of economic growth, we satisfy short-term consumptive appetites, but leave a legacy of high entropy: bountiful landfills, polluted waters and toxic air. By concealing this mess from our view and by hurling it elsewhere, we suppress reality and heap dishonor upon our successors. Not all growth is necessarily harmful. Growth, however, has become a

A Bicentennial Malthusian Essay: Conservation, Population and the Indifference to Limits



By John F. Rohe
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goal in itself.

The worst of Malthus's prophecies have been postponed in the Western world. Rohe marshals evidence to support his contention that our high standard of living has been obtained only by squandering our resource capital, such as the 1.1 million acres of prime crop land paved over by urban sprawl every year (3,000 acres per day). Elsewhere in his book, the author does some back-of-the-envelope math dealing with population

growth, doubling times, and the concept of "carrying capacity" (how many people and at what level of existence can a given environment sustain).

Like Malthus, Rohe ends his own *Essay* on a note of hope. If people are able to comprehend that there are limits to growth, and will take personal and community responsibility for ensuring that resources are not exhausted, then there is no theoretical reason why future generations will be forced to exist in a new Dark Age. **TSC**