The Dark World of Reverend Malthus

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Malthus' very name is associated with pessimism—only somewhat undeservedly so. Rev. Thomas Robert Malthus' An Essay on the Principle of Population, first published in 1798, appeared toward the end of a tumultuous decade in Great Britain. Where Adam Smith, in his 1776 book An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations, had imagined a commercial society harmoniously regulated by the operations of a self-regulating market generating self-sustaining growth, the vision of the economy which Malthus presented some two decades later was rather more grim, at least for the poor majority. Lacking a theoretical rigor on par with his peers, Malthus' Essay was nevertheless soon recognized as the second foundational work of Political Economy behind Smith's Inquiry. This paper will seek to situate Malthus in his time and will argue that his popularity with ruling landed elites is can be explained by their need for a champion in the debates on economic theory and by his round condemnation of the poor as the agents of their own suffering by overpopulating.

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INTRODUCTION

In his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, written in the 1750s, Adam Smith differentiates between our attitudes towards wealth when we are old and ailing against when we are in better health. In times of suffering and sorrow, writes Smith:

> Our imagination … seems to be confined and copped up within our own persons, [while] in times of ease and prosperity [it] expands itself to every thing around us. We are then charmed with the beauty of that accommodation which reigns in the palaces and economy of the great; and admire how every thing is adapted to promote their ease, to prevent their wants, to gratify their desires (Smith, 1979 [1759], pp. 183-184).

Should we reflect on what such wealth actually serves, it would seem "contemptible and trifling." But we rarely do. Instead:

> We naturally confound it in our imagination with the order, *the regular and harmonious movement of the system*, the machine or economy by means of which it is produced. The pleasures of wealth and greatness, when considered in this complex view, strike

> the imagination as something grand and beautiful and noble, of which attainment is well worth all the toil and anxiety which we are so apt to bestow upon it.
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> And it is well that nature imposes upon us in this manner. It is *this deception* which rouses and keeps in continual motion the industry of mankind. It is this which first prompted them to cultivate the ground, to build houses, to found cities and commonwealths, and to invent and improve all the sciences and arts, which ennoble and embellish human life; which have entirely changed the whole face of the globe, have turned the rude forests of nature into agreeable and fertile plains, and made the trackless and barren ocean a new fund of subsistence, and the great high road of communication to the different nations of the earth (Smith, 1979 [1759], pp. 183-184; emphasis not found in the original).

In other words: In our healthful youth, we imagine that power and riches bring lasting happiness, a delusion we more easily confront in sickness and old age. But the delusion is salubrious, inasmuch as it acts like a kind of Saint Elmo's Fire, compelling us forward to truck, barter and borrow—toward the industriousness which has "changed the whole face of the globe." What is clearly no delusion for Smith, however, is the "regular and harmonious movement of the system" which he admires so much, and which is at the heart of his "system of natural liberty." This harmony extends to relations between the classes, as is evident in the following passage. Smith continues:

> The rich only select from the heap what is most precious and agreeable. They consume little more than the poor, and in spite of their natural selfishness and rapacity … though the sole end which they propose from the labours of all the thousands whom they employ, be the gratification of their own vain and insatiable desires, they divide with the poor the produce of all their improvements. They are led by *an invisible hand* to make nearly the same distribution of the necessities of life, which would have been made, had the earth been divided into equal portions among all its inhabitants, and thus without intending it, without knowing it, advance the interest of the society, and afford means to the multiplication of the species …. In ease of body and peace of mind, all the different ranks of life are nearly upon a level, and the beggar who suns himself by the side of the highway, possesses that security which kings are fighting for (Smith, 1979 [1759], p. 185).

We can almost hear the wind swaying in the trees and the clanking of cattle bells as we read Smith's pastoral depiction of a society in which a "love of system … [a] beauty of order, of art and contrivance" prevails. It is, he writes (and the reader is encouraged to read aloud as we rise to an ecstatic crescendo) a society in which: "The perfection of police, the extension of trade and manufactures, are noble and magnificent[!] … the wheels of the political machine seem to move with more harmony and ease by means of them[!] We take pleasure in beholding the perfection of so beautiful and grand a system[!] …" (Smith, 1979 [1759], p. 185).

One can only speculate as to how much wine contributed to the writing of such laudatory passages, but Smith's gushing at the wonders of the British polity and economy do have a certain basis in reality. Agrarian capitalist farming in England was producing bumper yields during a price recovery. In Scotland, in the aftermath of the defeat of Bonnie Prince Charlie, the wholesale conversion to agrarian capitalism was well underway. The construction of canals had taken hold and the world's largest domestic free market was beginning to be linked up with a new transportation structure which had the effect of steadily lowering prices. New machines were being applied in agriculture, and in manufacturing the promise of an industrial revolution was in the air. In 1763, the conclusion of the Seven Years War left Great Britain the undisputed master of the seas and in possession of an empire stretching literally across the globe. Smith's concept of the "invisible hand" was carried over into the writing of his *Wealth*

of Nations, published in 1776, the same year as the Declaration of Independence, or the year the troubles began—with the stirring of revolution.

