

# Re-Imagining the Population Debate

## THE CORNER HOUSE

The debate about “overpopulation” presents a double mystery. To many environmentalists, it’s a puzzle how anyone could doubt the urgency of checking human population growth. To others, it’s a mystery how anyone could fail to see that harping on population increase covers up more important issues and victimizes vulnerable groups.

This mystery unfolds not only in public but within individuals. Population talk seems indispensable. Every modern state and business has to count and categorize people. Schools and prisons must be built, future market demand assessed. Extrapolate some of the figures far enough and the result is terrifying. Surely population pressure, if not “our number one environmental problem”,<sup>1</sup> must be a top priority for international action.

Yet the more familiar a society is, the harder it is to see its problems stemming from a collision between numbers and nature. Unsettled by crowds in an Indian railway station, Europeans may well want to start handing out condoms. Faced with crowds at a London station, they are more likely to blame government transport planning. Contemplating a distant future, they may find it easy to imagine food supplies overwhelmed by human numbers. But looking at the past and present, they know that scarcities come mainly from inequalities, land take-overs, wars, politics.<sup>2</sup> Tell someone her own family is too big and she may well reply: which children are excess?

This is one dispute that new facts and figures have never had much effect on. Its nature is that it repeats. Polemics extend it, they don’t end it. For over 200 years, in public and in private, two opposing kinds of common sense have been slugging it out, neither side budging (*see* Box, “Same Old Story”, p.3).

What are the prospects for resolving the tension? Taking history as its starting point, this briefing suggests the job will be difficult. In the population debate, as in most such quarrels, science and technique cannot be separated from aesthetics, religion, ritual and politics. This does not mean that the debate is irrational. But the peculiar mathematical metaphors and scapegoating ceremonies that form much of the substance of “overpopulation” talk will always appeal to some classes and subcultures more than others. Deep down, the conflict is less about numbers than about rights, the impossible ideal of a self-regulating market, and the differing demands of centralized and decentralized power. It is a political and cultural clash, not a dispute between the informed and the uninformed. If it can be overcome at all, it will not be through number-crunching but through the imaginative energies released by new social alliances.



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## Commons and Resources

One way of putting the endless debate over population into a larger perspective is to look sideways at another stubborn tension to which it is related: that between *commons patterns* and *resource patterns*.

In commons patterns, the right to survive overshadows exclusive individual rights to possess, exchange, and accumulate. Communal use adapts land, water and work to local needs rather than transforming them for trade and accumulation.<sup>3</sup> Faced with difficulties rooted in commoditization, the commons impulse is to tap wages to meet fixed needs, defend local pricing,<sup>4</sup> pressure the state into providing spaces for the vulnerable, fragment money itself into different types earmarked for different uses,<sup>5</sup> even, where necessary, transform individually-titled land into nonsaleable plots governed by the community.<sup>6</sup> Commons patterns typically deny rights to outsiders and in the past have instituted separate spheres for men and women under patriarchal control in household and community.<sup>7</sup>

Resource patterns, by contrast, allow subsistence rights only to private propertyowners, not unemployed workers. Faced with common land, the resource impulse is to seek subsidies to fence off, mobilize and develop it for production, consumption and exchange, disregarding local adaptations if necessary. Societies and bodies are shaped around centrally-organized norms. Work is a commodity activating capital and competition. Rather than earning enough for their needs, individuals learn to have needs they can satisfy with the money they must earn. Women tend to suffer unequal wages or confinement to a domestic domain often narrower than that of commons patterns. Market expansion makes possible both new forms of oppression and ethnic division and new “arm’s-length” notions of responsibility that encourage humanitarianism and notions of universal human rights.<sup>8</sup>

Both commons and resource patterns are simultaneously physical, social, conceptual. Although in continual conflict with each other, both can be found sharing the same landscapes, the same communities, the same brains. Both are constantly being ripped apart and patched up into new forms; each influences and encroaches on the other. They are like two different systems of roads crisscrossing a landscape, one consisting of local byways, the other of imperial, state, or long-distance trading highways (see Box, “Double Landscapes and Double Maps”, p.4). Both have a long history, but while commons patterns have sometimes been present without resource patterns, resource patterns have never been able to survive without commons patterns. As the saying has it: can’t live with them, can’t live without them. All modern politics is fought on the field this tension defines.

## The Busy Beehive

Commons and resource patterns connect with the population debate through English history. In England 500 and more years ago, resource patterns relating to food and labour were far more strictly hedged in by commons patterns than they are today. Common pastures and agricultural fields covered millions of hectares. Grain was “not seen as a commodity to be moved through the countryside in search of the best price, nor was it ever absolutely possessed by the producer”:

“The farmer who grew it – be he tenant or landlord – did not really own the corn; he attended it during its passage from the

1. Ehrlich, P.R. and Ehrlich, A.H., *The Population Explosion*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1990.
2. See Hildyard, N., “The Future is Now: Privatisation, Population and the Politics of Tomorrow”, Corner House Briefing No. 29, April 2003. [www.thecornerhouse.org.uk/briefing/29future.html](http://www.thecornerhouse.org.uk/briefing/29future.html) and [29future.pdf](#)
3. Fairlie, S., Hildyard, N., Lohmann, L. and Sexton, S., *Whose Common Future? Reclaiming the Commons*, Earthscan, London, 1993; Acheson, J. and McCay, B., *The Question of the Commons*, University of Arizona Press, 1990; Blackwell, B., “Micropolitics and the Cooking-Pot Revolution in Argentina”, *ZNet*, 29 August 2002. <http://www.zmag.org/content/>.
4. Thompson, E.P., “The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the 18th Century” and “Custom, Law and Common Right” in *Customs in Common: Studies in Traditional Popular Culture*, The New Press, New York, 1993, pp.97-258.
5. Zelizer, V., *The Social Meaning of Money: Pin Money, Paychecks, Poor Relief, and Other Currencies*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1997.
6. Janitfah, S., “Alternative Voices,” *Bangkok Post*, 8 December 2002, Perspectives p.6; Lohmann, L., “Polanyi along the Mekong”, March 2002, [www.thecornerhouse.org.uk/document/polyanim.html](http://www.thecornerhouse.org.uk/document/polyanim.html).
7. Illich, I., *Gender*, Pantheon, New York, 1983; Thompson, E.P., “The Moral Economy Reviewed” in op. cit. 4, pp.319-25.
8. Haskell, T.L., “Capitalism and the Origins of the Humanitarian Sensibility”, *American Historical Review*, April and June 1985, pp.339-361, 547-66. For the late 18th-century origins of the term “resource”, see Williams, R., *Keywords*, Fontana, London, 1976.

In 1982, Ivan Illich warned that “unless the distinction between scarce productive resources and shared, porous commons is philosophically and legally recognized, the coming *steady state society* will be an oligarchic, undemocratic and authoritarian expertocracy governed by ecologists.” He went on to note that the sense of “scarce” involved “should not be confused with (i) *rare birds* . . . however small the amount.” See Illich, I., *Gender*, Pantheon, New York, 1983, pp.18-19.

## Same Old Story: 200 Years of "Overpopulation" Debate

### *How real are the "powers of number" suggested by population graphs?*

"Population, when unchecked, increases in a geometrical ratio. Subsistence increases only in an arithmetical ratio. A slight acquaintance with numbers will show the immensity of the first power in comparison of the second."

T. R. Malthus, 1798

"Under optimal conditions, a single plant of the Indian species *Wolffia microscopica* [0.6 mm long] . . . could theoretically give rise to 1,000,000, 000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000 plants in about four months, with a spherical volume roughly equivalent to the size of the planet earth!"

Biology 100 text, 2002

"It is perfectly irrelevant to the question, whether we should double our population, that we cannot forsooth go on doubling it forever, unless, indeed, it could be shewn that by thus doubling it once, . . . we should be irresistibly impelled to go on doubling it afterwards."

William Hazlitt, 1807

"If data plotted by [population figures] can be made to look explosive, so can virtually any other series that increase over time. . . . Similar plots might have been used at various points in history to suggest runaway growth of anything from papyrus to buggy whips."

Griffith Feeney, 1990

### *How much can "population increase" explain?*

". . . clouds of Barbarians seemed to collect from all points of the northern hemisphere. Gathering fresh darkness and terror as they rolled on, the congregated bodies at length obscured the sun of Italy, and sunk the whole world in universal night. These tremendous effects . . . may be traced to the simple cause of the superior power of population to the means of subsistence."

T. R. Malthus, 1798

"The causal chain of the deterioration is easily followed to its source. Too many cars, too many factories, too much detergent, too much pesticides . . . too little water, too much CO<sub>2</sub> — all can be traced easily to TOO MANY PEOPLE . . . [and the] year-round sexuality of the human female."

Paul Ehrlich, 1968.

