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Thomas Robert Malthus: The Economist

Abstract

"As Robert Heilbroner has so aptly observed, economics has produced "a handful of men" whose contributions to mankind have been "more decisive for history than many acts of statesman who basked in brighter glory, often more profoundly disturbing than the shuttling of armies back and forth across frontiers, and more powerful for good and bad than the edicts of kings and legislatures." One such person cited by Heilbroner is Thomas Robert Malthus."

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Malthus: The Economist

He held the very first British Chair in 'political economy'

by Vernon M. Briggs, Jr.

Throughout history societies have built statues, monuments and even pantheons to memorialize the accomplishments of their founders, leaders, and inspirational heroes. Yet many of history's most influential contributors seldom receive such recognition. Such has been the fate of a number of writers in the field of economics. As Robert Heilbroner has so aptly observed, economics has produced "a handful of men" whose contributions to mankind have been "more decisive for history than many acts of statesmen who basked in brighter glory, often more profoundly disturbing than the shuttling of armies back and forth across frontiers, and more powerful for good and bad than the edicts of kings and legislatures."¹ For, as he put it, the "extraordinary power of their ideas" has "shaped and swayed men's minds."² One such person cited by Heilbroner is Thomas Robert Malthus.

Malthus was a "founding father" of the discipline of economics. But more important than his role as an intellectual pioneer has been the impact of the conceptualizations he proffered and the methodological approach he championed as the way economic issues should be studied and policy conclusions derived.

Although the topical range of his interests was wide, Malthus is best remembered for his inquiry into the causes and effects of population growth. Others before him had speculated on population issues but he was the first to produce a general theory of population in a systematic manner.

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As a Founding Father

In 1804, at the age of 39, Malthus was appointed to the first professorship established in Great Britain for the study of political economy. It was at the newly established East India College located east of London at Haileybury. He assumed the post in 1805 and held the position continuously until his death in 1834. In preparation for this appointment, Malthus had earned a bachelor of arts degree from Jesus College at Cambridge University in 1788. Shortly afterwards he took the vows of Holy Orders at the College and, subsequently, he received a Master of Arts degree in 1791 and was elected as a fellow in 1793 at the same institution. For a short spell, he served as a parish priest prior to his marriage in 1804, after which he pursued a career as an academician.

As a consequence, Malthus has been ennobled by John Maynard Keynes who described him as being "the first of the Cambridge economists."³ It is a statement of deference. It places Malthus among a

hallowed subgroup of economic scholars whose intellectual lineage over the past two centuries has left an indelible imprint on the evolution of economic doctrines. For subsequent "Cambridge

economists" included such luminaries as Alfred Marshall, who formalized the principles of what is today referred to as microeconomics, as well as Keynes himself, who formalized the principles of what we now label macroeconomics.

Malthus is better known for having been among the founding members of the "classical school" of economic writers.⁴ Collectively, they laid the intellectual foundation upon which much of modern economics has been built. In the immediate decades following the publication in 1776 of Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* — which is regarded as the

Malthus was considered
the outstanding
economist of all Europe.⁵

masterwork that unified a host of miscellaneous ideas into economics as a distinct subject of inquiry — there was immense scholarly activity. But it would not be until 1817, when David Ricardo published his *Principles of Political Economy and Taxation*, that the refinement and the advancement of the corpus of economic doctrines re-commenced in earnest. It was in this interim 41-year period that the writings of Malthus catapulted him to the status of being considered “the outstanding economist of all Europe.”⁵

During these early years of disciplinary development, Malthus established a close friendship with his contemporary, David Ricardo. In 1811, Malthus and Ricardo began an on-going exchange of letters that extended over the next ten years. It resulted “in the most precious literary correspondence in the history of economic thought.”⁶ Their written

dialog, as well as the conversations they had during numerous personal visits, served as a form of intellectual pollination. Through vigorous criticism, they stimulated each others’ thoughts.⁷ Yet, despite the fact that they typically held polar opposite viewpoints, their mutual admiration only intensified as the years passed.⁸

During the years when Malthus rose to prominence, tumultuous events occurred in Britain and continental Europe that dramatically influenced the course of economic thinking. The French Revolution began in 1789 and, after ten years of near anarchy and general mayhem, it led to the seizure of dictatorial power by Napoleon Bonaparte. For the next 15 years, he kept Europe in a nearly continuous state of warfare. As a consequence, the perilous state of international commerce in grains was revealed, while government purchases of foodstuffs greatly stimulated the demand for domestic grain suppliers. In Britain, as elsewhere, extensive amounts of pasture land were converted into arable land (which meant the more costly cultivation of marginally productive lands). Large increases in the supply of money in circulation occurred as the result of the government’s need to provision its soldiers and sailors. Prices skyrocketed.