In what would come to be recognized as the second major text in the canon of Political Economy, after Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, we find Reverend Thomas Robert Malthus writing in his *Essay on the Principle of Population*, published in 1798:

> The constant effort towards population, which is found to act even in the most vicious societies, increases the number of people before the means of subsistence are increased. The food therefore which before supported seven millions must now be divided among seven millions and a half or eight millions. The poor consequently must live much worse, and many of them be reduced to severe distress. The number of labourers also being above the proportion of the work in the market, the price of labour must tend toward a decrease, while the price of provisions would at the same time tend to rise. The labourer therefore must work harder to earn the same as he did before During this season of distress, the discouragements to marriage and the difficulty of rearing a family are so great that population is at a stand (Malthus 1976 [1798], pp 66-67).

Malthus goes on to explain that this cheapness of labor will induce the (agrarian) employer to hire workers as well as to "manure and improve" the soil, thus raising productivity and lowering the price of food, making the "situation of the labourer then again tolerably comfortable" and thus loosening up the constraints on further population growth. So there is an "oscillation" in this scenario which involves periods of economic upturn, it as if society only oscillates between periods of distress and periods of tolerable comfort.

What has become of Smith's "noble and magnificent … extension of trade and manufactures"? It seems Malthus has come along to cast gloom upon it. Consider Malthus' rebuttal of the utopian Godwin's claim that the abolition of property would produce a society of in which all lived "in the midst of plenty and where all share alike in the bounties of nature" (Godwin, as cited in Malthus 1976 [1798], pp. 66-67). Malthus categorically asserts:

> Mankind cannot live in the midst of plenty. All cannot share alike in the bounties of nature. Were there no established administration of property, every man would be obliged to guard with force his little store. Selfishness would be triumphant. The subjects of contention would be perpetual. Every individual mind would be under a constant anxiety about corporal support (Malthus 1976 [1798], p. 67).

One thing that Malthus is doing here is dismissing Godwin's vision of a property-less society as a utopian fantasy. Certainly Godwin's argument, rooted as it was mainly in conjecture, makes for an easy target, though it must be added that the Economists themselves were no less prone to build argumentation on the rather unscientific sands of hypothetical scenarios, ahistorical illustrations and, particularly with Malthus, Biblical themes. It is also to be expected that an Anglican vicar like Malthus would take issue with Godwin's attack on property and traditional order and mount a defense.

But more than that is going on in these words. While in the course of this essay we will revisit some of longstanding critiques of the content of Malthus' work, including his most egregious statements, his internal inconsistencies as well as his strengths, our main objective is to grapple directly with the question: what explains its popularity? How did a work which (rather dubiously) staked a claim to belong to the field of demography manage to attain the status of a follow-up to Smith's *magnum opus* in the field of Political Economy? Indeed, how was it that on the reputation of his *Essay* on population, Malthus received the first academic appointment to teach Political Economy, at the East India Company College in Hertfordshire? We will argue that in large part, the answers must lie in the political economy of Britain in Malthus' time. In other words, the dark world we find depicted in Reverend Malthus' writings reflected the anxieties of British society and of the ruling landed classes in particular, during

and after the Napoleonic Wars, anxieties which were largely absent during the period in which Smith was writing a depiction of a world imbued with natural harmony.

THE IMPACT OF THE FRENCH REVOLUTION ON BRITAIN

In four wars with France since 1688, Britain had either drawn or come out victorious, most spectacularly at the end of the Seven Years War in 1763. Defeat at the hands of the American colonists and their French allies in the American War of Independence dealt a heavy blow to the British Empire and to British pride. Sensing that the empire itself was lost, George III talked seriously of abdication. Yet it would take no more than a year for Britain's colonial trade to reach pre-war levels, and within a decade trade and diplomatic relations with the new United States would normalize. The Constitutional Convention of 1787 would also serve as a check on the more radical strains of revolution, serving as a kind of *counterrevolution*. Even as the wealthy men of property were signing the new constitution, in Massachusetts and Rhode Island, a veteran of the Revolutionary War, Daniel Shays, was leading angry and indebted farmers in open revolt. In suppressing Shays' Rebellion, the new American government ensured that the new democracy would be friendly to men of property and would check radical "faction" from upsetting the harmonious operations of commercial society. The less democratic participation from the lower orders, explains Wolin in describing the republican theory of the Founders, "the more likely that the populace would defer to men of talent, judgement, and political experience … The Constitution of the Founders compressed the political role of the citizen into an act of 'choosing' and designed it to minimize the direct expression of a popular will" (Wolin, 2008, pp. 256-257). The term which Wolin uses to describe this system and its enduring legacy is "managed democracy". The Founders had imbibed much from the managers of elitist democracy in Britain.