### *Who are too many?*

"A man who is born into a world *already possessed*, if he cannot get subsistence from his parents . . . and if the society do not want his labour, has *no claim of right* to the smallest portion of food . . . At nature's mighty feast there is no vacant cover for him. She tells him to be gone."

T. R. Malthus, 1803

"Overimmigration has had disastrous consequences for the quality of education available to poor inner-city Americans . . . indigenous non-human species . . . people and other creatures not yet born."

Ben Zuckerman and Stuart Hurlburt, 2001

"Mr Malthus denies to the unemployed poor the right to eat, but he allows the right to the unemployed rich man."

Francis Place, 1822

"The 'population problem' denotes both the population explosion of other peoples and too low a birth rate of one's own people. During the 19th century in France, one's own people were French, the others German and British. In Prussia, . . . the others were Jewish. Today the others are the Third World. In late-Victorian England, the others were the labouring classes."

Ian Hacking, 1990

"What ignorance, impudence and insolence must those base wretches have, who propose to *transport* the labouring people, as being *too numerous*, while . . . they say not a word against the prolific *dead-weight* [of] pensioners, placemen, soldiers, parsons, fund holders, tax gatherers or tax eaters!"

William Cobbett, 1826

"We know more about what makes females work than what makes males work. That's only because females create population problems. . . . The common pathway to turn off having people is females."

Dr Hugh Gorwill, 1992.

**Sources:** Malthus, T.R., *Essay on the Principle of Population*, first edition, 1798 and second edition, 1803; Hazlitt, W., *A Reply to the Essay on Population*, Longman, London, 1807; Feeney, G., "On the Uncertainty of Population Projections", in Demeny, P. and McNicoll, G., *The Earthscan Reader in Population and Development*, London, 1998; Cobbett, W., "The Valley of the Avon" in *Rural Rides*, reprinted in Pyle, A., *Population: Contemporary Responses to Thomas Malthus*, Thoemmes, Bristol, 1994; Zuckerman, B. and Hurlbert, S.H., "Is Overimmigration in the U.S. Morally Defensible?", *San Diego Union Tribune*, 3 August 2001; Hacking, I., *The Taming of Chance*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1990; Burfoot, A., "An interview with Dr Hugh Gorwill: Potential risks to women exposed to clomiphene citrate", *Issues in Reproductive and Genetic Engineering*, Vol. 5, No. 1, 1992.

## ***The difference between commons and resources is crucial to the population debate.***

9. Appleby, J.O., *Economic Thought and Ideology in Seventeenth-Century England*, Princeton, 1978, pp.28-9.
10. Smith, A., "Digression Concerning the Corn Trade and Corn Laws" in *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, 1776, Book Four, Chapter V.

field to the market. He could not store it in order to wait for a more propitious moment of sale; he could not move it to a distant market; he could not sell it to a middleman . . . while it stood in the field. Rather, he must load up his carts with his grain, proceed to the nearest market, and offer his year's harvest to his traditional customers. Similarly, the miller and the baker were constrained to push the grain processing along in an orderly fashion to its final form as a loaf of bread selling at a price set by the local assize court. If people died from hunger, . . . they did so blaming the harvest not the harvester. . . . At a time when the tiller of the soil had God to thank for the weather and the king to thank for his land, manipulating the fruits of the two could easily be viewed as wicked and ungrateful. . . . The selling of wares in towns and cities was as closely guarded by the company of craftsmen as the justices of the peace watched grain sales. Again, the social purpose of labour predominated . . . The pitting of skilled workman against skilled workman would promote neither the practice of their craft nor the well-being of their households."<sup>9</sup>

Elites eager to benefit from growing international trade and rising prices strained hard against such limitations. They were impatient to exploit opportunities to transform land, people, food, privileges and customs into transferable properties and resources. How could agricultural yields be maximized when different groups of people exercised a variety of use-rights to the land? How could grain traders take advantage of their greatest profit opportunity – times of physical scarcity – when that was exactly when the community tended to intervene to ensure that prices didn't go out of reach of local people?<sup>10</sup> How could enterprising improvers extract fixed measures of work from people who might down tools as soon as they had enough cash to get through the week? How could finance flourish if usury was a stigma?

## **Double Landscapes and Double Maps**

The double logic resulting from superimposed commons and resource patterns is nothing unusual. Similar dualities can be found everywhere.

One example is road systems. In many countries, meandering, narrow streets linking adjacent localities along local land contours coexist with broad, straight, high-cost thoroughfares suitable for moving goods or armies quickly across entire countries.

Both types of road system date back a long way (obsessively straight long-distance imperial roads go back at least to Roman times). Both are a part of everyday life. Both influence and interpenetrate the other. In some places, new superhighways overlay older roads through river valleys and mountain passes, eliminating bumps and slopes

with tunnels and overpasses. In others, they detour around towns, breeding their own small feeder roads. Farm carts and tractors invade highways built for private automobiles, while delivery lorries jostle for space with bicycles and foot traffic on winding dirt tracks.

Yet on some levels the two systems don't mix. Roads which link large, distant cities in unbroken straight lines may obliterate more villages than they serve. Straight, long-distance roads help generate the ability to feel "in a hurry", while winding dirt tracks may foster isolation or independence. Too many high-speed cars on local tracks, or too many donkey carts on hard-surfaced motorways, result in breakdown or gridlock. Nor is there any point in putting stretches of eight-lane concrete highway between antiquated single-lane bridges. Randomly stirring the

two systems together defeats the different advantages and freedoms each allows.

Such double landscapes require two different kinds of common sense to navigate – and two different kinds of map. An international road atlas is of little use in finding a local post office. A set of local ordnance survey maps is an awkward tool for discovering the quickest way from Boston to Manchester.

Computer-generated directions are often confusing because they leave out this unspoken context, treating superhighways and alleyways as part of the same system. They can flummox drivers by directing them "north 1.2 kilometres and then right" without telling them whether to look for a motorway entrance ramp or an old lane behind some shacks.



Commodification meant chipping away at the commons matrix to make room inside for a more impersonal, abstract, seemingly less embodied economic logic featuring balances of trade, exchange rates, foreign gluts and distant, unseen buyers. Prices set by regional supply and demand began to supersede local bargaining power, and long-distance commercial contracts to compete with local ties of obligation. Theorists flouted the authority of nobles by publishing mathematical tracts. Gaps appeared between religion and economic life. In some ways, “the market” became more real than markets. Landowners switched tenants and retooled live-in servants as short-term hires. As apprenticeship and guild membership were undermined, the state learned to view people under its control as a quantifiable block, a token of power and prosperity whose dimensions might be manipulated from above. Thinking about livelihood, intellectuals looked increasingly not only to heavenly hierarchies or Biblical parables but to the busy beehive: something whose inner workings weren’t immediately evident to the naked eye or body but which, with a little care, could be left to its own productive devices.

The question was how the beehive was supposed to work. As early as the 17th century, resource patterns were making the lives of many ordinary people increasingly precarious. Many of those who had work weren’t paid enough to live on. By the end of the 18th century, landlords held three-quarters of cultivated land, which tenant farmers worked with hired, landless labourers who outnumbered occupiers at least two to one. Rents were skyrocketing as more and more common lands were privatized. Marginal cottagers and smallholders were becoming labourers, while labourers were losing traditional rights and tenure.<sup>11</sup> Huge numbers were on welfare. Nor was there any way of letting the industrial system take the strain. Manufacturing was expanding only slowly and fitfully. Mechanization was itself often a cause of loss of work.

All this gave elites pause. Were some of the potential busy bees fated to become directionless drones buzzing out of control around the landscape? Should they emigrate or could they be kept on ice and disciplined for future use by landowners and factory owners? If so, how? Was pauperism an inevitable consequence of prosperity? If paupers were to be provided with a subsistence out of increasingly productive land, how could this charity be made to pay? Naturally, many prospective busy bees had their own views of the matter. Some moved to forest margins, some muttered about rebellion. For centuries, different sides picked out elements they liked from both commons and resource patterns, trying to mix and match them for maximum advantage.

- Many landed elites liked the idea of a land market and the idea of treating the lower orders as employees rather than servants or quasi-family members. But they themselves wanted to go on being treated as traditional, benevolent local masters. They liked the idea of making labour into a commodity – but didn’t like the idea of unions. They were as nervous about a full-blown national labour market as some of today’s neoliberals are about a genuinely global labour market and the unrestricted movement of people that entails. Distrusting manufactures, they were apprehensive about masterless people on the move who might squat on common lands, hinder enclosure, and flock to parishes with generous welfare arrangements. In the later 18th century, they became especially worried that high wages in town would jack up the cost of rural labour higher than farmers could afford and threaten the rural hierarchy. All this exposed them to attack from below.