Landowners, merchants and manufacturers prospered while the working class masses sank deeper into lives of poverty and squalor. Wages of agricultural workers were set by local government officials who did not permit them to rise. As for the wages of the growing ranks of manufacturing workers associated with the advancement of the Industrial Revolution, severe labor market competition kept these wages depressed as women and children were recruited to fill these jobs.

When Napoleon surrendered in 1813, a host of new problems surfaced in Britain, associated with the re-conversion of the economy. Due to the magnitude of the public debt, payments of the debt by specie had been suspended; taxes remained high; prices soared

while wages lagged so that the working masses continued to be pauperized; the powerful agricultural interests, fearing an influx of cheaper imported grains, demanded tariff protection;

and the manufacturing and shipping interests were clamoring for concessions and subsidies from parliament.

The supposedly harmonious course of economic development portrayed earlier by Adam Smith was exposed as being at best only an ephemeral description of a bygone pre-industrial era. Seemingly, *The Wealth of Nations* had little of relevance to say about a British society caught in the throes of urbanization, industrialization, and internationalization. The key concerns of economics — production, exchange, and distribution — were being radically transformed by these new social forces.

Illustrative of the search for new ideas was the debate over the tariff question. Both Malthus and Ricardo wrote widely circulated pamphlets on the subject. For centuries, England had adopted various “corn laws” that placed duties on such imports and, at times, provided government bounties on such exports. The word “corn” was generically used to apply to any edible grain (e.g., wheat, rye, barley or oats). During the Napoleonic conflict, domestic corn prices had soared since imports had virtually stopped while demand sharply increased. Agricultural land owners, therefore, were fearful after the defeat of Napoleon

**“...tumultuous events occurred in
Britain and continental Europe...”**

that the British Isles would be flooded with grain imports from continental Europe. They argued that it was in the public interest to protect them from foreign competition. They emphasized that they had sustained major costs associated with expanding domestic production during the war years which they had a right to recoup. They also contended that it was not in the national interest for the country to become dependent on foreign food suppliers. Hence, they proposed a sizable increase in the duties on imported corns to prohibitive levels. The proposal triggered a domestic

“...it was not in the national interest for [Britain] to become dependent on foreign food suppliers.”

struggle between the powerful land-owning class and the emerging merchant and manufacturing class. Never before had the issue of the distribution of income been so sharply brought to the forefront of public debate.

In 1815, the Tory Parliament, beholden to its land owning constituency, passed a new Corn Law which established a high price of corn that had to be maintained before any imports could be allowed. The guaranteed high price of corn also meant that the landlords could continue to extract high rents for the use of their land.

Both Ricardo and Malthus agreed on the basic facts but they came to diametrically opposite views about what they meant and what should be done. Briefly stated, Ricardo correctly predicted that Britain's future rested with capital development, not agriculture. He held that rent was not a creation of wealth but, rather, a deduction of wealth from others. What the landlords gained by protective tariffs was what either business and/or workers lost. But since wages were fixed by market pressures caused by the population pressures created by the working class itself (i.e., he accepted Malthus's views on this point — the poverty of the masses was of their own making), it had to be profits of employers that were

lost as a result of high food prices. In other words, food prices and profits moved inversely. Hence, Ricardo attacked the Corn Law with its high tariff provisions. If the duty on imports was abolished, marginal (i.e., more costly) land would be taken out of production, the price of food would fall, and Britain would prosper.⁹

Malthus, on the other hand, defended agricultural protectionism. Malthus, like Adam Smith, saw Britain as primarily being an agricultural society. As a true successor to Smith, Malthus viewed rent as the chief form of surplus (i.e., wealth) that society was creating. Agriculture essentially created its own demand. For while other commodities were not necessary after they were produced, food was, as it represented a demand for population. The reason food prices were high, therefore, lay in its abundance, not its scarcity as is the case with other commodities. Rent was a gift of nature to the owners of land that ultimately increased the wealth of society.¹⁰ Malthus, however, claimed that his support for agricultural protectionism was not intended to be a defense of the interests of landowners. Rather, it rested with his perception of what is the national interest: Britain should be self-sufficient in food production.¹¹ Hence, he favored the Corn Law of 1815, with its high tariffs so that Britain might prosper.¹²

It may seem strange that Malthus opposed grain imports while his famous population theory foresaw death by famine as the probable fate of a considerable portion of the human race — including many who lived in the British Isles. But it was his opinion that famine conditions within a nation could be better averted by government protection of agriculture than by exposing the masses to the vicissitudes of unregulated market competition associated with the emerging industrial age.