Yet the coming of revolution to the Americas and later to France made elitist democracy in Britain far more difficult to manage. Even during the American Revolutionary War, a domestic revolt in London, the so-called Gordon Riots of 1780, would be brutally suppressed by Red Coats (Cf. Nicholson, J., 1985). Revolution in Ireland, meanwhile, was nipped in the bud by acceding to Henry Gratton's demands for legislative autonomy for Britain's oldest colony. While the American Revolutionary War and its aftermath was a period in which the British Empire was forced to make some major adjustments, by the late 1780s, it would have seemed as if all threats to the established hierarchy—atop which sat the landed oligarchs who dominated the British Parliament—had been dealt with.

Then, like a thunderclap, came the French Revolution of 1789. Its effects on British society would be profound. Initially welcomed as a revolution in imitation of the Glorious Revolution of 1688, few Britons were initially bothered by revolution in France. The most notable exception was Edmund Burke, who like Malthus, supported the Whig Party but had conservative tendencies. In his essay *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Burke argued that the French revolutionaries' repudiation of tradition, combined with its seizure and centralization of power, set a dangerous precedent which, "he uncannily predicted … would lead to tyranny, a rejection of Christianity in France and a cataclysmic war in Europe" (Žmolek, 2013, p. 538). In these convictions, Burke was virtually alone. Prime Minister Pitt listened to his dire warnings and ignored them. The dark days of a full generation of war with France would later drive Pitt to an early grave.

One crucial difference between the American and French revolutions was the absence of a feudal nobility with attached privileges in America. When French nobles rose in the National Assembly on 4 August 1789 to renounce their feudal privileges, leading to the announcement that "feudalism is abolished", the news of this lightning-fast change in social property relations must have caused many British landowners to experience a sense of panic. It must be pointed out that English feudalism was a dead letter after the English Civil Wars of the seventeenth century and that by 1760 the English peasantry had virtually ceased to exist as a class. Where their French counterparts still had feudal privileges to give up in 1789, the English landed classes formed an oligarchy of landlords collecting economic rents from tenant farmers who hired agrarian laborers working for wages. The mode of extracting surplus from the working population now involved strictly economic relations of market exchange in the form

of rent and wages. However, blue blood families and their palatial estates continued all the rituals, traditions and trappings of the old aristocracy, retaining titles of peerage and identifying with class privilege. Moreover, the landed classes not only still ruled the country, a smaller number of these "great houses" controlled more land than ever before. This made them an obvious target for revolution. In his *Essay*, Burke gives expression to the British ruling class's fears of the threat of revolution, writing:

> Who but a tyrant ... could think of seizing on the property of men, unaccused, unheard, untried, by the whole descriptions, by hundreds and thousands together? Who that had not lost every trace of humanity could think of casting down men of exalted rank and sacred function, some of them of an age to call at once for reverence and compassion, of casting them down from the highest situation in the commonwealth, wherein they were maintained by their own landed property, to a state of indigence, depression and contempt? (Burke, 1973 [1790], p. 119).

These words were written even before the Terror unfolded in France. In the interim, the revolution in France had inspired British working class (mainly artisanal) radicals to speak out. For the first time since the English Civil war of the 1640s, radicals like Tom Paine and Mary Wollstonecraft, both of whom produced tracts rebutting the arguments of Burke, were emboldened to call for an end to the gross inequalities of British society. As we shall see, by the time Malthus took up his pen to write his *Essay*, the conservative reaction to radicalism was well underway and Malthus would emerge as one of its chief spokesmen. Moreover, unlike Burke, Malthus' *Essay* sought to lend respectability to the conservative cause by couching its argument in the language of science, mathematics and demography. In truth, it was and is a profoundly political tract.

THE FINAL WAVE OF ENCLOSURES

In the British countryside, the 1790s was a dark decade for reasons having nothing to do with the French Revolution. On the surface, the term "enclosing" describes the rudimentary act of segmenting an open field with a fence or a hedge. But the enclosure *movement* was a centuries-long process by which the English peasantry was cleared from the land by declaring it private property, thereby converting it from being a resource regulated by local, customary law to land to being considered "real estate" under Common Law. After the Glorious Revolution of 1688-89, the landed classes had managed to establish Parliament as a coequal power with the patrimonial monarchy. All efforts by Parliament to check or slow the process of enclosures had ceased. Parliament was dominated by landed oligarchs obsessed with consolidating the security of their private property in land. Beginning with the Waltham Black Act in 1723 and continuing into the first half of the nineteenth century, Parliament would pass into law hundreds of new prohibitions carrying the death penalty for even the most obscure transgression of property rights. Collectively, this body of laws would later earn the moniker "the Bloody Code". Alongside this and over the same period, hundreds of bills of enclosure were passed, buttressing the legal case for new enclosures, or in many cases sealing the legality of those which had already taken place. Parliamentary enclosures thus greatly accelerated the enclosure movement.

