



Making Threats

**Biofears and
Environmental Anxieties**

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Malthusianism and the Terror of Scarcity

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“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.”¹

--T. R. Malthus, *Essay on the Principle of Population*

Since 1798, when the Reverend T. R. Malthus wrote these lines, Malthusianism has been one of the great scare stories: a tale of overnumerous Others menacing Us. For 19th-century French elites, these Others were German and British; for Prussian intellectuals, Jews; for late-Victorian English elites, the laboring classes of their own nation.² In the early 20th-century U.S., they were immigrants from Southern Europe or China, or the “morons” and “unfit” infesting slums or backward rural areas. In the 1990s, the overpopulated Others included the “loose molecules” of disaffected West African youth.³ Today they are immigrants captured at night on heat-sensing cameras as pale, leech-like blobs swarming over fences to take advantage of Britain's National Health Service or California's job opportunities; or arrogant, sly “welfare queens” breeding up to welfare budgets in U.S. cities;⁴ or, post-9/11, the dangerous “youth bulge” stirring up trouble in “Muslim countries”.⁵

In the Malthusian story, how many of Us there are is not usually a problem. Crowding at Indian railway stations is due to Their wanton breeding; crowding at London stations to Our government's poor transport plan-

ning. Covers of books on the “population problem” feature photographs not of

the white middle class but of people of colour, usually women and children. What typically worries Malthusians is the idea that everything We have had to work hard for - property, the fruits of intellectual and physical labor, political power, survival itself - will fall to feckless Others through mere fecundity. Yet as borders between Us and Them dissolve, shift and reform as different threats loom or recede, even We Ourselves can intermittently slip into the category of overpopulating Others. Women who are Us in some lights become Them in others. “Females create population problems,” said one population control scientist a decade ago. “The common pathway to turn off having people is females.”⁶ And the Northern middle classes -- the customary Us of the Malthusian story -- periodically have to share the spotlight as part of the Other of nature, the mindless “human virus” infecting the planet. At the same time, people who are ordinarily Others sometimes attain temporary status as Us when both are faced with a more menacing Outside Other: two U.S. experts recently pointedly included “poor inner-city Americans” among those whose educational opportunities were threatened by “over-immigration”.⁷

But Malthusianism is not only an ever-adaptable tale of “darkness and terror”, “congregated bodies” and impending “universal night”. That is only its werewolf side, the side that comes out after sunset, around the storytelling fire. There is also a daylight Malthusianism that draws in its claws and feels no need to show its teeth, that to its adherents “goes without saying”. This is the Malthusianism that more visibly underpins a scaffolding of two centuries of productive thinking about private property, “free markets,” government policy, development, and biology. From what it sees as a natural, quasi-logarithmic relationship between available food and the labor used to grow it, this Malthusianism derives or predicts a political regime featuring a zero-sum game between humans and nature, economic scarcity, enclosure, market-allocated food and labour, inequality and sharp divisions between owners and nonowners of land and sexuality. It follows from this derivation that a whole range of social thinkers have been misinformed: not only revolutionaries, egalitarians, utopians, and do-gooders, but also those who have feared that revolution would lead to permanent tyranny; not only commoners convinced of their own right to subsistence, but also aristocrats persuaded that earning the poor's deference means fulfilling traditional paternalistic obligations to them.

Grim as it may be, this theoretical Malthusianism does its best not to present itself as a scare story of Others menacing Us. The man who invented it

(this chapter's epigraph notwithstanding) was not a xenophobic demagogue, but a courteous, cosmopolitan clergyman, theodist, and mathematician who professed as much concern as many others of his genteel background about the plight of the poor. Even today his theory helps shape an enlightened middle class's sense that there is something “natural” about market discipline. To question it is typically not to run up against the fearful, closed-faced rage of obsessive bigots, but rather the blank-faced, bewildered anger of ordinary people who feel that common sense, even civility itself, are being challenged, and can't understand why.

What is the relationship between these two aspects of Malthusianism -- the dark, often racist scare stories on the one hand and, on the other, the polite establishment wisdom about how society must be analyzed and organized? And what can this relationship tell us about how both aspects work in contemporary politics, and about the permanent appeal of Malthusianism?