There were numerous other major issues on which Malthus and Ricardo differed but the point is that they honed their arguments on each other and, rightly or wrongly, they elevated the level of economic discourse for all time.

As a Conceptualizer

Malthus made lasting additions to the economic literature with his theory of rent (which greatly influenced the writings of Ricardo) and with his

contention that an economy might at times underconsume so that, at least in the short run, it could involuntarily be plagued by unemployment (which greatly influenced the writings of Keynes). But he is best known for his theory of population. As the noted authority on the development of economic thought, Wesley C. Mitchell has stated "Malthus's discussion of population was a contribution of first class magnitude."¹⁴

The first *Essay on Population* was published anonymously in 1798. As is well known, it was the follow-up product of a lengthy discussion with his father, Daniel Malthus, about the possibility of societal improvement. It occurred at a time when social reformers in both England and France were speaking of the coming of a golden age of equality for mankind. The elder Malthus shared this positive outlook. His son, however, was pessimistic and fearful about the human prospect. Following their talks, the younger Malthus sought to sharpen his arguments by writing them out.

His subsequent treatise set forth the proposition that men were inclined to marry and to multiply their numbers until such time as the available food supply is barely sufficient to support them. As "food is necessary to the existence of man" and "the passion between the sexes is necessary," Malthus felt the optimists were wrong in their assumptions that people could master their physical desires.¹⁵ As he wrote, "I say that the power of population is indefinitely greater than the power of the earth to produce subsistence for man."¹⁶ Population, he stated, is necessarily limited by the means of its subsistence. Population will increase whenever the means of subsistence increases unless the growth is prevented by powerful checks.

In the first *Essay* he identified two such checks. Positive checks are those that reduce an existing population — e.g. famine, war, plague, disease, or infanticide; negative checks are those personal decisions that lead to a decrease in the birth rate which keeps the population from growing (e.g., deciding to

marry later or to have fewer children; it could also include the use of contraception and abortions although Malthus adamantly opposed both). As both of these checks on population growth meant unavoidable misery imposed by both the natural world and by human nature, the very characteristics of population itself forever made a state of perfection impossible for human beings.

The dilemma is inevitable, according to Malthus, because population tends to increase at a geometric ratio while subsistence could increase only at a lower arithmetical ratio. The reason for the difference is that there are limits to the amount of usable land available to grow crops and to raise domestic animals for food. To explain his position, Malthus introduces a concept that would later be formally known as the law of diminishing returns (also

known as the law of variable proportions). In essence, the law states that as long as one factor of production (say, land) is fixed (or increases at a slower rate) relative to another variable factor of production (say, labor), total production may initially increase, but as more units of the variable factor (labor) are added, total production will inevitably begin to decline and, if carried to an extreme, actually become negative. This argument is hinted at by Malthus as his explanation for the reason why food production tends to grow more slowly than population without being formally identified by him as a specific economic law.¹⁷ This argument, however, gave the theory far more credibility to later scholars (when the law was formally articulated in 1848 by John Stuart Mill) than Malthus's simple assertion of its workings as an explanation for the differential between food and population growth ratios.¹⁸ Ironically, this reasoning, which was elaborated upon by Mill, gave "the Malthusian theory of population a better logical form" that is more convincing than Malthus himself had provided.¹⁹

The difference between the two potential growth rates meant that the availability of food supplies

"...the power of population is indefinitely greater than the power of the earth to produce subsistence for man."
— Thomas Robert Malthus

exerted an ever present restraint on the welfare “of a large portion of mankind.” The resulting imbalance also meant that the future of the human race would most likely be one of constant struggle rather than of utopian tranquillity.

The Malthusian notions of inevitable struggle and adaptation, it is worthy to note, would ignite the imagination of Charles Darwin when, 40 years later, he picked up a copy of the *Essay* (probably the sixth edition) to read “for amusement.”²⁰ From this passage, Darwin surmised that natural selection was the likely principle of biological change in nature. Man’s perception of the scientific world was never the same.