Resistance to enclosures had long been framed in terms of a defense of customary rights which the tillers of the soil had enjoyed since "time out of mind." The enclosure of arable land in any given village or parish translated into the loss of possession of land on which to grow food for one's family. Many continued to till the land not as peasants, but as agrarian wage laborers paid in wages by a capitalist tenant-farmer. Those who did not leave the village upon losing their rights of tenure remained in cottages which typically had an attached garden insufficient to feed an entire family and thus turned to spinning, weaving or other domestic handicrafts to earn the money now necessary to survive. With conditions favorable to enabling these now market-dependent rural-dwellers to make a comfortable living by engaging in domestic manufacturing, the eighteenth century was in fact the golden age of so-called cottage industry in Britain. An important aspect helping make it possible for cottage-dwellers to enjoy

a relatively comfortable living was their continued enjoyment of customary rights granting them access to the commons: right of pasture, or the right to graze one's animals upon the commons; right of *piscary*, or the right to fish in ponds and streams; *firebote*, or the right to collect firewood from the forests, and so on. In other words, in many parishes, for a long time after peasants lost possession of the land and thus ceased to be peasants, they continued to have access to common land and the vital resources which it offered.

The number of bills of enclosure passed by Parliament between 1760 and 1780 eclipsed a thousand. During and in the immediate aftermath of the American War, the number of such bills fell off dramatically, but soon the pace picked up again with greater force. In the two decades after 1793, Parliament passed some two thousand acts of enclosure (Hay & Rogers, 1997, p. 198). With most arable land already enclosed, bills of Parliamentary enclosure now focused primarily on enclosing the wastes and commons. This translated into a new state of crisis as cottagers across Britain were losing their common rights entirely.

In the quarter century after 1793, only three years saw abundant harvests. The outbreak of war with France in 1792 contributed to the grain shortage as supplies were bought up by the government at the same time as grain imports fell off (Benson, 2013). The price of bread doubled between 1794 and 1795. As families struggled to put bread on the table and distress spread across the countryside, unprecedented numbers of protests were mounted. Many protesters were arrested and gaoled and a significant number were executed. Famine was reported in some regions during the winter of 1795-96. "Who forgets the frost of ninety-five?" asked Hannah Moore (1840, pp. 253-254), continuing: "Then all was dismal, scarce, and dear. And no poor man could thrive." The winter of 1800-01 would again bring dearth, regional famine and protest.

This is the socio-economic context in which Malthus' *Principle of Population* was written. Where Malthus discusses "inclosures" in that essay, he is merely concerned with two problems. His first concern involves conversion of arable land to pasturage for grazing animals for meat and wool and the consequent reduction in grain production. Secondly, he recognizes that another result of inclosures is to displace peasants and convert them into cottagers.

It should be noted that Malthus' concern is not for the peasants' loss of possession and access to land, which he treats as a *fait accompli*, at least in Britain. In the journal of his travels in Scandinavia, Malthus (1966, pp. 46, 52 and 71) observes instances of "inclosures" but invariably finds those in Denmark "shabby" and scarce; those in the Norway "little used", poorer and "uncultivated." This is in keeping with the way Malthus:

> stressed the frequency with which populations were scanty and living conditions miserable even when the physical environment was richly endowed with the resources needed for the production of wealth. The Turkish empire and the Spanish colonies of South America, for example, were vivid, if depressing illustrations of the way in which men could frustrate the best intentions of providence (Wrigley, 1988, p. 39).

The Economists' tendency to disparage societies whose agriculture was less productive than Britain's does not appear to be based upon an understanding that the pristine development of capitalism was unique to Britain; it tended rather to be attributed to racial and cultural differences, in keeping with Smith's view of working people as a "race" of laborers. Capitalism, the prevalence of competitive markets or what Smith called "commercial society", was assumed in the writings of Smith, Malthus and all the Political Economists as a universal.

The same is true of the Physiocrats in France at time when France was not capitalist at all. One of the leading Physiocrats, Turgot, briefly became finance minister of France (1774-1776) and promoted policies of radial liberalization, including some limited and short-lived experiments at enclosure, on the assumption that *policy* could bring capitalism to France. The results? Turgot's attempt to introduce free trade to the grain market prompted grain riots and the measure withdrawn. His efforts to abolish feudal tenures made little headway. His order to abolish the guilds was greeted with greeted by artisans with

celebrations dubbed "Turgot's Carnival" by the conservative leaders in church and the Paris government, who quickly orchestrated Turgot's removal and his replacement by Necker (LaFrance, 2019, pp. 32-33).

Both the Physiocrats and the Political Economists *naturalized* capitalism, treating markets and market society as universals in a world where they were not and elevating self-interest, which the medieval church treated as a form of corruption, to the greatest virtue, one from which all good things follow. Under French absolutism, property and exchange were still regulated by "extra-economic" rules and regulations, Turgot's efforts at reform notwithstanding. In Britain, whilst the centuries-long transformation of property and tenure to a logic of market regulation was nearing completion, many "extra-economic" forms of property, among them customary rights of access to the commons, still existed. Since Smith saw these as just so many forms of irrational monopoly, all his readers needed to know is that he opposed them. It was assumed and taken for granted that because self-sustaining growth was possible under conditions of capitalism, the market would eventually provide. Should some suffer as a result, they merely needed to adjust.