***Commons and resource patterns each restrain the other.***

***People often picked and chose elements they liked from both commons and resource patterns.***

11. Williams, R., *The Country and the City*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1973; Snell, K.M.D., *Annals of the Labouring Poor: Social Change and Agrarian England 1660-1900*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1985; Hobsbawm, E.J., *Industry and Empire*, Penguin, London, 1968; Polanyi, K., *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time*, Beacon, Boston, 2001; Goody, J., Thirsk, J. and Thompson, E.P., *Family and Inheritance: Rural Society in Western Europe 1200-1800*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1976; Porter, R., *English Society in the Eighteenth Century*, Penguin, London 1982; Perkin, H., *The Origins of Modern English Society 1780-1880*, Routledge, London, 1969; Briggs, A., *A Social History of England*, Penguin, London, 1999; Hill, C., *Reformation to Industrial Revolution*, Penguin, London, 1969.

## ***Bread rioting rose to new levels in the late 18th century.***

## ***The lower orders were less inclined to defer to elites engaging in efficiency drives.***

- Many among the lower orders liked the idea of not having to defer to traditional superiors. Many also welcomed opportunities to move around the country. But they also wanted elites to go on honouring old obligations, and objected to the economizing measures landowners were adopting under the guidance of lawyers and bailiffs. They were outraged at tightened game laws and the loss of the social safety net of common pasture and woodland. And they resisted prices based on national or global supply and demand, which translated into the language of the commons as cruelty. Bread riots intermittently shook the country throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, rising to new levels in the 1790s, with blood-daubed loaves being carried through the streets by mobs of women and men enraged at the loss of “fair” pricing set locally by local magistrates.
- In the 17th and 18th centuries, the law tried to “reestablish through national authority the local responsibility that was so clearly being disrupted by forces beyond local control”. Throughout the period, the 1601 Poor Law continued to force thousands of individual parishes to provide subsistence to the needy, while the Statute of Artificers of 1563 was used to try to “replant labourers in their native soil” by instituting an idealized apprenticeship system.<sup>12</sup> But such efforts became increasingly riddled with contradictions. The Poor Law, under fire during the 18th century, came to breaking point around 1800. Trapped in their parishes at the mercy of the growing power of rural capitalism, labourers were being paid at a rate below subsistence. Local elites resorted to using parish poor rates to top up their wages to levels at which they could buy all their children enough bread to live on. The result was disaster. Why should farmers pay labourers a full subsistence wage if local ratepayers could pick up part of the salary bill? More and more people claimed relief. It became hard to tell poor labourers from dependent paupers. Productivity dropped. Individuals and small families were especially disadvantaged. Poor rates rose, seemingly without making a dent in pauperism. Even capitalists were demoralized, while other elites nursed old resentments against the “insolence” of boozy welfare dependents, unfavourably comparing them with the picture of the destitute they wanted to see – industrious poor widows and orphans responding to the “unexpected favours” of rich, benevolent landowners with “uplifted hands . . . bursting tears . . . [and] unfeigned gratitude”.<sup>13</sup>
- Elites who had often been content to idealize rural workers as pastoral clowns, boors, rogues and wenches began to want to see them more in the light of industrious, sober, respectful but cheerful producers divided between male breadwinners and female homemakers. Unfortunately, many rural labourers couldn’t seem to get with the programme. Failing to respond to more pay with more production in the approved “rational” fashion, they were still inclined to work for sufficiency, not accumulation. Their casual attitude toward showing up on the first day of the work week, immortalized in the joke phrase “Saint Monday”, infuriated commercializing elites. The economical way to control labour, it began to seem by the 18th century, was to switch it on or off by providing or withholding a wage slightly above starvation level (a resource pattern reinterpretation of “subsistence”) while applying harsh social controls. As one clergyman-theorist argued, hunger controlled people better than magistrates. But in that case it hardly made sense to guarantee the same subsistence to able-bodied but unemployed paupers. Conditions in workhouses, to which able-bodied people on

12. Appleby, J.O., op. cit. 9, p.56.

13. Townsend, J., *Dissertation on the Poor Laws*, 1786.

the dole were assigned, would somehow have to be made even worse than those of the most miserable labourer. Retranslated back into the language of commons rights, such attitudes again seemed a travesty of subsistence norms and undeserving of deference.

- Intellectuals were meanwhile trying but failing to reserve a space for subsistence rights within new, resource-oriented political theories. In the late 17th century, the philosopher John Locke clung to the view that the poor had a “natural” right to subsist by taking as much of “another’s plenty” as they needed to keep themselves from “extreme want”; private property rights were by contrast merely conventional. But at the same time he attacked the commons framework in which these supposedly God-given subsistence rights made most sense, and endorsed the resource idea that subsistence was not an end in itself but just a means to preserving the labour that was essential to national strength. By the mid-18th century, it was easy for David Hume to demote Locke’s “natural” right to subsistence to just another convention on a par with the current division of private property rights.<sup>14</sup> Other authors avoided talking about subsistence rights at all. Joseph Lee in the 17th century and Adam Smith in the 18th pitched their arguments to appeal to subsistence concerns, but claimed that they would be handled automatically by the market.<sup>15</sup>
- Middle-class moralists warped the commons norm of different gender spheres to erect an ideal according to which women were to be restricted to a devalued, “feminine” domestic realm related less to livelihood than to guaranteeing the transfer of private property down the male line. They then referred to the ideal to deny working men political rights. These, they held, belonged only to propertied male heads of households who “kept their wives at home in the private sphere”.<sup>16</sup> Women were increasingly excluded from trades such as carpentry and foundry that they had been apprenticed to together with men, sharpening the workplace’s sexual division of labour.<sup>17</sup> Owners were able to use low-paid female and child labour to undercut male wages. Later, the idea that this labour was necessary to new manufacturing patterns was used to argue that plebeian men should not be granted a “breadwinner wage”. All this brought new tensions and tactics to sexual politics.

## Enter “Overpopulation”

For most of the 18th century, the contradictions in such potentially explosive mixtures were contained. Food riots annoyed local notables but also served as pressure relief valves alerting them when commercialization was threatening the political order. Elites treated the masses with a combination of legal repression and shows of benevolence. The masses treated elites with a combination of shows of deference and anonymous threats. Mobs tended to be both rowdy and royalist, rebellious and deferential in turn, and easily enlisted by one or another elite benefactor.<sup>18</sup>

But things changed with the French Revolution at the end of the 18th century; the final, devastating phase of enclosure of commons; the continued failures of a partly commoditized economy; and growing pauperism. Middle-class radicals’ attacks on patronage, inequality and private property made it easier for workers and artisans to blame destitution on misrule and maldistribution. Tales of lost commons and subsistence

*Many mixtures of commons and resource patterns turned out to be unstable.*

14. Locke, J., *Two Treatises of Government*; Ashcraft, R., “Lockean Ideas, Poverty and the Development of Liberal Political Theory” in Brewer, J. and Staves, S., *Early Modern Conceptions of Property*, Routledge, London, 1996, pp.43-61.

15. Appleby, J.O., op. cit. 9; Smith, A., op. cit. 10.

16. Clark, A., *The Struggle for the Breeches: Gender and the Making of the British Working Class*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1995, pp.264-8.

17. Snell, K.M.D., op. cit. 11, pp.196-7.

18. Thompson, E.P., “The Patricians and the Plebs” in op. cit. 4, pp.16-96.

***Malthus aimed to show that it was not subsistence rights, but private property rights, that were natural.***

***Malthus was first and foremost a storyteller.***

rights began to sound seditious, not just nostalgic. Conflicts and alliance-building between men and women at home and in the workplace entered a new phase. Mobs began to oppose themselves to – rather than seek realignments with – the rich. Elites had to reorganize themselves as well. This was the moment modern overpopulation talk was born, along with the rest of modern economics.

One key figure is the parson and professor T. R. Malthus, who lived from 1766 to 1832. Malthus's most famous work, *Essay on the Principle of Population*, was a defence of private property and inequality against the assaults of utopian intellectuals such as William Godwin.<sup>19</sup> His deeper role was to undermine the legitimacy of commons patterns by helping to loosen, among elites, the residual grip of a culture of respect for subsistence rights that was blocking a fuller commoditization of labour and a sharper divide between owners and workers.

Malthus's method was to assure his peers that the bitter suffering they were seeing around them was not something anybody could do much about. Scarcity was not a sometime thing resulting from periodic natural disasters. It was a permanent feature of nature, always impinging disproportionately on the poor. Privatization was a necessary adaptation to it. Intellectuals like Locke had got things exactly the wrong way around. It was not subsistence rights that were natural, but private property rights. The Poor Laws might as well be abolished outright. Nobody should be compelled to take care of those who had lost out through privatization. Charity should be voluntary, not an obligation. Labourers had a right only to the food they could buy with their labour. The sooner they got that into their heads, the sooner they would learn to appreciate any benevolence that did happen their way. And the sooner landed elites got it into *their* heads that the subsistence ethic was untenable, the quicker they would realize they would gain neither the poor's deference nor national prosperity by pretending to respect it. But it was not only a facsimile of the old deference that was to be reconstructed within a resource pattern. Gender inequality, too, had to be rejiggered. The equality between men and women spoken of by figures like Godwin had to be shown to be as ungrounded a dream as the abolition of private property.