In the realm of public policy, however, the impact of the first *Essay* was far more immediate. As his biographer, James Bonar, wrote: “Malthus gained his reputation by a bold and sudden stroke, well followed up.”²¹ Although it had been published anonymously, it was widely known who the author was. The message was clear and easily understood by those who could read — and they were most likely at that time to be the people who paid taxes. The practical policy implication of his message seemed to be that the more funds provided to the poor, the more poor there would be to provide for.²²

Thus, employers quickly became enthusiastic supporters of Malthus’s teachings, for the theory implied that the plight of the poor was of their own or their parents’ making. The low wages of the time, therefore, were attributed to the intensity of “the passion between the sexes” and the subsequent abundance of population. Thus, the propertied classes seemed to be absolved from all responsibility for the widespread prevalence of poverty. In fact, it would seem that employers were doing the human race a favor by keeping wages low and making living conditions miserable. In this regard, the Prime Minister of Britain, William Pitt, withdrew in 1800 his pending proposal before the House of Commons to liberalize the existing Poor Laws in Britain. The action was taken in deference to the many objectives raised by those who were influenced by Malthus’s arguments.

In addition to its popular success, the first *Essay* firmly established Malthus’s professional career. The reaction to the first *Essay* was swift, widespread, and

often bitter. Indeed, as Bonar notes, “Malthus from the first was not ignored” and that “it rained refutations” throughout the remainder of his life.²³

Fearing that he may have been too hasty, he did not re-publish the first *Essay* until it had been thoroughly revised. He engaged in extensive travel, reading, reflection, and gathered what relevant statistical data that was available. The result was the publication of a thorough revision of the *Essay* in June, 1803, with his name appearing as the author.

“...the more funds provided to the poor, the more poor there would be to provide for.”

The second edition, while setting forth the same original theme, was “a far more substantial performance than the first.”²⁴ It was expanded by four times in length and it contained far more historical materials and statistical evidence to support his thesis. It also introduced a modification of his theory pertaining to the checks that cause population levels to tend toward subsistence. Namely, he wrote that “moral restraint” could act as a means by which population numbers would be voluntarily limited. The concept was added as a way “to soften” the harsh conclusions of the first *Essay*.

In contemporary times, “moral restraint” may seem to be nothing more than a revised name for his earlier concept of “preventive checks.” For “moral restraint” simply meant that working class people could use their own forethought to postpone marriages until they had a reasonable prospect of earning an income sufficient to support their prospective families at a level to which they desired to live. Meanwhile, they should practice virtuous celibacy until they can marry. Hence, Malthus uses the concept to mean “a hesitation” by people whereby they could ponder the economic consequences of their potential actions. If they do so, he believed that it would not be necessary for people to suffer from vice and misery. Mankind could, by practicing “moral restraint,” create the conditions whereby population size could be held at

levels below those that would cause widespread suffering. In so doing, human nature could be brought into harmony with common sense.²⁵ There is a place for human intelligence.

There were four more revised editions of the *Essay* (the last appearing in 1826) as well as a host of other writings that added empirical support for his population thesis. His views offered sharp contrast to the prevailing mercantilist doctrine which held that the prosperity of a nation depends chiefly on its population. Malthus posited the reverse: the size and welfare of a nation's population depend on the prosperity of the nation. People will, in turn, adjust their lives to the changing economic circumstances they confront. It is not the absolute size of the population *per se* that is the threat to mankind, but, rather, the relative proportion between food and population in a country at a given time that is of consequence. Malthus believed, as Keynes said, "that he had found the clue to human misery."²⁶ Indeed, Bonar wittily suggested that the *Essay* could also be known as an inquiry "into the nature and causes of the poverty of nations" (a play on the title of Adam Smith's famous book).²⁷

As a Methodologist

As with all aspects of Malthus's contributions, even his methodology has been the subject of both high praise and bitter criticism. The earlier path-breaking work by Adam Smith had been, of necessity, a work of deductive logic.²⁸ *The Wealth of Nations* was not a result of investigation. It was, instead, a product of reflection and of organization of what personal knowledge Smith had accumulated over his lifetime. It was the outpouring of a great mind. Likewise, Ricardo was also a practitioner of deductive reasoning.²⁹ Ricardo knew little about history and seemed to care less about any lessons it might teach. He did not concern himself particularly with statistics or the gathering of such information as support for his reasoning. Confident that he knew his subject matter and that his premises were absolutely valid, Ricardo

proceeded to set forth his analysis in terms of what Mitchell has called "a series of imaginary experiments."³⁰

The deductive reasoning used by Smith and Ricardo to fashion their theoretical perceptions and to reach their conclusions about how a free market functions is the legacy that underpins the reasoning of mainstream economics to this day. When confronted with facts contrary to theoretical predictions, the response is that economic theory is concerned with tendencies but its assumptions are beyond questioning. Any

facts that deviate from the expected behavior are viewed as only temporary aberrations from what, in the long run, will be results that are consistent with the theoretical expectations.

