Getting Malthus Right

Book Review Essay by John Attarian

Few thinkers have been so widely — and badly — misstated and misunderstood as Thomas Robert Malthus, the Anglican parson, mathematician and economist whose 1798 *Essay on the Principle of Population* bluntly made an issue of population pressure on food supply. Malthus has been vilified as an unfeeling monster who maintained that because population always outruns its sustenance, if the poor are helped, they will simply breed until their living standard is depressed again. He is dismissed, too, as a myopic pessimist who didn't anticipate agricultural machinery, cultivation of the Great Plains, the Green Revolution, and such.

The Reverend Thomas Robert Malthus AM FRS: Demi-Devil, Saint, or Merely Great Benefactor?
by Jack Parsons
Cardiff, Wales, UK: Sir David Owen Population Centre
63 pages, $7.50

In this concise and lucid monograph, based on a lecture at Cardiff University for the bicentenary of Malthus's *Essay*, Jack Parsons, Visiting Lecturer at the University's Sir David Owen Population Center, handily dispels several Malthus myths. (Portions appeared in Parsons's essay in *The Social Contract*'s Malthus issue, Vol.VIII, No.3, Spring 1998.)

Setting him in the context of Georgian England's brutality, Parsons persuasively shows that Malthus was actually quite emancipated from the "received thinking" of his times. Far from the flintheart of caricature, he loathed slavery, opposed class favoritism in law and justice, condemned unequal property ownership, and advocated universal education. Parsons also provides a useful survey of the responses to Malthus's theory.

But it is regarding the theory itself and its continued relevance that Parsons is most valuable. The "pop" version of Malthus's population theory, already mentioned, is wildly inaccurate. In fact, Malthus wanted social improvement, and intended his theory to correct the utopianism of William Godwin, the Marquis de Condorcet, and others, who, carried away by the French Revolution, thought that human perfection was imminent. He wanted to bring them "back down to earth and get them to go in for *realistic* [Parsons's italics] measures of reform."

Fair enough. So too is Parsons's account of Malthus's assumptions: that the world is a loving God's creation; that He intends its evils to spur us to try to overcome them; that man is lazy and requires necessity to make him act; that we need food to survive; that man's greatest motive is self-interest; that "the passion between the sexes" will remain "nearly in its present state."

When Parsons addresses the theory itself, though, trouble erupts. Malthus said, he states, that food supply tends to increase arithmetically: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, etc., whereas population tends to rise geometrically: 1, 2, 4, 8, 16, etc.

> *Hence, there tends to be an ever-widening gap between populations and their food supplies. Of course there cannot really be an unduly large or permanently widening gap between the two curves since humans must have food to stay alive. The great thing is the tendency for the gap to widen, so that some set of influences must keep a balance of sorts between the two.* [Parson's emphasis]

This is uncomfortably near the common misrepresentation of Malthus which one encounters even among those who should know better: that food supply grows arithmetically whereas population grows geometrically, creating an ever- greater divergence between them, so eventually disease, famine and such must reduce population to what the food supply can support.

Actually, Malthus explicitly stated that "population must always be kept down to the level of the means of subsistence," that "Population, *when unchecked*,

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increases in a geometrical ratio. Subsistence only in an arithmetical ratio." Since food is necessary for life, "the effects of these two unequal powers must be *kept equal*. This implies a strong and *constantly operating* check on population from the difficulty of subsistence." (italics added)[1] Malthus reiterated that "the great law of our nature" keeps the effects of these two trends equal, and that "in no state that we have yet known" was geometric population growth actually the case; he referred repeatedly to the "constant operation of the strong law of necessity" restraining population growth, the "constant check upon population."[2] For Malthus, the check on population growth is *always* operating. How then can the gap between population and sustenance tend to widen? In Malthus's theory there *is no* "Malthusian trap" caused by this growing divergence, there is no eventual comeuppance administered by famine and such, and those who say that there is have simply got Malthus wrong.

To his credit, Parsons does note that the arithmetic and geometric progressions were meant as "an illustrative gimmick." And he does imply the constancy of the check's operation, and quotes Malthus on this. But he would have done better to make this explicit and emphatic, and shun the misleading stress on the "tendency" for the "gap" to widen.

Redemptively, he accurately presents Malthus's systems of checks on population growth — the dual system of "preventive" and "positive" checks (which depress the birth rate and raise the death rate, respectively), and the tripartite system of checks: misery, vice, and "moral restraint" — that is, refraining from or postponing marriage, meanwhile eschewing fornication.