Obviously, some tension exists between the two sides of Malthusianism. Malthus himself tried to dissociate the two when he insisted his theory was actually on the side of the poor, pointing them toward the discipline needed for survival and success. He also famously withdrew an inflammatory passage in the 1803 edition of his major book in which “nature” bid the landless and jobless “begone” from her dinner table. So, too, contemporary Malthusians have periodically tried to dissociate themselves from the Us-and-Them narrative. Some have even pointed out, with some justice, that economists in the tradition to which Malthus belongs tend have a better anti-racist record than many virulent anti-Malthusians such as Charles Dickens.⁸

Yet, equally obviously, the two sides of Malthusianism have affinities. Even if they appeal to somewhat different audiences, they serve many of the same purposes. In Malthus's own time, the objective was a defense of private property and inequality against the assaults of utopian intellectuals at a time of popular unrest and revolution in Europe. It was also to loosen, among elites, the residual grip of a culture of respect for subsistence rights that was blocking a fuller commodification of labour and a sharper divide between owners and workers. In our own time, when what the late Ivan Illich called the “war against subsistence” has entered a new stage, the common objective of the two Malthusianisms has expanded to include a defense of technocratic management of peoples and their reproductive organs and genes in the service of (Our) economy and environment.

In addition, both aspects of Malthusianism are often found in the same places. The same book that talks about “darkness and terror”, Malthus's *Essay on the Principle of Population*, also broaches technical ideas in economics[] that are still being worked through today. A contemporary neo-Malthusian such as Paul Ehrlich, similarly, is capable of writing in one book about the “feel of overpopulation” brought on by encounters with the Others he found in Delhi –

“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”⁹ –

while discoursing in the next on technical themes in population biology.

Both aspects of Malthusianism, finally, have always been jointly subject to suspicions from the left. In the early 19th century, William Cobbett satirized Malthusian “feelosophy” as a coverup for “parson”ish Us-and-Them prejudices:

“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!”¹⁰

More recently, feminists have criticized Malthusianism as masculinist in both theory and practice: undermining cooperation and discussion while inspiring population control programs which amount to “something like a war” against women and the poor.

In this chapter, I want to suggest that the Malthusian “darkness and terror” narrative about Us and Them and the Malthusian economic model are united by more than common authorship, common purposes and common critics. Though they seem on the surface to belong to different genres, the two Malthusianisms strengthen and complement each other structurally.

The first part of this chapter retells the would-be predictive Malthusian political economy story against its historical background. A second part describes how the economic model contained in the story needs Us-and-Them fear narratives and metaphors to get itself out of conceptual trouble and to distract or rally the troops in times of cultural confrontation, social upheaval, or theoretical uncertainty. A final section details how the Us-and-Them narratives also need the Malthusian mathematics: to displace and elevate themselves into ritual and tragedy and perpetuate and reconstitute themselves as civil common sense.

THE MALTHUSIAN STORY

In a sense, Malthus was for one revolution but against another. Despite reservations about manufacturing, he stood mostly behind the revolution that in his time was trying to turn commons¹¹ into resources - that is, to commodify labor, privatize common land, replace “fair” food prices set by local magistrates with market prices, and so forth. At the same time, he opposed the political and intellec-

tual upheavals that, coinciding with the French Revolution, were stressing equality (including gender equality) and the overthrow of hierarchical institutions.

The first revolution was only partly underway at the time he was writing (and, as Karl Polanyi argued more than a century later, can never be fully carried out anyway),¹² and Malthus's stance could not but be controversial. His particular point of attack was the felt right to subsistence or survival - an aspect of commons structures that interferes with market mechanisms because it tends to override exclusive individual rights to possess, exchange, and accumulate. It was a timely target. The formal welfare system of his time, still administered under a 1601 law by local authorities, was in disrepute. Confined to 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. But there was little need for farmers to 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. Other elites resented the "insolence" of boozy welfare dependents who were failing to live up to 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".¹³ With figures like Malthus tugging at the thread consisting of the idea that everybody had subsistence rights, the tattered fabric of the commons ethic was even closer to coming apart than it had been before.