The effect of enclosures with which Malthus *was* concerned is how the displacement of agricultural producers tended to become an added burden on the poor rates (Malthus, 1976 [1798], pp. 106-108). This would become Malthus' life-long obsession. The Poor Laws ought to be abolished, he argued, because not only did they tend to inflate the cost of bread, but they also encouraged idleness and mindless procreation. The topic of Malthus' influence on the reform of the Poor Law in 1834 is beyond the scope of the present essay. Malthus had a particular, and rather awkward, preoccupation with sex. Having delayed his own marriage until he felt he was able to support a family, Malthus seems particularly obsessed with the problem of men who do not follow his own noble example.

> By removing what he saw as the natural incentives to refrain from sexual intercourse created by economic insecurity, the poor laws inevitably would lead to unrestrained reproduction on the part of poor people. Malthus maintained that such a system "taught that all who are born have a *right* to support... whatever their number, and that there is no occasion to exercise any prudence in the affair of marriage, so as to check this number." Because of this, "the temptations, according to all the known principles of human nature, will inevitably be yielded to, and more and more will gradually become dependent on parish assistance." The ultimate result of poor law policy, then, would be more poverty and greater misery for poor people (Tomczak, 2015, quoting Malthus, 1996 [1817], vol. 2, p. 380; emphasis in the original).

Many of his contemporary critics were extremely alarmed at his apparent lack of concern for the poor. The essayist William Hazlitt (1994 [1807], pp. 178-179) wrote of the *Essay*: "A more complete piece of wrong-headedness, a more strange perversion of reason could hardly be devised by the writ of man." Hazlitt found Malthus' mathematics "altogether spurious" and "entirely groundless" and his callousness toward the poor nothing other than "pseudo-science in the service of sinister political interests" (Pyle, 1994, p. xx). From a journal by William Cobbett (1994 [1826], p. 314), penned during his tour of the valley of the Avon in 1826, we read:

> The state of this Valley seems to illustrate the infamous and really diabolical assertion of MALTHUS, which is, that the human kind have a NATURAL TENDENCY to *increase beyond the means of subsistence for them*. Hence, all the schemes of this and the other Scotch writers for what they call *checking population*. Hence all the *beastly*, the *nasty*, the abominable writings, put forth to teach laboring people *how to avoid having children*. Now, look at this Valley of AVON. Here the people raise nearly *twenty times as much food and clothing as they consume*. They raise five times as much, even according to my scale of living. They have been doing this for many, many years. They

> have been doing this *for several generations*. Where, then, is their NATURAL TENDENCY *to increase beyond the means of sustenance for them*?

For his part, Malthus was extremely sensitive to his critics and revised and re-published the *Essay* and other works many times seeking to clarify his position. Most famously, he removed his "nature's mighty feast" passage from the 1806 re-publication of his *Essay*. It began with the words:

> 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 might 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 upon the compassion of some of her guests … (Malthus, 1976 [1798]: 106-108).

If this scene conjures up scenes from Dickens' *A Christmas Story* in your mind, it is probably because Dickens apparently modeled the character Scrooge after Malthus. Without delving further here into the controversies regarding Malthus' *intentions*, we can for now note that Malthus had a penchant for writing passages devoid of compassion for the sufferings of the poor in a way that is consistent with the absence in his writings of any acknowledgment of the way the final assault on common rights were adding to the distress during the dark decades during which he wrote. Where David Ricardo became the champion of the rising class of capitalist industrialists in his debate with Malthus, "Malthus satisfied the need of the landed classes for a champion in the field of political economy" (Žmolek, 2013, p. 623). While Malthus' *Essay* was written in direct response the utopian thinkers Godwin and Condorcet, "his real popularity among the upper classes in general lay in his attack on the arguments of Paine, Owen and the Spenceans, and their 'delusive' defence of a right to subsistence" (ibid.). At the heart of the controversy over the right to subsistence was the access to land, both arable and commons, which the landed elite in Britain were in the process of taking away from the working poor. By portraying the poor and not those divorcing them from the land as the agents of their own immiseration, Malthus satisfied the need of Britain's ruling landed classes for an economic theory which absolved them of blame. Twenty-first century policymakers who ignore the astronomical and ever-widening levels of inequality and focus solely on the question of whether recipients of various forms of welfare are indeed worthy of such aid, ought deservedly to be considered Malthusians.

POVERTY AND THE FALL OF MAN

One reason we do not apply such a label in this way is that the term "Malthusian" is generally restricted in use to refer not to Malthus' views on poor relief but specifically to his *postulata* at the center of his *Essay*, namely that:

> First, That food is necessary to the existence of man.
> Secondly, That the passion between the sexes is necessary and will remain nearly in its present state.
>
> In the true fashion of nineteenth century writers eager to bolster their credentials, he dubs these two truisms as "laws" before reformulating them as follows:
>
> Population, when unchecked, increases in a geometrical ratio. Subsistence increases only in an arithmetical ratio. A slight acquaintance with numbers will shew the immensity of the first in comparison with the second (Cobbett, 1994 [1826], p. 314).

There is nothing like adding mathematical language to make your assertions sound more scientific.