Malthus had been introduced to the *a priori* methods of Smithian economics and, over his academic life, he too, made frequent use of its mechanistic logic.³¹ But, in contrast to Smith and Ricardo, Malthus became well-known for his preference for the use of inductive arguments to support his conclusions.

In his *Principles* book, Malthus makes clear what it is that separates his methodology from the body of analysis that constitutes mainstream economics at that time and to this day. Malthus concedes, as do most economists, that "the conclusions of political economy partake more of the certainty of the stricter sciences than those of most other branches of human knowledge."³² But, where he differed was in his belief that it is "serious error, to suppose that any propositions, the practical results of which depend upon the agency of so variable a being as man, and the qualities of so variable a compound as the soils, can ever admit of the same kinds of proof, or lead to the same certain conclusions, as those which relate to figure and number."³³ As a consequence, he held that "the science of political economy bears a nearer resemblance to the science of morals and politics than to that of mathematics."³⁴

History, personal observations from travel, and

**"...the prevailing mercantilist
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statistics, to the degree they were available, became the fodder of his intuitive reasoning. As Mitchell described Malthus, "he was a person who wanted to actually observe what went on in the real world and to argue about these observations."³⁵ It is for this precise reason that Alfred Marshall, likewise, paid tribute to Malthus by stating that his work represented "the first thorough application of the inductive method to social science."³⁶ Keynes was later to muse that "if only

"[Malthus' work represented] the first thorough application of the inductive method to social science."

— Alfred Marshall

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."³⁷ To which Marc Blaug, a critic of Malthusian economics, has retorted:

It is fortunate for the history of economics that good logic triumphed over bad. A victory for Malthus would have made economics the happy-hunting ground of every quack with panaceas designed to shore up the allegedly defective market economy. One can only marvel at Keynes's astounding assertion.³⁸

But there is little justification for Blaug to conclude so dogmatically that inductive reasoning is any more subject to "quackery" than deductive reasoning is subject to charges of being totally irrelevant to the study of the actual welfare of mankind. After all, most of the world's crucial activities are non-mathematical in nature. Inference from experience is at the heart of all of the law, most of medicine, much of biology, some of chemistry, and virtually all of successful business management.

Indeed, contemporary scholars of economic methodology have vigorously attacked the deductive approach that continues to be at the heart of mainstream economics in the late 20th century. Deirdre McCloskey, who is not only a prominent methodologist but is a former officer of the American Economic Association,

wrote in 1996 that mainstream economic methodology has devolved into largely "sandbox games."³⁹ She attacked its confusion of "statistical significance" with "scientific significance" and its reliance on "blackboard proofs," both of which render its findings as being totally inappropriate for application to real world policy making.

Two decades earlier, Robert Gordon, in his presidential address to the same American Economic Association, strongly criticized the trend in contemporary economics to believe that the relevancy of a happening depends primarily on its consistency with current economic theory.⁴⁰ As Gordon made clear, the real test for a discipline that seeks to be a science is *not* whether its propositions are logically true and tautologically deductible from earlier assumptions but whether its propositions correspond to reality.⁴¹ In chastising the modern economics profession for its predilection for "rigor regardless of relevance," Gordon concluded by stating: "And let us not be afraid to ask — and try to answer — the really big questions."⁴²

To his credit, Malthus pioneered the use of inductive processes for the study of economic issues and even his most severe critics must acknowledge that he addressed "really big questions."

Assessment

There is no debate over the influential role that Malthus played in the founding of the field of economics. Not only did he hold the first academic chair in political economy in Britain, he has also been described by Mitchell as being "the first professional economist" in the country.⁴³ Mitchell claims that the mantle rightly belongs to Malthus, rather than to his far more famous predecessor Adam Smith, because, when Smith lived, economics was considered to be only a branch of moral philosophy and, two years after publishing *The Wealth of Nations*, Smith quit academia to become a public official for the remainder of his life. Malthus, in contrast, became an academician shortly after the publication of the second version of the *Essay* and he continued in that vocation, teaching and writing on a variety of economic issues, until his death.