Malthus's stance pitted him against both elite traditionalists who still valued subsistence rights as part of a paternalistic system ensuring their own status and commoners who were adversely affected by the commercial revolution. But it also set him against the democratic currents whose influence was helping to shift modes of popular protest used under the older paternalism toward new ones informed by utopian and anti-private-property currents of thought. 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. 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.

Malthus tried to establish his case by telling a story about nature and the way it acts on humans to create private property, inequality and monogamous marriage. Imagine, Malthus says, a benevolent utopia without property, possessiveness, inequality, misery, marriage, vice, or luxury. Everybody would be supplied with what they needed out of available surplus. Leisure would be plentiful. People would not need to take responsibility for the future welfare of their children. It would be of no consequence who their father was; 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 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 property owners: Malthus wrote that women could not be expected to "have resources sufficient to support their own children".¹⁴ 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, Malthus said, could "be almost driven from society for an offence which men commit nearly with impunity".¹⁵

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,"¹⁶ wrote Malthus. 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 property-less 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, as would 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, luxuries and manufacturing capital - would just encourage the poor to breed. The supply of labourers with insufficient work to do would grow, keeping wages low. Food prices would increase, impoverishing willing and active labourers. And the educated class would be deprived of the leisure needed to develop their thinking on liberty and the market, as well as their role in creating demand for luxury goods.

Revolution, the tale suggested, should be neither hoped for nor feared.¹⁷ Contemporary society did not 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 welfare legislation, 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. Malthus's tale of an endless return to nature's equilibrium promised to abolish feminism, radical politics, and progress toward equality in one go.

Like most great narratives, Malthus's tale can also be read as a metaphor. The overarching image is an old one comparing society with a machine hooked up to nature and tended by wise elites. Already 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, profit-making 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”¹⁸ - continue to develop the metaphor.

Long before Malthus wrote, moreover, 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.¹⁹ 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”.²⁰

Malthus famously upgraded this metaphor through a mathematical analogy, which is itself a novel narrative. 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.”²¹

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

Today many other metaphors jostle with Malthus's for attention: population bombs and explosions, human floods, tides 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 $y=2x$ 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”. Humans, at least the lower grade of humans (Malthusianism has always turned on this equivocation), are *in principle* opposed to the rest of nature. Scarcity is built into their very interaction. Even one couple is potentially “too many”.

WHY THE POLITICAL ECONOMY MODEL NEEDS THE US-AND-THEM FEAR NARRATIVE

In a celebrated article, the legal scholar Carol Rose argues that the classical property theories of Locke, Blackstone, and others were, logically speaking, incapable of doing what they aspired to do: to predict the development of a private property regime “from a starting point of rational self-interest”:

“. . . there is a gap between the kind of self-interested individual who needs exclusive property to induce him to labor, and the kind of individual who has to be there to create, maintain, and protect a property regime.”²²

In order to account for the existence of such a property regime, Rose maintains, Locke, Blackstone, and the rest had to reach outside their model for a narrative which would allow their audience to imagine themselves one with characters taking risks for an imagined common good. They plugged the analytical lacuna in their theories with a story. Only a narrative could render plausible the transformation of economic individuals whose nature is supposed to be to maximize short-term self-interest into vulnerable, imaginative seekers after cooperation capable of learning from the past long enough to join with others in setting up a civil society capable of securing and protecting property rights.

Malthus, a late arrival among these political economists, also hoped to find a scientific, “natural” basis for private property, as well as for inequality. But his theory, too, survives only if it is propped up with an extraneous story. As many of his contemporaries noticed, Malthus's argument is circular. His model, which posits human actors behaving as “plants and animals” in an egalitarian utopia, always ends up in an inegalitarian scenario. But it is only by booby-trapping the initial set up with extra narrative ingredients derived from contemporary middle-class mythology that Malthus can make it turn out that way.