### **Malthus's Story**

Establishing all this was the job of art. Malthus would never have thought of himself as an artist. But art is what he did. He had few new facts to share. Instead, he imagined a story. It is the charm of this story, not its verisimilitude, that captured so many hearts then and afterwards.

Malthus's tale is about nature and the way it acts on humans to create private property, inequality and monogamous marriage. Imagine, Malthus says, a benevolent Godwinian utopia without property, possessiveness, marriage, inequality, misery, vice or luxury. Everybody would be supplied with what they needed out of available surplus. Leisure would be plentiful. Nobody would need to take responsibility for the future welfare of their children. Their paternity would be of no consequence; they would be provided for regardless.

Unconcerned about status, people would have no reason not to form attachments early and have plenty of children. But this would lead to scarcity. Crops would be stolen or harvested before they were ripe. People would sicken. Murder would threaten. People would begin worrying about self-preservation. Benevolence would be banished. Strife

19. Godwin, W., *Enquiry into Political Justice*, 1793; Malthus, T.R., *Essay on the Principle of Population*, first edition, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1993 [1798].



would reign. Nor would there be any chance of people's realizing their intellectual abilities.

To get themselves out of danger, people would seek ways of increasing produce and allocating it only to selected people. The only solution: private property. Land previously held in common would be divided up and every man's parcel secured against violation by anyone else. To check population growth, the costs of raising children would have to be made to fall on individuals, who would then be compelled to take responsibility for their upkeep. Or, rather, on individual men, who were society's propertyowners: women could not be expected to "have resources sufficient to support their own children".<sup>20</sup> Men would then be more inclined to hesitate before fathering children. Delay, of course, would have a feedback effect: older people have fewer children. Yet all this meant that men would have to know who their children were; it went without saying that they would never consent to helping raise anyone else's. But that created a problem: unlike women, who are seldom in much doubt about which children are theirs, men can never be quite sure. Human survival therefore dictated a sexual double standard under monogamy, by which women could "be almost driven from society for an offence which men commit nearly with impunity".<sup>21</sup>

But with private property and unequal marriage would come inequality in wealth. "Those who were born after the division of property would come into a world already possessed."<sup>22</sup> If their parents had not tailored their family size to their properties, they would have no land for themselves and could not legitimately demand it from others. Because benevolence had been wiped out during the first phase of subsistence crisis, smaller families, or families who had been lucky enough to extract more from their land, would be willing to share their surplus only with those whose labour could be used to produce yet more surplus. This could then be offered to still more propertyless people in return for yet more labour. If there was a huge supply of labourers, shares would be small, sickness and misery would grow, and population would be checked. But after more food was produced with the cheaper labour, wages would increase, and with it the population of the lower orders. The surplus the upper classes made available to the lower would be the limiting factor on population. Giving in to humanitarian impulses when the labourer population was high and suffering was great, by undertaking a radical redistribution of property – for example, turning luxuries, manufacturing capital, and the stipends of clergy and college fellows into emergency relief – would just encourage the poor to breed and increase the supply of labourers with insufficient work to do, keeping wages low. It would also increase food prices, impoverishing willing and active labourers, and would deprive the educated class of the leisure needed to develop their thinking on liberty and the market.

The best way the lower classes would have of improving their lot would be to control their numbers by cutting themselves loose from commons patterns and submitting to discipline by the market. Male labourers would have to try to save some of their families' wages. Fear of being laid off and sent to the workhouse, plus financial status competition, would help prevent them slacking off once they had earned a bare sufficiency. Delaying marriage would in turn further increase industry and economy, even if it meant men's resorting to prostitution. Birth control, on the other hand, in addition to being immoral, would lead only to indolence. The flip side of the pain associated with population pressure was that it called forth exertion and created intellect.

Malthus's narrative immediately outclassed the tales most other

*Malthus's tale suggested that inequality was inevitable.*

*So, it suggested, were monogamy and a sexual double standard.*

20. Malthus, T.R., op. cit., p.84.

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid., p.85.

***Malthus's tale  
promised to abolish  
feminism, radical  
politics and  
progress toward  
equality in one go.***

***Like the economists  
who succeeded him,  
Malthus compared  
society to a  
machine.***

23. Waterman, A.M.C., *Revolution, Economics and Religion: Christian Political Economy 1798-1833*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991.
24. Borges, J.L., "The Fearful Sphere of Pascal" in *Labyrinths*, New Directions Press, New York, 1964, p.189.
25. Mirowski, P., *Machine Dreams: Economics Becomes a Cyborg Science*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2002, p.9.
26. Steuart, J., *An Inquiry into the Principles of Political Oeconomy: Being an Essay on the Science of Domestic Policy in Free Nations*, London, 1767.

intellectuals were telling about the issues of the day. Revolution, the story suggested, should be neither hoped for nor feared. Contemporary society was neither a way-station on the road to some egalitarian utopia, as radicals imagined, nor would revolution plunge it permanently into a tyrannical dystopia, as reactionaries dreaded.<sup>23</sup> Nor did it rest on anything as mythical as a social contract. Scarcity, poverty, private property, inequality, food and labour markets, and unequal marriage were inevitable given any starting point whatever. Nature and God dictated that society ultimately be divided into owners and nonowners of land and sexuality alike. Subsistence rights for all were physically impossible to defend, making further moral debate about them pointless. If work was by nature a commodity with the same price across the country, any worker unable to command wages enough to live on would have to starve. Private property, not the poor laws, and not commons either, would provide the best possible deal for the poor, the best hope for allowing people to realize their potential, and also the best guarantee that the lower orders would continue to defer to the higher. In a way that nostalgic narratives could not, Malthus's tale of an endless return to nature's equilibrium promised to abolish feminism, radical politics and progress toward equality in one go.

### **Malthus's Metaphor**

**It may be that universal history is the history of a handful of metaphors.**

**Jorge Luis Borges<sup>24</sup>**

Malthus crowned his narrative by refurbishing old metaphors comparing society with a machine hooked up to nature and tended by wise elites. Earlier versions of such metaphors had been common currency at least as long as the beehive comparisons to which they are related. In the 14th century, Aristotelian commentator Nicole Oresme had introduced the idea of God as clockmaker (replacing the old figure of potter), and the image was passed down through Leibniz and Voltaire to the theologian William Paley, whose books were Oxford texts for both Malthus and Charles Darwin. The comparison reassured religious believers that bits of a device which seemed of little virtue in themselves could serve a higher purpose. Hunger, vice, profitmaking might all be part of a mechanism necessary for the achievement of a greater good. What's more, a clock, once set in motion, drives itself. It needs only to be wound, adjusted and repaired once in a while. Today, this literary figure of economy as machine occasionally wound up and adjusted by the state dominates policy thinking around the world. Economists – always "inordinately fascinated by machines"<sup>25</sup> – continue to develop the metaphor.

Long before Malthus, machine metaphors had also been formulated explaining how numbers of people could be regulated. In the mid-1700s, the theologian and statistician J. P. Susmilch had posited a sort of population thermostat correlating availability of farmland with rate of and age at marriage. In 1767, James Steuart, another clergyman-economist, had come up with a metaphor according to which:

"the generative faculty resembles a *spring* loaded with a weight, which always exerts itself in proportion to the diminution of resistance. . . . If . . . food be increased, . . . people will begin to be better fed; they will multiply, and in proportion as they increase in numbers, the food will become scarce again".<sup>26</sup>

Malthus upgraded the metaphor through a mathematical analogy. Population, he claimed, tends to increase geometrically (1, 2, 4, 8, 16, 32, 64, 128, 256, 512 . . .), while, even with ever-increasing applications of labour to land, food supply at most increases only arithmetically (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 . . .). The disparity between the two series increases extremely rapidly:

“The germs of existence contained in this spot of earth, with ample food and ample room to expand in, would fill millions of worlds in the course of a few thousand years.”<sup>27</sup>

By force or by foresight, the geometric power of population – the immensely powerful natural spring which drove Malthus’s machine narrative – had therefore to be constantly and strongly restrained.