Likewise, there is little debate about Malthus's predilection for inductive reasoning. Keynes described

Malthus as being “the inductive and intuitive investigator who hated to stray too far from what he could test by reference to the facts and his own intuition.”⁴⁴

Thus, it is the conceptual aspect of his life’s work pertaining to the study of population that symbolizes the paradox of his reputation. The irony has best been captured by the famed economic philosopher, Kenneth Boulding. He has written of Malthus, that “he was a great and insightful economist,” but “he really knew very little about the theory of population and he made no valuable or original contributions to it;” nevertheless, “one thinks of Malthus and population in the same breath.”

For all of his writings about population, Malthus showed scant interest in the demographic factors that actually determine population growth.⁴⁶ There is no discussion of the age and gender distribution of the population, especially the proportion of the population who are women of childbearing age. Such fertility factors, of course, have substantial influences on the actual growth capacity of a population at any given time. There is little discussion of the time lags necessary for population tendencies to respond to changes in the means of providing subsistence. Likewise, there is no apparent recognition of the demographic link between the birth rate and the death rate as the critical determinant of the population growth of a nation.

During his life time, it was the simplicity of the idea he discussed that explained his immediate appeal. There is, after all, no dispute that every living thing will multiply in a geometrical progression up to the limits of its food supply. Therefore, any such population growth rate could not be sustained indefinitely. Thus, while the logic of his proposition cannot be refuted, neither can it be verified since unchecked population growth does not exist in the real world. Furthermore, as modified by the second *Essay*, rising living standards in a country could only mean that the country is practicing “moral restraint;” falling living standards, in turn, would prove the absence of such “restraints” with the result being that the populace has been exposed to misery and vice. But this means that the proposition can be applied to any actual or conceivable population trend. Accordingly, Blaug concludes that “a theory that is not

falsifiable by any conceivable event is a tautology masquerading as a theory.”⁴⁷

As for the use of the law of diminishing returns, Malthus certainly deserves kudos for being a co-founder of one of the most important principles of economic analysis. Nonetheless, his actual use of the concept in his population theory is subject to criticism.⁴⁸ The law itself is a static proposition

**“...one can expect substantial
pressure for more emigration out of
the less developed nations and
immigration into the industrialized
countries.”**

concerning the returns sustained by adding a variable factor to a fixed factor under *a given state of technology*. But, there is no law of diminishing returns to technological progress. Thus, one of the most frequent charges against Malthus is his theory’s failure to recognize the dynamic nature of a growing population dependent on a given amount of land under conditions of *constantly improving technology*. The United States, for example, has less than half the land in agriculture in the 1990s than it did in the 1920s, but it produces far more food now than it did then due to enormous increases in agricultural productivity that have taken place over in the interval.

Nevertheless, if there ever can be said to be such a thing as a consensus among economists concerning the lasting contribution of Malthus, it would be that the population law he posited remains firmly intact, but the conclusions he drew from it have proven to be unwarranted. The tendency of human beings to multiply would, if unchecked, soon exceed the limits imposed by available space to sustain them. However, in his discussion of human conduct, Malthus seems to have confused the sexual and reproductive instincts.⁴⁹ They are not the same. Only sexual instincts can be attributed the character of “irresistibility.” Reproductive instincts can be modified by particular circumstances — such as social, political, and