While Malthus in his time had little access to modern methods of statistical sociology, even those using such methods would be hard-pressed to defend Malthus' proposition because these untested assertions are just that. But perhaps that explains their enduring appeal: appealing to common sense, they appear self-evident but are so universalizing that they are untouchable by any method of scientific verification. Beyond common sense, a pause and a few moments' reflection might lead us in the opposite direction if we consider, following Cobbett's observations in the valley of Avon, that throughout the history of agricultural societies, those who produced food have always had to produce a surplus several magnitudes beyond what they consume in order to pay taxes, rent and various other forms of tribute. Typically, only external shocks to the system such as locusts, bad weather, natural disasters or disease disrupt this balance, which is soon reset.

The point is that Smith, Malthus and their fellow Economists relied very little on actual science, so something else must explain their long-enduring popularity. Boer and Petterson (2014, pp. 87-88) offer an explanation. Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, they write, "is badly written, deeply contradictory, strikingly lacking in originality and insight, full of rampant polemic, cavalier with evidence, and rambling to the point of distraction…" Where then does Smith's strength lie? "Adam Smith's skill," they explain, "was as a storyteller, a mythmaker of the first order." Here then is the obvious continuity linking Smith's optimistic if not utopian view of oeconomy as harmonious with Malthus' dour pessimism. Boer and Patterson trace an even more direct line than that, arguing that the argument of both men and of several of their contemporaries was animated by a re-telling of the great biblical myths. While Smith eschews biblical references, he nevertheless provides a re-telling of the foundation myth by universalizing the tendency to truck, barter and barrow—market exchange—as an assumed trait of human nature going all the way back to Adam and Eve. "Our primitive forebears," quip Boer and Petterson (ibid., p. 109), "were capitalists at heart, it seems."

Malthus, the pious man of the cloth, also takes us back to Eden, but his focus is upon the Fall of Man and the inevitability of evil. When Malthus uses terms like population and subsistence, their sin-connotating equivalents lust and hunger are implicit. Malthus' critique of Godwin's utopia is rooted in a strong belief in evil, which will inevitably lead even the best-laid plans astray. Where Godwin proposes a world in which people can choose their own sexual partners, Malthus rebuts that the result would soon be "broods of children roaming the earth seeking scarce food" (ibid., p. 161). Where Godwin, echoing Gerard Winstanley of Digger fame, proposes we would all be better off if we abolish property and share the earth in common, Malthus (and here we do see his direct refutation of the assertion of the rights of commons) reminds us that greed would produce theft and the land would need to be once again divided (and enclosed) to ensure security of tenures. To the quite admittedly utopian suggestion that sharing the earth as a commons would obviate the need for labor, Malthus reminds us that children and population growth would soon disrupt any such harmonious balance between people and resources, thereby necessitating labour once more to provide for the surplus of population beyond which the earth might otherwise provide with minimal effort. "The back-breaking labor of producing food is [then], like property, a punishment for disobedience" (ibid., p. 162). Boer and Petterson find Malthus' retelling of the myth of the Fall an useful corrective to the utopian-leaning schemes of believers in the Enlightenment concept of human perfectibility: We ignore human shortcomings such as lust and greed at our own peril and to the detriment of our efforts to pursue either individual or social improvement or perfection.

While refuting Godwin's suggestion that human perfectibility was the central purpose of Malthus' original *Essay* of 1798, Malthus also sought to systematically attack two of Godwin's other suggestions: the suggestion that immortality might one day be achieved and Godwin's dissenting ideas about human sexuality. By the time Malthus took up his pen, Godwin's utopian ideas on perfectibility, death and sex had already been widely satirized. In the 1803 republication of the *Essay*, Malthus was at pains to downplay the role of the by now widely discredited Godwin in its original inspiration. This, argues Bederman (2008, p. 785) was insincere on Malthus' part, for prior to reading Godwin, Malthus had shown little interest in the subject of population. Upon reading Godwin's *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, however, Malthus was apparently "irritated by the essay's assertion that enough sustenance

existed to support all people, if only property were redistributed." Based on a careful examination of Malthus' margin notes in his personal copies of both Godwin's and Wollstonecraft's works, Bederman argues that Malthus' original *Essay* was in fact written as an *ad hominem* attack on both Godwin and Wollstonecraft. What had sparked the flurry of attacks on the two authors was a grief-stricken Godwin's decision to posthumously publish Wollstonecraft's *Memoirs* shortly after her death from puerperal fever following childbirth in September 1797. The revelations that Wollstonecraft had attempted suicide, the details of her extramarital affairs and of her giving birth to two children out of wedlock gave anti-Jacobin authors a target they had long sought after: proof "that vice and libertinism lay at the heart of political radicalism" (ibid., p. 775).

Upon its publication in 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* was met with general approval, but half a decade into war with France, the conservative reaction to Jacobin egalitarianism equally saw the demand for women's equality as a threat to established order. "Equalizing thought became anathema" (Nicholson, M., 1990, p. 418). While Malthus did not mention Wollstonecraft by name, Malthus lampoons Godwin's suggestion that over time the passion between the sexes may be "extinguished" with the retort: "Towards the extinction of the passion between the sexes, no progress whatever has hitherto been made. It appears to exist in as much force at present as it did two thousand or four thousand years ago" (Malthus, 1976 [1798], p. 19). In an unmistakable reference to Godwin and Wollstonecraft's marriage, Malthus continues to write of "exceptions" to this rule, while at the same time, paradoxically, alluding to their love affair as evidence that the "passion between the sexes" cannot be cooled, even in middle age.