Today many other metaphors jostle with Malthus’s for attention: population bombs and explosions, human floods and swarms, tiny lifeboats sinking under their human cargo, Petri dishes overwhelmed with the putrid toxins from proliferating bacteria, lemmings charging off cliffs, automobiles smashing into brick walls at high speed, and so on. But these catastrophe metaphors are nothing like as fertile as the seed from which they are derived: Malthus’s diverging curves  $y=2^x$  and  $y=x+1$ . A bomb goes off only once. A lifeboat sinks only once and a car can only be smashed into a brick wall once. But Malthus’s mathematical metaphor emphasizes that there is no need to wait for a bomb to go off or a lifeboat to sink. Pressure is *always* being exerted by abstract humans against an abstract “nature”, just as the curve of the equation  $y=2^x$  is always powerfully pulling away from  $y=x+1$ , no matter what the values of  $x$  happen to be at any particular time. Humans, at least the lower grade of humans, are *in principle* opposed to the rest of nature. Scarcity is built into their very interaction. Even one couple is potentially “too many”. Malthus’s deeper legacy is not the terror of the “population bomb” image, but the modern economic notion of scarcity and the enterprises – destructive and oppressive as well as productive – that it has sanctioned. Today’s orthodox economists are often closer to the spirit of Malthus than more consciously neo-Malthusian thinkers such as Paul Ehrlich.

## Malthus’s Triumph

**It is pictures rather than propositions, metaphors rather than statements, which determine most of our philosophical convictions.**

Richard Rorty<sup>28</sup>

Malthus’s triumph was as a poet, not as a rationalist. As many of his contemporaries noticed, his narrative, if treated as an argument, is circular. He booby-traps the egalitarian utopia he pretends to take from his opponents in such a way that it cannot help but degenerate into the unequal society he says is inevitable. The utopia he tries to reduce to absurdity resembles neither the Godwinian construct he says he is attacking nor the commons patterns which constitute his deeper target.

By quietly pre-dividing Godwin’s utopia into two classes, one of which breeds up to subsistence, the other of which does not, one of which has a right to live, the other of which does not, Malthus constructs the “imperious necessity” of inequality that he pretends to prove. By assuming from the outset that “it could not be expected that women should have resources sufficient to support their own children”, he makes inequality between the sexes a foregone conclusion. By treating

***Malthus’s metaphor suggested that the lower grade of humans were in principle opposed to the rest of nature.***

***Scarcity was permanent and inexorable.***

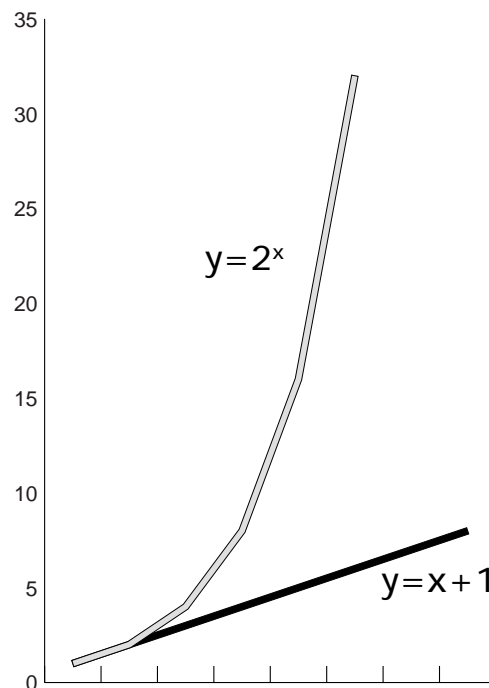
27. Malthus, T.R., op. cit. 19, p.14.

28. Rorty, R., *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1979, p.14.

## Late 18th-Century Guides for Looking at the Poor



**Thomas Gainsborough** (1727–1788) painted this rag-clad, barefoot *Cottage Girl with Dog and Pitcher* in 1785. Evidently found “natural and pleasing” by its well-off buyer, the picture portrayed a poverty which was felt to be ordained by nature — neither the responsibility of the rich nor an incitement to social change. Such children, it was felt, had to become inured to hard labour as a condition for sympathy. The role of the rich — benign spectators of labourers’ struggle to survive, unable to raise their wages or lower their rents — was to encourage them to work hard enough to feed their many dependants. The more oppressed the subjects of such paintings were, the bigger the opportunities for benevolence and philanthropy.



Some 13 years later, as unrest grew, **T. R. Malthus** (1766–1832) offered another picture of the life of the lower classes. The steeply rising curve is the “power of population” to rise when unchecked, the dark line the far feeblier power of food supplies to increase. Whereas for the rich, and for “civilized” societies, the upward thrust of the top curve is held in check by worries about loss of status, for the poor (and for “savage” and egalitarian societies) it strains more directly against the dark line representing subsistence. The picture helped turn the attitude that the “pressure of distress” on “the lower classes of society . . . is an evil so deeply seated that no human ingenuity can reach it” into a “provable” proposition.

**Sources:** Postle, M., *Thomas Gainsborough*, Tate Publishing, London, 2002; Barrell, J., *The Dark Side of the Landscape*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1980; Malthus, T.R., *Essay on the Principle of Population*, first edition, 1798.

commons patterns as little more than the absence of resource patterns, he ensures they will be indefensible.

In his narrative, Malthus conveys nothing of how real commons were “intensely owned”,<sup>29</sup> worked and preserved, instead portraying them mainly as a norm-free, unowned arena for profligacy and incessant baby-making. Correctly viewing private property as crucial for the security of the well-off, he fails to mention how often it was a threat to the security of the poor. (Privatizing common woodland, for example, frequently amounted to tearing to shreds what was known throughout Europe as “the poor’s overcoat”).<sup>30</sup> Instead of seeing subsistence guarantees as part of a complex network of obligations, he sees them as merely a licence for freeloading and antisocial behaviour.

Malthus’s picture of the poor’s fertility as a geometric series held in check mainly by hunger, vice and disease was possible only through

29. Thompson, E.P., “Custom, Law and Common Right” in op. cit. 4, p.183.

30. Lohmann, L. “Forests: Myths and Realities of Violent Conflict” in Suliman, M., ed. *Ecology, Politics and Violent Conflict*, Zed, London, 1999, pp.158–80. See also [www.thecornerhouse.org.uk/document/forpolvi.html](http://www.thecornerhouse.org.uk/document/forpolvi.html).



portraying their culture as a virtual vacuum. He saw that people at the grassroots did not behave as if they had read Adam Smith, but gave no sign of grasping what they *did* do. Instead he treated them as Others whose traits were simply the negation of those he wanted to see in his own class. They were present less as autonomous human actors than as “plants and animals” in a natural mechanism. At various times Malthus did try to back up this picture with anecdotal evidence from various countries, including the United States. But he ultimately acknowledged that his famous “power of number” was only an image – an admission demographers have confirmed. Nor could his narrative of the lower orders’ sexual response to wages below and above subsistence be squared with observable fluctuations in employment, which followed cycles shorter than the time needed for a generation to mature.<sup>31</sup>

On Malthus’s view, the poor would be frugal only if they recognized they had no God-given right to live. Real discipline, sexual restraint and foresight would have to come from the struggles for status and dignity more familiar to middle- and upper-class society:

“A man of liberal education, but with an income only just sufficient to enable him to associate in the rank of gentlemen, must feel absolutely certain that if he marries and has a family, he shall be obliged, if he mixes at all in society, to rank himself with moderate farmers and the lower class of tradesmen. The woman that a man of education would naturally make the object of his choice would be one brought up in the same tastes and sentiments with himself, and used to the familiar intercourse of a society totally different from that to which she must be reduced by marriage. Can a man consent to place the object of his affection in a situation so discordant, probably, to her tastes and inclinations?”<sup>32</sup>

Overwhelming as such preoccupations may have been for a genteel young man in Malthus’s situation, however, they did little to illuminate the moral disciplines at work in family and sexual politics among society’s majority. Throughout Malthus’s narrative, real women, like real commoners, are conspicuous by their absence. Women’s roles in the household economies of the lower orders disappear just as commons disappear. Missing, too, is any sense of women’s work outside the home – even the brief flashes of revelation that can be found in the tales of other well-off travellers such as William Hutton, who, approaching Birmingham in 1741, was:

“surprised at the prodigious number of blacksmith’s shops upon the road . . . In some . . . I observed one or more females, stripped of their upper garments, and not overcharged with the lower, wielding the hammer with all the grace of the sex.”<sup>33</sup>

Such gaps need not imply that Malthus was any more mischievous, prejudiced or dishonest than anyone else in his position. As historian E.P. Thompson notes, “it was always a problem to explain the commons within capitalist categories.”<sup>34</sup> And Malthus was right that the Poor Law was failing to fulfil its ostensible purpose.

All the more reason why, although Malthus’s artistic reach exceeded his empirical grasp, his imagery was persuasive to the most powerful sections of society. Like many of the painters of the age, he helped teach elites how to look (or not look) at paupers and at women, how to see beggary and hard labour as natural fixtures of society, and how to feel a benevolence toward the victims of the transition from paternalism to capitalism which could remain disconnected from any sense of

## *Malthus’s art succeeded by erasing many of the details of how his own society worked.*

31. Fine, B., *Marx’s Capital*, Macmillan, London, 1989, p.35. Already in 1804, Arthur Young had observed wryly that “Mr Malthus certainly knows that young men and women in the country do not marry with a view to the demand of the farmers, but are impelled by very different feelings” (Pyle, A., *Population: Contemporary Responses to Thomas Malthus*, Thoemmes, Bristol, 1994, p.108).