NOTES

- ¹ Robert L. Heilbroner. *The Worldly Philosophers*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1953), p.3.
- ² *ibid.*
- ³ John Maynard Keynes. "Robert Malthus: The First of the Cambridge Economists." *Essays in Biography*. (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1933), p.106.
- ⁴ Warren J. Samuels. *The Classical Theory of Economic Policy*. (Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1966), p.4.
- ⁵ John N. Ferguson. *Landmarks of Economic Thought*. (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1938), p.96.
- ⁶ *ibid.* P.92.
- ⁷ For a sample of the tenor and substance of the correspondence between Malthus and Ricardo, see Richard T. Gill. *Great Debates in Economics*, Volume 1, (Pacific Palisades, CA: Goodyear Publishing Company, Inc., 1976), pp.8-28. For the complete exchange see Piero Straffa. *The Works and Correspondence of David Ricardo*. Volumes i-ix, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1951).
- ⁸ Keynes, *op. Cit.*, p.148.
- ⁹ David Ricardo. *The Principles of Political Economy and Taxation*. (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, Ltd., 1960), Chapters II, V, VI, XXII and XXIII.
- ¹⁰ T.R. Malthus. *Principles of Political Economy*. (New York: Augustus Kelley, Inc., 1951), Chapter III.
- ¹¹ Charles Gide and Charles Rist. *A History of Economic Doctrines*. (Boston: D.C. Heath and Company, 1913), pp.142 and 145-6.
- ¹² Samuel Hollander. *The Economics of Thomas Robert Malthus*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), pp.809-819. [Hollander contended that in the later years of his life, Malthus' views were changing from agricultural protectionism to free trade and balanced growth between agriculture and industry. See pp.846-865.]
- ¹³ *ibid.*, p.164.
- ¹⁴ Wesley C. Mitchell. *Types of Economics*. Volume 1, (New York: Augustus M. Kelley Publisher, 1967), p.235.
- ¹⁵ Thomas Robert Malthus. *An Essay on the Principle of Population*. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1976), p.19.
- ¹⁶ *ibid.*, p.20.
- ¹⁷ *ibid.*, pp.20, 22.
- ¹⁸ Mitchell, *op. cit.*, p.242.
- ¹⁹ *ibid.*, p.243.
- ²⁰ Ronald W. Clark. *The Survival of Species, Charles Darwin: A Biography of a Man and an Idea*. (New York: Random House, 1984), pp.53-55. Darwin first read the *Essay* in September, 1838, but he did not publish his famous *Origin of Species* until 21 years later in 1859.
- ²¹ James Bonar. *Malthus and His Work*. (London: Frank Cass & Co., Ltd., 1966), p.5.
- ²² Indeed, there is research that supports this conclusion. See George R. Boyer, "Malthus Was Right After All: Poor Relief and Birth Rates in Southeastern England," *Journal of Political Economy* (February, 1989), pp.93-114.
- ²³ Bonar, *op. cit.*, p.2.
- ²⁴ Mitchell, *op. cit.*, p.255.
- ²⁵ Bonar, *op. cit.*, p.54.
- ²⁶ Keynes, *op. cit.*, p.119.
- ²⁷ Bonar, *op. cit.*, p.5.
- ²⁸ Mitchell, *op. cit.*, pp.14, 60-67, 99-100.
- ²⁹ *ibid.*, Chapter 5. (See especially pp.327-330.)
- ³⁰ *ibid.*, p.328.
- ³¹ Hollander, *op. cit.*, pp.951-969. In fact, he contends that Malthus was essentially a deductive theorist and he downplays the views held by most other scholars that Malthus relied mostly on inductive methodology.
- ³² T. R. Malthus, *op. cit.*, p.1.
- ³³ *ibid.*
- ³⁴ *ibid.*
- ³⁵ Mitchell, *op. cit.*, p.1.
- ³⁶ M. Blaug. *Economic Theory in Retrospect*. (Homewood, IL: Richard D. Irwin. Inc., 1962), p.65.
- ³⁷ Keynes, *op. cit.*, p.144.

- ³⁸ Blaug, *op. cit.*, p.159.
- ³⁹ Deirdre McCloskey. *The Vices of Economists — The Virtues of the Bourgeoisie*. (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1996).
- ⁴⁰ Robert A. Gordon. "Rigor and Relevance in a Changing Institutional Setting." *American Economic Review* (March, 1976), pp.1-14.
- ⁴¹ *ibid.*, p.1.
- ⁴² *ibid.*, p.14.
- ⁴³ Mitchell, *op. cit.*, p.258.
- ⁴⁴ Keynes, *op. cit.*, p.135.
- ⁴⁵ Kenneth E. Boulding. "Foreword," *The First Essay by T.R. Malthus*. (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1959), p. v.
- ⁴⁶ Blaug, *op. cit.*, p.67.
- ⁴⁷ *ibid.*, p.65.
- ⁴⁸ *ibid.*, p.64.
- ⁴⁹ Gide and Rist, *op. cit.*, p.132.
- ⁵⁰ Martin Ravallion. "Famines and Economics," *Journal of Economic Literature* (September, 1997), p.1207 (see footnote 3 of this article).
- ⁵¹ *ibid.*, pp.1205-1207.
- ⁵² United Nations Population Fund, *The State of the World Population:1993*. (New York: United Nations Population Fund, 1993), p.1.
- ⁵³ Ravallion, *op. cit.*, pp.1236-1237.
- ⁵⁴ Bimal Ghosh, "Economic Migration and the Sending Countries," *The Economics of Labour Migration*. Edited by Julian van den Broeck (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 1996), pp.77-114; and Vernon M. Briggs, Jr. "International Migration and Labor Mobility: The Receiving Countries," *ibid.*, pp.115-158.
- ⁵⁵ United Nations Population Fund, *op. cit.*, p.15.
- ⁵⁶ E.G., see Herman E. Daly and John B. Cobb. *For the Common Good: Redirecting the Economy Toward Community, the Environment and a Sustainable Future*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990); John M. Culbertson. "Economic Growth, Population and the Environment," *Population and Environment*. (Winter, 1989), pp.83-100; and Digby J. McLaren. "Population Growth — Should We Be Worried?" *Population and Environment*. (January, 1996), pp.243-259.
- ⁵⁷ Bonar, *op. cit.*, p.398.