> … Malthus had figured out how to hoist Godwin on the explosive petard of his own sexual radicalism. On the one hand, Godwin himself conceded that his proposed system of freely chosen sexual partners would lead to an increase in population; Malthus would argue that this would lead to severe problems of material scarcity. On the other hand, Godwin somehow believed that human nature would allow all men to cheerfully shun sexual intercourse. Familiar with the Wollstonecraft controversy, Malthus realized that Godwin's recent revelations about his own middle-aged extramarital affair made this assertion manifestly ridiculous (Bederman, 2008, p. 788).

If we accept Bederman's findings, this puts Parson Malthus' moral position on extramarital sex at the heart of his "scientific" and "mathematical" theory, at the heart of which was the proposition that "[u]nleashed sexual desire, combined with enough food, would make the population explode" (ibid.). This equation of uninhibited female sexuality with destructive powers, and of Wollstonecraft with Eve, fit neatly with the anti-Jacobin reaction in progress at the time and with conservative opinion which was willing to admit equality of mind, but which saw equality between the sexes in terms of political and social *power* as an existential threat to the prevailing patriarchal political order. The simultaneity of sexual pleasure (for men) with the domination of women was the central issue which Wollstonecraft wanted to confront. Whilst she stakes a claim for women's equality with men in the pursuit of erotic pleasures, Wollstonecraft also sees sex as dangerous for women because the sexual domination of women by men reinforces social inequalities. For Malthus, sex is dangerous for the opposite reason: because mindless procreation by the poor will lead to overpopulation and thus misery, thus posing a threat to the social order built on inequalities (Nicholson, M., 1990, pp. 414-415). "Malthus imposes frustration on the majority, and extends license to the rich. His commonsense advice not to have children you can't afford is really a shocking, mercenary vulgarity—essentially prostitution, where sex, if you can pay, is always available" (ibid., p. 420). The Reverend was widely accused of endorsing prostitution. This is just one of innumerable logical contradictions in Malthus' work pointed out by his critics.

Gallagher finds Malthus' view of the female body quite counterintuitive. Since Malthus wants to "arrest" the fertility of young women to prevent the catastrophe he alleges will result from unbridled procreation, he thus equates the sexual power of youth with the decay of the body politic. "The social body is an 'old woman' insofar as it is populated by young women. Malthus, thus, turns the body into

an absolute social problem" (Gallagher, 1986, p. 86). Furthermore, by treating sexual pleasure as an absolute good, Malthus is able to treat the very abstinence he advocates as a source of intense misery. The body "is unfit for utopia not by its weaknesses but by its strengths, not by its vices but by its virtues. The intensity of misery in the body deprived of sexual pleasure … is directly proportional to the healthiness and legitimacy of the pleasure it lacks" (ibid., p. 89). Of course the well-to-do were implicitly exempted from this formula; they are free to procreate at will because they have the means to provide and thus prevent misery (and, we may infer, because their numbers are anyhow relatively small).

One wonders how Malthus expected the poor to grasp such logical contortionisms to which their behavior was expected to conform. Might then the Reverend's concept of God prove to be somewhat less mind-bending? Perhaps not. Malthus shares with his radical opponents a rejection of the feudal vision of God as an anthropomorphized deity on a throne and equates God with natural law. By invoking mathematics to frame his theory, he then breathes divinity into his theorem by declaring it a law, thus invoking God, and thus purportedly making it unassailable. His argument thus shielded from criticism, he could now deploy it against Paine and the Enlightenment revolutionaries, for whom the new Deism justified equality by dispensing with the afterlife destinations for the saved and the damned in favor of a cosmology in which god transforms matter into spirit. Appropriating this, Malthus contrasts spirit with Newtonian dead matter and builds upon this dichotomy a new conception of the separation of the saved and the damned. On the one hand there are the owners of property, who are saved because their wealth permits them to rise above the general condition of those without property, or those who are condemned to a life of misery. "Original sin becomes propertylessness" writes M. Nicholson (1990, pp. 407-408), adding that Malthus' Law:

> evacuates human desire for better conditions. The most the majority can ever hope for … is the state of laborers in pre-revolution America. It is no accident that Malthus dates a maximum condition to a period before revolution. Revolutionary desire is precisely what Malthus's *Population* is designed to abort … The God that emerges is hardly distinguishable from a monster that enjoys his creatures' suffering: the God [which] Blake, Shelley, and Byron satirize (ibid., pp. 419-420).