32. Malthus, T.R., op. cit. 19, p.32. Compare the expostulations of a character in Jane Austen’s *Sense and Sensibility* (1811, drafted more than a decade earlier) about the future of a young clergyman eager to marry a sweetheart:

“Wait for his having a living! – aye, we all know how *that* will end; – they will wait a twelvemonth, and finding no good comes of it, will set down upon a curacy of fifty pounds a year, with the interest of his two thousand pounds, and what little matter Mr Steele and Mr Pratt can give her. – Then they will have a child every year! and Lord help ‘em! how poor they will be!”

Malthus’s own first curacy paid £40. As he himself noted, such calculations were more characteristic of English society at all levels than that of many other countries.

33. Hutton, W., *History of Birmingham*, Birmingham, 1781, quoted in Snell, K.M.D., op. cit. 11, pp. 296-7.

34. Thompson, E.P., op. cit. 4, p.163.

***Malthus's story, like Gainsborough's paintings, endures not because it is true to life but because it is well-fashioned.***

***Like Malthus's original, many of today's neo-Malthusian arguments are circular.***

responsibility. Graphs derived from his narrative could usefully be exhibited alongside paintings such as Thomas Gainsborough's *Cottage Girl with Dog and Pitcher*, *The Woodcutter's Return* and *Charity Relieving Distress* (see Box, "Late 18th-Century Guides for Looking at the Poor", p.12).

Malthus's canvases, of course, are tinged, as he put it, with a more "melancholy hue" than those of most other artists. Not for him the lingering sentimentality of Gainsborough's paintings of picturesque working waifs. But as with such romanticized portrayals of the lower orders, much of Malthus's artistry consists in erasure. What he does not show is as remarkable as what he does. Critic John Barrell has traced the evolution of rural dwellers in English painting in the 18th century from the lusty, rustic clowns of the early Gainsborough to the diligent paupers of his later work to nearly-invisible dots in the landscapes of John Constable.<sup>35</sup> Malthus also performs a vanishing act on the rural lower orders. What disappears in his population narrative is virtually their whole society.

Yet to much of his audience, to point out that the poor were not like that would have been beside the point. Malthus's narrative, like Gainsborough's paintings, endures less because it is true to life than because it is well-fashioned. To wonder why the circularity, factual incorrectness and inconsistencies of Malthus's argument do not defeat it is to read it as something it is not. It redraws poverty and inequality, it does not explain them.

To audiences other than the one for which it was intended, the appeal of Malthus's art was limited. To many of his own contemporaries, his images of the poor were insulting. In many ways, his concepts of social life looked as empty to the lower orders as their notions of subsistence, commons and proper behaviour looked to him, and his notion of masculinity was unavailable to most labouring men.<sup>36</sup> But how to communicate this to those impressed by the formal beauty of Malthus's narrative? Malthus's acutest critics lived in a world so far removed from his that to them his views often seemed mad and evil, a bizarre stew of tautologies and falsehoods. Saying so did little to advance the debate. The success of Malthus with his chosen audience and his failure with others are two sides of the same coin, and one reason why his theories have so often seemed to be simultaneously common sense and nonsense.

## **The Story Continues**

Contemporary Malthusian arguments, like Malthus's own, owe much of their imperviousness to rational criticism to their artistry in repackaging social and cultural prejudices central to the identity of certain groups. Countering them with logic and evidence alone is unlikely ever to defeat them.

Like Malthus's original, many of today's neo-Malthusian arguments are circular. They are able to arrive (with shows of regret) at "conclusions" unfavourable to the underprivileged partly because they smuggle in assumptions prejudicial to them at the outset. For instance, immigration to Northern countries is sometimes criticized on the ground that "immigrants will adopt wasteful Northern lifestyles". This argument is advertised as non-racist and backed with impressive numbers. Yet the conclusion relies on the premise that changing Northern lifestyles is a lower priority, or less achievable, than preventing others from sharing

35. Barrell, J., *The Dark Side of the Landscape*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1980.

36. Clark, A., op. cit. 16.

them. Those who already follow those lifestyles are held to be entitled to them. Similarly, population programmes are disproportionately directed at women of colour not because they have been discovered to be at the root of social problems, or to have been engaging in parthenogenesis, but out of a pre-existing sexual double standard and because population itself, culturally defined in Malthus's day as poor commoners, is defined in ours as black and female.<sup>37</sup> (Book or magazine covers on the "population problem" would simply not be able to communicate what they are about if they used photographs of white, male middle-class office workers. Instead, they almost invariably feature people of colour, especially women and children.) Like Malthus's original, too, many neo-Malthusian arguments gain status from scientific mistakes attributable to cultural distance (*see* Box, "Learning or Instructing? The Culture of Malthusianism", pp.16-17). To many educated people today, as in Malthus's day, commons represent essentially a lack: a lack of discipline, a lack of education, a lack of ownership. Because unpriced, they are unvalued, and because unvalued, permanently threatened. More markets are the only alternative to chaos.

As in the 19th century, Malthusians often react to critics who attempt to point out the blank spaces in their picture of society as if they were making rude noises. To them, it is as if people were to criticize Gainsborough for not being a photographer. Efforts to trace environmental problems to inequality or erosion of commons are often brushed aside: "Yes, but what about future human numbers?" Just as in Malthus's day, this is not a hard-headed call to take note of any particular facts that critics have not already acknowledged – everybody knows that the earth cannot support trillions of human bodies and that humans often threaten their own environments – but rather an invitation to leave aside detailed, context-specific social analysis and return to the romance of the mathematics classroom where abstract, inexorable, monolithic tensions between "humans" and "nature" are played out in graphs on the blackboard or overhead-projector screen. This romance, as before, nurtures, and is nurtured by, blindness to human diversity and abstraction from the politics of the past and the present.

In 19th-century England, feelings about "population" divided largely along social fractures. Government ministers tended to be friendly to Malthusianism, working-class movements hostile. The debate went in circles partly because different sides had different interests. Today, too, positions on "overpopulation" often divide along North-South, rich-poor, man-woman lines. Yet different, even irreconcilable, positions are more likely now than before to nestle within the same individuals. So many contemporary institutions have made population their business that the concept has become a "quotidian universal", like capital cities or development programmes.<sup>38</sup> Every country has to have one. No one can survive a United Nations meeting, or even a backyard political discussion, without talking the talk. And no one is surprised when an author of a paper on (for example) climate change analyses industrial development and the politics of fossil fuel use for 20 pages, only to switch suddenly in the final paragraph to blaming the problem on "population increase".

This is another reason why harping on the logical failures of "overpopulation" talk is, as it was in Malthus's day, to miss much of its gist. As researchers Melissa Leach and James Fairhead write, it is not enough just to refute narratives which claim environmental destruction is inevitable under population pressure "in order to reveal 'accurate' realities beneath":

***The scientific errors  
of many neo-  
Malthusian  
arguments can be  
attributed to  
cultural alienation.***

37. *See, for example, Roberts, D., Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction and the Meaning of Liberty, Vintage Books, New York, 1999; Silliman, J. and Bhattacharjee, A., (eds.) Policing the National Body: Race, Gender and Criminalization, South End Press, 2002.*

38. Anderson, B., "Nationalism, Identity and the Logic of Seriality" in *The Spectre of Comparisons: Nationalism, Southeast Asia and the World*, Verso, London, p.33.

## Learning or Instructing?

T. R. Malthus's narrative about the rich and the poor, and about women and men, reflected his relations *with* them.

Malthus's well-off but quirky upbringing equipped him well to respond to the diverse sensibilities of his elite audience. His father Daniel was a landowner, yet also a radical, an inveterate traveller, an intimate of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, a translator of Goethe's *Sorrows of Werther* – and an enthusiast for free-ranging intellectual discussion in his own household. Malthus's mother was of equally good family – she and her siblings had famously had their portrait painted as children by William Hogarth – but was more conventional, and was discomfited when Daniel made her remove her wedding ring. Although sent to Dissenting tutors outside the religious establishment, the young Malthus was raised in the mainstream Anglican church. Although he himself had no fortune in land, he was from an early age quick to defend landed wealth. At Cambridge University, Malthus excelled at mathematics, idolized Isaac Newton, read Adam Smith, and settled on a career as a country clergyman. This was not necessarily a modest ambition. Clergy dominated many areas of 18th century R & D: statistics, natural

history, and the important technical subject of theodicy, or explaining how a benevolent God could countenance the apparent evil in the world. Such a background helped ensure that Malthus was willing to listen to both radical and conservative voices, to see others' point of view, to enter into lively debate, to value ingenuity, and to follow an idea wherever it led – all of which made him well prepared to undertake a creative, sympathetic critique of both egalitarianism and paternalism.