religious views — that vary with time and place. The growing acceptance of family planning practices in the industrial world in the 20th century has provided a means to separate the two basic instincts, thereby tempering the inevitability of the Malthusian prediction. Moreover, in economics “the Malthusian view that famines act as a check on population growth has been discredited.”⁵⁰ Given that food in this modern era is generally available elsewhere, the actual outbreak of a famine in one nation or region with its attendant human suffering is attributed to institutional failure of the governments of other nations to respond to the needs of an afflicted state, not to the inevitable operation of Malthusian laws.⁵¹

Yet the fact remains that for many non-industrialized nations, they have retained the high birth rates associated with their agrarian economies while also experiencing the declining death rates associated with the industrialized nations. The consequence being that many of the former are experiencing dramatic population growth. The United Nations Population Fund has reported that 93 percent of the world’s population growth in 1990 occurred in these less-developed nations and it projected that 95 percent of the annual population growth would occur in these nations by the year 2000.⁵² Such growth exerts a negative influence on efforts to stimulate economic development. Often rapid population growth is the source of political turmoil and violence in these countries because it is linked to problems related to health, housing, education, nutrition and land use.

The assumption in economics is that technology will continue to expand worldwide food supplies and that, eventually, the non-industrialized countries will become less agriculturally dominated and begin to reduce their birth rates as the pecuniary cost of children becomes more obvious. In the short run, however, soaring population growth in the less developed nations means that there will be more political pressure on the “have countries” to help the “have nots” and that one can expect substantial pressure for more emigration out of the less developed nations and immigration into the industrialized countries.⁵³ Yet, unlike earlier eras when there existed sizable unoccupied areas around the globe and when some industrialized countries were willing to be

generous in providing accommodation to ease the overpopulation pressure of the less developed world, there are no unoccupied regions anymore that are not claimed by some country and most, if not all of the industrial countries, claim to be under financial stress.⁵⁴ Hence, the U.N. Population Fund has already warned that the rapidly emerging confrontation between the urge to migrate by millions of people in the less developed nations and the mounting resistance to their efforts by the more developed nations means that immigration promises to become “the human crisis of our age.”⁵⁵

Unfortunately, having largely dismissed the pioneering work of Malthus, the economics profession in the 20th century has largely abandoned the field of population studies. Thus, as the issue of overpopulation has emerged in the less economically developed world, economists have had little of value to say other than to simply conclude that the issue should be left to the market to settle and international assistance agencies to confront. The simplicity of this homily with its harsh adjustment consequences, however, neglects the entire issue of the quality of life in all countries which are faced with limitational factors — now or in the near future. It also places economists on a collision course with environmentalists who worry that worldwide population growth is leading to resource depletion, pollution, loss of biodiversity, urban congestion, and global warming.⁵⁶

Thus, it is unfortunate that the legacy of Malthus has been diminished in the field of economics. For his message is of vital consequence: human beings ought to use their intelligence — not dogma — to prevent suffering and to improve the well-being of all people. It is the only real hope there is for long run human survival. As Bonar expressed it:

*But all can enter the mind of Malthus and understand his work who knew the hardness of the struggle between the flesh and the spirit, and yet believe in the power of ideas to change the lives of men, and have faith not only in the rigors of natural laws but in man's power to conquer nature by obeying her.*⁵⁷

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