In short, Malthus' God is a(n) (agrarian) capitalist God, one who rewards industry with ease and punishes idleness with poverty and misery. Such a theological position is intelligible in the context of an agrarian capitalism which had transformed the English peasantry into a propertyless proletariat and the final wave of Parliamentary enclosures which threatened to divorce agricultural labors from *all* direct access to nature as a source of subsistence or sustenance. The Bloody code still in effect, Malthus called upon men of property to harden their hearts even further against the sufferings of the poor, for to be charitable would only serve to magnify their misery by encouraging overpopulation. Following Burke's lead, Malthus denied that the poor had any natural right to subsistence (Cf. McNally, 1993, pp. 62-103).

CONCLUSION

Revolution in France set in motion the resurgence of radicalism in Britain and a conservative reaction to match that would last well beyond Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo. The continuing reaction of the British state to the perceived threat of radicalism beyond 1815 points to the specific class dynamics in Britain, which involved an incipient industrialization, yes, but within which an oligarchy dominated by a class of landlords collecting rents from tenant-farmers who employed agrarian waged laborers in what has been described as an *agrarian* capitalism. The resurgence of radicalism was informed in the cities by the struggle against displacement by the newly developed factory system and in the countryside by agrarian wage laborers suffering the effects of seasonal unemployment compounded during years of extremely poor harvests. In the context of war with France, the ruling oligarchs treated artisan and agrarian protests alike as sedition.

Whilst not taking aim directly and Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), Malthus' *Essay* did directly attack the views of her husband whilst indirectly attacking both as an implicit example of the untamable "passion between the sexes" which was so problematic because, at least amongst the poor, if left unchecked, it would lead to overpopulation and vice. In presenting his "Law" of population, Malthus reworked the Augustinian dichotomy between the saved and the damned, lending it both a scientific and a distinctly classist (and misogynist and deeply racist) flavor. Appearing ideologically and theoretically blind to how England's agrarian capitalism and an emerging industrial capitalism were reproducing poverty and structural violence on an ever-expanding scale, Malthus would go on to argue in his *Principles of Political Economy* [1820] that while the poor had no inherent right to subsist, the one percent played an indispensable role in conspicuously consuming production surpluses which otherwise could only go to waste.

The timing of Malthus' 1798 intervention is important, and it seems that had such a tract appeared in the 1750s, it might have passed unnoticed. By couching his *postulata* in both scientific and natural law (and thus religious) terms, Malthus produced a counter-Enlightenment argument which had qualities which Burke's essay lacked. For the oligarchs profiting handsomely from an expanding market system, market competition, as blessed by the Economists, was sacrosanct. There could be no consideration of a reversion to any earlier state of affairs. Revolutionary violence and terror in France appeared to confirm their views that radicalism and calls for the levelling of classes were doomed to end not in progress but misery. Malthus provided an argument which (at its most general and unscrutinized level) could, like a myth, render all of this intelligible in a single narrative. He had an audience eager for an argument within the new field of Political Economy which justified their accumulation of unprecedented wealth in land whilst denying the cries of those being rendered propertyless, and he delivered. And he was not done. He would live just long enough to see the repeal of the Old Poor Law in 1834, largely thanks to the influence of his arguments that relief to the poor only encouraged idleness and mindless procreation and thus increased misery. At least until the economic upturn of 1849, the actual effect of the repeal during some of the most dreadful years in British economic history was clearly to intensify the distress of the poor in Britain. Yet the findings of the Poor Law Commissioners of 1834 continued to be widely treated as common wisdom for over a century. Finally, in the 1960s, the economist Marc Blaug pointed out that: a) poor relief, by lessening the labor supply, would have a positive effect on wages, thereby being of double benefit to the poor; and b) relief also meant better worker diets, allowing for greater caloric intake and thus greater productivity (or the obverse: cutting relief could slow productivity by reducing the caloric intake of workers) (Blaug, 1963, pp. 152-157; 1964, p. 241). Also in the 1960s and 1970s, historians re-examined the work of the Poor Law Commissioners of 1834 and concluded that their work was shoddy, biased and incomplete. Ironically, however, just as President Richard Nixon was about to sign into law a plan for a War on Poverty which would provide a guaranteed basic income to all, his advisors persuaded him to reconsider. On what basis? On the basis of the hoary old arguments of the Commissioners of 1834, who were guided by Malthus (Bregman, 2016, pp. 77-82).

History, writes Tomczak (2015, p. 37) "shows us that the obsession in the modern era with the reproductive behavior of poor people - and particularly recipients of public aid - is nothing new." The contemporary slogan of "short term pain for long term gain" which is at the heart of the neoclassical revival and of contemporary neoliberalism is a continued perpetuation of the Malthusian logic. It seems a fair question to ask to what degree the present conservative reaction is impelled by a revulsion against unregulated female sexuality and pregnancy out of wedlock as it was in Malthus' time.

One might borrow what has a standard term in contemporary military doctrine to describe what can happen to the poor in the often not so short "short term" as "collateral damage". Today, we are witnessing an age of global enclosures or what Harvey (2007, p. 162) calls "accumulation by dispossession" which involves an extreme polarization between concentration of unprecedented wealth in a tiny number of hands and the spread of relative poverty, particularly throughout the Global South. So extreme is the disparity of wealth in the world today, that one is tempted to argue that Malthus, not Smith, has left the greater legacy.

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