Malthus also had a type of direct experience with the poor which some of his class lacked. During a formative period of his young life, he had been curate at a tiny chapel in an out-of-the-way corner of rural Surrey. Having put in time visiting labouring families in dirt-floored cottages made of clay daubed over woven twigs and branches, he had no truck with romantic views of the life of the poor:

"The sons and daughters of peasants will not be found such rosy cherubs in real life, as they are described to be in romances. The sons of labourers are very apt to be stunted in their growth . . . Boys that you would guess to be fourteen or fifteen, are upon enquiry, frequently found to be eighteen or nineteen."

Yet despite the evident sympathy

and desire to act that his experience helped cultivate in him, Malthus listened no more carefully to the voices issuing from such cottages than the romantics he attacked did. Like most members of polite 18th-century English society, Malthus remained culturally aloof. His contemporary, the crusading journalist William Cobbett, spoke to and argued *with* the lower orders, including women agricultural labourers, through his tours and writings. Another contemporary, the essayist William Hazlitt, though he wrote and spoke primarily for his peers, claimed to have learned *from* the lower orders, including working women. Malthus, on the other hand, neither sustained a conversation *with* the lower orders nor claimed to have learned anything *from* them. Instead, he proposed education *for* them, to correct their lack of understanding of the natural order. Convinced they were idle, dissolute and improvident, he viewed their stunted offspring as an outcome of an indiscipline reinforced by misguided paternalism and faulty instruction from the state that "King and country" wanted more subjects.

In fact, as one working-class leader, Francis Place, pointed out, the poor could not afford to be idle, and their sexual behaviour had never been guided by state directives. Malthus, he said, lacked the "opportunity of judging correctly of the working people":

"Rather, attention should also be paid to how these narratives arise and become entrenched, and how they serve the institutions and individuals who deploy them."<sup>39</sup>

### Malthusian Ritual

**From the collective violence . . . a new culture is founded.**

**Rene Girard<sup>40</sup>**

What kind of story is the Malthusian narrative? What genre does it belong to? The obvious answer is tragedy. In Malthus's tale, well-intentioned, all-too-human (if slightly cartoonish and future-blind) heroes fight for equality and material improvement, only to come to grief through the enmity of nature and the tragic flaw of failing to acknowledge their own incorrigible individualism. Their strivings temporarily disturb an eternal system which, after a short time of tragic upheaval,

39. Leach, M. and Fairhead, J., "Challenging Neo-Malthusian Deforestation Analyses in West Africa," *Population and Development Review* 26, 1, March 2000, pp.17-43.

40. Girard, R., "Generative Scapegoating" in Hamerton-Kelly, R.G., *Violent Origins: Ritual Killing and Cultural Formation*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1987, p.90.



# The Culture of Malthusianism

“ . . . his own notions, his rank in life, his very profession and their reserve and suspicion have all conspired to prevent him. . . . Mr Malthus has seen, every body has seen, the conduct of the dissolute among the labouring classes; they are open to continual observation. . . . [But o]f the virtues of the working people it is not possible for Mr Malthus to be accurately informed, for they are unobtrusive, and must be sought out.”

Unsurprisingly, while admired for the courtesy he showed to his peers, Malthus did not respond to critics outside his class.

Malthus’s followers tend to share these traits, helping ensure that the intellectual battle between them and their sharpest critics has seldom been joined in more than 200 years. To the 19th-century English elites who embraced Malthus, as the irascible writer Charles Dickens never tired of repeating, the “people they governed were not real.” To most 20th-century development specialists, too, the opinions of grassroots folk are less interesting than those of their professional colleagues and social betters. The history of “population science” is full of technocrat-tourists who see, hear, smell and sympathize with, but tend not to converse at length with, the poor. Thus Paul Ehrlich in Delhi:

“I have understood the population explosion intellectually for a long time. I came to understand it emotionally one stinking hot night in Delhi, a few years ago . . . The streets seemed alive with people. People eating, people washing, people sleeping. People visiting, arguing, and screaming. People thrusting their hands through the taxi window, begging. People defecating and urinating. People clinging to buses. People herding animals. People, people, people, people, people . . . since that night I’ve known the feel of overpopulation.”

The cultural distance symbolized by the gap between those inside and those outside that taxi window has encouraged some startling empirical mistakes both in Malthus’s time and ours, as experts have continually underestimated the intellectual content of commons patterns. Such errors are more easily avoidable by researchers who, unlike Malthus, actually converse with, rather than just discourse about, the poor.

For example, development and conservation institutions, entranced by the Malthusian assumption that humans are always threatening “nature”, and that the more humans the greater the threat, have mistaken forest islands of the *campos* in certain parts of Brazil, or in the forest-savanna

transition zone in Guinea, for the disappearing remnants of a forest which was once much greater. Researchers who ask local people for their life stories, and look through archives, have, on the other hand, discovered that they are largely the fruits of deliberate human action. Similarly, neo-Malthusian narratives describing how increased human numbers have recently disturbed an earlier Ethiopian “harmony with nature”, because false, have led to destructive development programmes.

**Sources:** James, P., *Population Malthus: His Life and Times*, London, 1979; Malthus, T.R., *Essay on the Principle of Population*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1993; Place, F., *Illustrations and Proofs of the Principle of Population*, Longman, London, 1822; Wilson, E., *The Wound and the Bow*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1941; Ehrlich, P., and Ehrlich, A.H., *The Population Explosion*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1990; Fairhead, J. and Leach, M., “Enriching the Landscape: Social History and the Management of Transition Ecology in the Forest-Savanna Mosaic of the Republic of Guinea”, *Africa* 66 (1), 1996, pp.14–36; Posey, D., “Indigenous Management of Tropical Forest Ecosystems: The case of the Kayapo Indians of the Brazilian Amazon”, *Agroforestry Systems* 3, 1985, pp.139–58; Hoben, A., “Paradigms and Politics: The Cultural Construction of Environmental Policy in Ethiopia”, *World Development* 23, 6, pp.1007–21.

resettles into a “darkly-tinted” equilibrium suspiciously resembling modern capitalist society.

The same is true of many of the stories penned by Malthus’s successors in biology and economics. The most famous neo-Malthusian narrative even bears the title “tragedy”. Writing in *Science* in 1968, the plant biologist and eugenicist Garrett Hardin revived 19th-century critiques of commons regimes through a tale tracing what he called the “tragedy of the commons”. In Hardin’s tragedy, a common pasture is destroyed when its users, a group of stick figures evidently unacquainted with real commons patterns, all try to maximize their own individual short-term gain from the unpriced grass by grazing as many cows on it as they think they can get away with.<sup>41</sup>

Such tragedies are not just stories. They prescribe solutions as well as describe problems. They suggest to governments where to look for the main action and where to look for the subplot. They discount the significance of the puzzling gestures alien cultures make and rule out

41. Hardin, G., “The Tragedy of the Commons”, *Science* 162, 1968, pp.1243–8; Acheson, J. and McKay, B., op. cit. 3.

***Malthus's tragic tale can be seen as an account of scapegoating narrated from the viewpoint of the persecutors.***

***Malthus's tale defended expelling a whole class of Others from society.***

alternative endings. They give clues on how to reorganize institutions to forestall final-act bloodbaths. The institutions then churn out more stories, which in turn create yet more of their own realities. All these dramas are re-staged every day in the brains of staff at the World Bank, bilateral aid agencies and university economics departments, ever eager to imagine they are seeing a biome expiring theatrically at the hands of overnumerous commoners or a crisis magically averted by a macroeconomist Prospero.

There is a further practical reality to these “tragedies”. Literary critic Rene Girard has proposed that the myths on which many tragedies are based be read as accounts of “scapegoating narrated from the viewpoint of the persecutors” in which “the victimizers see themselves as the passive victims of their own victims.”<sup>42</sup> Malthus’s population narrative fits this pattern closely. For two centuries critics have complained that Malthusian mathematics, by failing to address the underlying causes of poverty or environmental destruction, scapegoats the oppressed. The indictment is true, but barely hints at the dimensions of the scapegoating involved. The role of the scapegoat is to absorb not only blame but also violence, and by doing so to make society possible. Scapegoating is not just mythmaking, just as mythmaking is not just telling lies. It is also killing, a use of death for symbolic purposes. Much of the power of population concepts lies here.