Parsons shows, too, that Malthus did not oppose population growth when resources could support it; recognized that food production could be increased, perhaps indefinitely; and abhorred coercive measures to control population. Thus, Malthus' beliefs about these matters "are the exact opposite of those typically attributed to him."

Many "Malthusians," Parsons rightly observes, are actually far removed from Malthus, in advocating what the good parson abhorred: birth control and state population control policies. He makes the important point that the Catholic Church largely adheres to Malthus's theory. Like him, the Church condemns extramarital sex, contraception, abortion, and government population control, and favors responsible parenthood. It does allow rhythm and natural family planning, which Parsons speculates he may have opposed.

However, Parsons errs again in arguing that Malthus was a "structuralist," a believer that rapid population growth does not cause poverty, hunger and other problems, hence they must issue from a society's structure — its laws, government, institutions, etc. For structuralists, "population is a dependent variable and so cannot possibly modify other variables and thus become a cause of social, economic or other problems." This is Malthus's position, Parsons argues, relying on quotations (including some from Malthus's *Summary View of the Principle of Population* which Parsons wrongly attributes to the *Essay*'s first edition) which maintain that due to institutions, etc., population in some countries is not as high as it could be.

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But this is not the same as arguing that structure causes poverty, or that population is a dependent variable and can't create problems. Malthus said explicitly that a population increase, unaccompanied by a proportionate increase in food, would reduce each person's food supply, i.e., depress living standards. And while he acknowledged institutional imperfections, his emphasis was overwhelmingly on the relation between population and sustenance as the "insurmountable" obstacle to social perfectibility. "All other arguments," he added, "are of slight and subordinate consideration in comparison with this"[3] — which necessarily relegates structural causes of misery to minor importance. And he explicitly rebuked Godwin for attributing almost all vice and misery to institutions, and contends that while "unfair combinations" by the rich do frequently prolong suffering

among the poor, "yet no possible form of society could prevent the almost constant action of misery" upon most people under inequality, and upon everybody under equality.[4]

In arguing Malthus's ongoing relevance, Parsons is on solid ground. The modern world, he points out, is "malthusian" in the negative sense of population pressure outrunning carrying capacity, with shortages of agricultural land (much of it damaged by bad stewardship), water, and other resources. Today's world population of six billion, as opposed to the theoretically possible 300 billion implied by the geometric progression and a 25-year population doubling time, indicates that powerful checks must have operated — just as Malthus argued. Post-Malthus population economics has added new conceptual tools such as human capital, but Malthus's central concern remains: the relationship between population, resources and the quality of life. The basic, "inescapable" realities, Parsons maintains, are that material resources are for practical purposes finite; population growth is potentially infinite; and so eventually population growth must be arrested, somehow. Humanity's choice is to raise the death rate or lower the birth rate.

Malthus, Parsons concludes, was a "great benefactor" of humanity, because he desired feasible improvements, while insisting on reminding us of reality's disciplines. Parsons's monograph is a sturdy and valuable effort at rehabilitating Malthus and rescuing him from falsifiers. All those interested in Malthus or the issues he raised would profit from it.

They would profit, too, from taking Parsons's advice to read Malthus for themselves — going to the original source, as scholars should. Doing so, and getting Malthus right, would demolish many misunderstandings. For instance, the optimists' jeer that Malthus failed to anticipate the Green Revolution etc. and has therefore been refuted rings hollow, as it rests on the ubiquitous falsification of his theory: the widening gap, the Malthusian trap, and such. Malthus argued that an increased food supply would lead to increased population; that Europe's historical population growth was due to greater food output; and that "*population constantly bears a regular proportion to the food that the earth is made to produce* [Malthus's italics]."[5] That the Green Revolution and other improvements enable a much larger population to exist does not refute Malthus, it *supports* him!

Moreover, the late Julian Simon's optimism about population growth flowed from demolition of a straw Malthus. Malthus, Simon said, held that human population displays "constant geometric growth" and that "because fertility goes up as income goes up, the extra population eats up the extra income," so mankind tends "to be squeezed down to a long-run equilibrium of living at bare subsistence." The "core" of Malthus's theory, according to Simon, is that "population increases faster than does the means of sustenance and continues until the standard of living has fallen to bare subsistence."[6] As should by now be clear, this is an outrageous distortion. And Malthus said nothing about long-run equilibrium at "bare subsistence." It says something about today's standards of scholarship and discourse that Simon got away with this tendentious falsification.