The era in which the overpopulation discourse came of age was one of stupendous suffering. It was suffering which was felt to be new in its volume, intensity and possible consequences. “Within three miles of the house where I am writing these pages,” wrote Gilbert Wakefield, Malthus’s tutor, in the same year that his old student was composing his *Essay on Population*:

“there is a much greater number of starving miserable human beings . . . than on any equal portion of ground through the habitable globe.”<sup>43</sup>

Such suffering could not be ignored. It had to be addressed if not eased, accounted for if not justified. Between 1770 and 1830, explanations and proposals for action flooded the public realm. Added to old theories attributing pauperism to God’s plan or the poor’s indiscipline were new ones citing drug addiction, bad administration, primogeniture, maldistribution, inequality and so on. The ferment over mass poverty and the poor laws shaped the minds of every intellectual of the time and for long afterwards: from Mary Wollstonecroft to Charles Darwin, from Harriet Martineau to Karl Marx, from Robert Owen to Herbert Spencer.<sup>44</sup>

During the early 19th century in England, the tide of these explanations shifted decisively among intellectuals. Malthus’s appeal to “imperious necessity” united conservatives like Edmund Burke with utilitarians like Jeremy Bentham, and even appealed to some feminists and the odd working-class intellectual like Francis Place. Within a generation, Malthus’s population story created a massive conviction across a whole range of influential English elites that the underlying cause of distress among the poor was overpopulation. Misery was unavoidable, poverty in the midst of plenty was no paradox, emergency relief was largely misguided, and a reserve army of labour awaited discipline by nature.

The suffering of an era of swift transition became worse still. As welfare was chipped away and poor rates held down, workhouses were made as like prisons as possible in accordance with Malthusian ideals of instruction. The Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, enacted with a

42. Girard, R., op. cit. 40, pp.79, 91. See also Rebel, H., “Dark Events and Lynching Scenes in the Collective Memory”, in Scott, J.C. and Bhatt, N., (eds.), *Agrarian Studies: Synthetic Work at the Cutting Edge*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2001, pp.44-65; Connerton, P., *How Societies Remember*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1989, p.49; Wollheim, R., *The Sheep and the Ceremony*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1979.

43. Quoted in Thompson, E.P., *The Making of the English Working Class*, Penguin, 1980, p.192.

44. Polanyi, K., op. cit. 11; Ashcraft, R., op. cit. 14; Kerr, B., *Bound to the Soil: A Social History of Dorset 1750-1918*, John Baker, London 1968, p.96.

respectful nod to Malthus, accompanied, historian E. P. Thompson writes:

“perhaps the most sustained attempt to impose an ideological dogma, in defiance of the evidence of human need, in English history.”<sup>45</sup>

With his population story, Malthus had helped create a fused class of paupers and labourers at the same time he seemed to be only describing it.

The story went on to explain how the killings which followed were for the best. While the people who were killed may have meant no harm, their nature victimized the community. Recalcitrant yokels, unmannerly Others, irreverent commoners undisciplined into infinite needs – all had to be either reformed or expelled from a rapidly marketizing social order. In the process, many were degraded into even more contemptible beings in need of still harsher measures of exclusion. On a Malthusian view, there was no malevolence in these killings. The poor died from neglect, work, or their own nature. If they were treated brutally, it was for their own good and that of others. Relief would only cause more suffering. Abolishing it could be no crime. Later, similar killings took place in Ireland, India and elsewhere.<sup>46</sup> They are still being carried out today. On the evergreen view that “the market” is a natural global machine independent of culture, they are inevitable.

One name for such processes of repeated sacrifice and denial, fuelled by unanimous agreement on implausible premises, is ritual. During the 19th and 20th centuries, the administration of poverty became a ritual in which millions were subjected to violence as the scapegoats for a social plague of which they themselves were the victims. As “over-population”, they were offered up to an implacable nature in everyday rituals preserving the idealistic image of a self-regulating market.

Given that population is stridently portrayed today as the “enemy” of nature, it is useful to remember that in the early 1800s, as today, it is not only humans who were lynched. The 19th-century English “poet of

*In Malthusian rituals, it is not only humans who are lynched.*

45. Thompson, E.P., op cit. 43, p.295.

46. Davis, M., “Origins of the Third World: Markets, States and Climate”, Corner House Briefing No. 27, December 2002, [www.thecornerhouse.org.uk/briefing/27origins.html](http://www.thecornerhouse.org.uk/briefing/27origins.html) or [27origins.pdf](http://www.thecornerhouse.org.uk/briefing/27origins.pdf)

## The Endless Go-Round over “Free Markets”

**When economists are asked why almost all of them believe in free trade, they will say that it is a “theoretical” argument that persuades them. Further inquiry will reveal that it is in fact a pretty diagram that persuades them.**

**Deirdre N. McCloskey**

Sixty years ago, the economic historian Karl Polanyi identified as the “most important problem of recent social history” the question whether the:

“concept of a self-regulating market was utopian, and its progress was stopped by the realistic self-protection of society [or whether] all protectionism was a mistake due to impatience, greed

and shortsighted-ness, but for which the market would have resolved its difficulties”.

As ex-World Bank chief economist and Nobel laureate Joseph Stiglitz recently pointed out, the evidence has come down hard in favour of the first answer: “Truly free markets for labor or goods have never existed”. But, as Stiglitz goes on to say, the tidings “all too often” seem not to have reached policymakers.

Nor, apparently, has the news that market discipline has never been more than selectively applied. From William Cobbett in the 1830s to Karl Marx in the 1860s, Walter Lippmann in the 1920s, Polanyi in the 1940s and Noam Chomsky in the 2000s, critics have asked why, if “free markets” are such good medicine for the poor, they are so

seldom prescribed for the rich. Few have ever received an answer.

Just as Malthus saw social problems resulting not so much from overhasty as from insufficient privatization, so his contemporary followers claim that they stem not from commodification but from a lack of it; not from development, but from incomplete development; not from globalization, but from thwarted globalization.

**Sources:** Polanyi, K., *The Great Transformation*, Beacon, Boston, 2001 [1944]; Chomsky, N., “Free Trade and Free Market” in Jameson, F. and Miyoshi, M., *Cultures of Globalization*, Duke University Press, 1998; McCloskey, D., *The Rhetoric of Economics*, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, Second Edition, 1998.

***New narratives  
and metaphors are  
needed to counter  
those of  
Malthusianism.***

***These are likely to  
emerge only from  
efforts to form new  
alliances.***

47. Summerfield, G., ed., *John Clare: Selected Poetry*, Penguin, London, 1990, p.196.  
48. Thompson, E.P., op. cit. 4, p.184.

This briefing is written by  
Larry Lohmann of The  
Corner House.

enclosure”, John Clare, saw privatization’s degradation of the natural world of common lands as indivisible from the sufferings of the people who relied on them. Even moles who used to share common pastures were set upon by bounty hunters hired by agricultural improvers, the animals’ bodies strung up on trees to:

“ . . . hang sweeing to the wind  
On the only aged willow that in all the field remains  
And nature hides her face while they’re sweeing in their chains  
And in silent murmuring complains  
Here was commons for their hills where they seek for freedom still  
Though every commons gone . . . ”<sup>47</sup>

The moles “sweeing” recall the human rioters hanged for their role in the popular “Captain Swing” rebellions of 1830.<sup>48</sup>

No one on the receiving end of such rituals needs any acquaintance with literature to take a contrarian’s view of the “tragedy” which forms their script. Like Girard, they will see it as a story of scapegoating told by the persecutors which brings about what it seeks to prevent. From this angle, the “concern for the poor” to be found in Malthus and his followers can be seen structurally as that of the priest officiating at a sacrifice ridding the community of a plague. Here again, Malthus’s art both resembles and differs from that of fashionable 18th- and 19th-century painters of rural urchins whose suffering is seen as an opportunity for self-congratulatory pity and charity. Both art forms turn aside calls for social change and for reassessment of responsibility, but they do so in different ways.

This is one more reason why evidence has such a small effect on discussions about how to deal with “overpopulation”. Such discussions usually revolve not around the search for interesting truths but around everyday rituals expressing elite strivings for group solidarity and survival. Much of their “common sense” is owed to the familiarity of ceremonies in which the blood of the past is recalled and justified only to sanctify the violence of the future. When a sacrifice to the market seems to fail, it is repeated with variations: “feminist” population control, “participatory” water privatization. Complaining too literal-mindedly about the irrationalities of such procedures misses the point. Overpopulation talk gives old conflicts new forms. That is its point. Subjecting it to more scientific criticism will not get rid of that point.

Seeking a path out of the repetitive debate about “overpopulation” may mean abandoning the search for some theoretical key which will, all by itself, magically unlock the hold of the concept on the imagination. It is probably too late for that. A more creative way forward may be to join in concrete counter-alliances challenging neoliberalism, eugenics, racism and new forms of discrimination against immigrants, women, the disabled and the aged. Only through efforts to form new alliances will new counter-narratives and counter-images become possible which can hold their own against the tales, metaphors and rituals binding the networks for whom economic scarcity and the inevitability of wholesale privatization and population control remain sacred writ. What stories can rural dwellers relate about how they came to build up their forest islands or improve their soils? What tales can immigrants tell about the pressures, terrors or temptations that have brought them to new countries? What metaphors can tie such narratives together in ways which engender new commitments and mutual responsibility? Proving “overpopulation” theories wrong may matter less than what happens next.