Insofar as criticisms and dismissals of Malthus rest on misrepresentations, they are untenable. Far from having proved their case, Malthus's detractors haven't even started doing their job.

In a deeper sense, Malthus is vindicated. His essential point is that we live in a limited world which constrains our possibilities, and that reality has the last word. Of course Malthus is right. The instant we were conceived, we were doomed to die. Death, indeed, is the ultimate, unanswerable argument for the reality of limits and the limits of reality.

His rebukes to Condorcet and Godwin regarding human perfectibility remain relevant, because we face an uncannily parallel situation today. Today's computer revolution, globalization and prosperity are for economics what the French Revolution was for politics, spawning frothy speculation that mankind is approaching Utopia. The utopians he debunked eerily resemble Simon and others, who dismiss scarcity constraints and assert a prospect of limitless growth and abundance, as if reality is infinitely malleable and we can get something for nothing. And Malthus's refutations apply to them too.

Condorcet argued, Malthus wrote, that though man is not immortal, his lifespan will constantly increase, "will have no assignable term, and may properly be expressed by the word 'indefinite.' He then defines this word to mean either a constant approach to an unlimited extent, without ever reaching it, or an increase in the immensity of ages to an extent greater than any assignable quantity." Similarly, Simon declared that resources are

not finite, because their amounts, like the number of points in a one-inch line, "can never be known even in principle.… Hence resources are not 'finite' in any meaningful sense."

Responding to Condorcet, Malthus the mathematician nailed the flaw in Simon too: "a careful distinction should be made, between an unlimited progress, and a progress where the limit is merely undefined." The error lies "in not discriminating between a small improvement, the limit of which is undefined, and an improvement really unlimited." In like manner, Simon confused an infinite supply of a resource with a merely undefined quantity of it.

Whatever may be said against his specifics, Malthus's essential point holds: it's a limited world, which limits what we can do.

Where he did err was in failing to reckon with the impact of beliefs on behavior. The Reverend Malthus apparently took Christianity's continued dominion over the West, and with it a continued robust affirmation of the goodness of life and existence, for granted. He failed to anticipate the West's Gadarene plunge into economism, feminism, decadence and nihilism, manifested in pervasive rejection of children and parenthood amounting to a death wish. The passion between the sexes is as great as ever — indeed, judging from our loathsome smut "culture," it is apparently an obsession — but bears ever-fewer fruits. Indeed Europeans and native-born Americans are playing out Kipling's grim warning in "The Gods of the Copybook Headings":

On the first Feminian Sandstones
we were promised the Fuller Life
(Which started by loving our neighbour
and ended by loving his wife)
Till our women had no more children
and the men lost reason and faith,
And the Gods of the Copybook Headings said:
"*The Wages of Sin is Death*."

Mass immigration since the Seventies offsets the native birth implosion, though, so Malthus's posited situation of population growth pressing on subsistence still obtains. If subsistence is redefined to encompass all resources needed to sustain a decent Western standard of living, Malthus's moral about reality limiting our possibilities becomes still more stark. Seen in light of today's depleted aquifers, water shortages, overtaxed power grids, cropland erosion, and the coming "end of cheap oil," the talk of unlimited growth, a "long boom" of global prosperity and a Dow Jones Industrial Average of 36,000 or more looks as fatuous as the utopian prattle Malthus chastised. When this new striving for Utopia hits the wall of reality's limits and fails, as it inevitably must, Malthus will murmur across the centuries: "I told you so."

Malthus lives. •

NOTES

[1] Thomas Robert Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population and A Summary View of the Principle of Population*, ed. Antony Flew (Harmondsworth, England, UK: Penguin Books, 1970), pp.61, 71.

[2] Ibid., pp.72, 73, 76, 78.

[3] Ibid., pp.77, 72.

[4] Ibid., pp.133, 79.

[5] Ibid., pp.79, 86-87.

[6] Julian Simon, *The Ultimate Resource* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981), pp.163, 184, 186.

[7] Malthus, *Essay on the Principle of Population*, p.125.

[8] Simon, *Ultimate Resource*, p.47.

[9] Malthus, *Essay on the Principle of Population*, pp.128, 128-130.