One of these ingredients is a pre-existing class division between a Them who breed up to subsistence and an Us who do not. Without this division, it is hard to understand how one group of humans in Malthus's egalitarian starting scenario, after having gotten lucky with their crops or their family size at one point in the narrative, suddenly become a permanent upper class obsessed with conserving their high status, while others never seem to learn; but fortunately for Malthus, such a story seemed natural to his audience. Another ingredient is a pre-existing gender divide between men, who can have “resources sufficient to support their own children,” and women, who cannot. This divide, with its associated “marriage market” narrative, again seemed a commonplace to most of Malthus's peers. A third ingredient is a polarity between a security-ensuring private property regime and a

commons regime viewed as little more than its Other: an absence of ownership; an inability to accumulate; a license for freeloading, antisocial behavior and endless baby-making; an emblem of Their disorder. While contestable, the resulting narrative again dovetailed with stories familiar to Malthus's middle-class readers. As a traditional English popular rhyme complained, tales emphasizing the security value of commons to the poor were no match, in the elite imagination, for stories stressing the security value of private property to the rich:

They hang the man and flog the woman
That steal the goose from off the common,
But let the greater villain loose
That steals the common from the goose.

A final mythological patch on Malthus's otherwise untenable theory is his mathematical narrative of diverging numerical series that bring about scarcity, property, and class society. As Malthus himself admitted in the end, these series are not observable in society. They are a romance out of a mathematics classroom – merely an illustrative metaphor for a fearful “power” controllable by Us but not by Them. Just as Locke and Blackstone paper over their theories' incoherence by smuggling in a narrative their audiences respond to instinctively without realizing its extrinsic nature, so Malthus lends flesh to his own theory's emptiness by helping himself to Us-and-Them narratives that made plausible his audience's pre-existing prejudices and terrors.

Critics puzzle over the fact that Malthusianism perennially rises from the dead. But to wonder why repeated demonstrations of its circularity, factual incorrectness, and inconsistencies do not defeat it is like wondering why people still look at the fashionable paintings of Malthus's age. Both endure less because they are true to life than because they are well-made. In Malthus's age, they helped tell elites how to look (or not look) at paupers and at women, see beggary and hard labour as natural fixtures of society, and feel a benevolence toward the victims of the transition from paternalism to capitalism that remained disconnected from any sense of responsibility. Graphs derived from Malthus's narrative's most striking metaphor could usefully be exhibited as successors to paintings such as Thomas Gainsborough's *Cottage Girl with Dog and Pitcher*, *The Woodcutter's Return* and *Charity Relieving Distress*. *Cottage Girl* (see Figure 1), for example, dating from 1785 and evidently found “natural and pleasing” by its well-off buyer, 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 dependents. The more oppressed the subjects of

such paintings were, the bigger the opportunities for benevolence and philanthropy.²³ Malthus's picture of the life of the lower classes (see Figure 2), first set out thirteen years later, set a steeply rising curve representing the “power of population” against a line representing the far feeble 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 abstinence grounded in 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, although as much a product of imagination as Gainsborough's painting, helped give the old 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”²⁴ a new scientific lease on life as a “provable” proposition. In this way, Malthus helped reinforce the idea that Our right to exclude Others from Our property in times of scarcity came not only out of an unequal natural order but also out of Our hard work and Our socially-beneficial abstinence. Challenges to Our right to accumulate indefinitely became threats not only to Our goodies but also to, among other things, Our self-image and identity as disciplined abstainers. In a newly vivid way, the Malthusian narrative asked its audience whose side they were really on. Like all narratives, metaphors and pictures, it had the additional advantage in a debate of not colliding, logically speaking, with propositions or with opposing narratives, metaphors, and pictures. Removing or changing premises in arguments is often a tacit admission that they are invalid. Importing or switching narratives is safer in that it amounts only to quietly changing the subject, or replacing background with foreground.

To audiences other than the one for which it was intended, of course, the appeal of Malthus's art was limited and his images of the poor 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. But how to communicate this to those who found their own identity and struggles expressed and idealized through Malthus' narrative? Malthus' 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 that his theories have so often seemed to be simultaneously common sense and nonsense.

Contemporary neo-Malthusian arguments, too, owe much of their imperviousness to rational or scientific criticism to their artistry in papering over logical gaps with stories of Us and Others central to their audience's identity. They are able to arrive (with great shows of regret) at “conclusions” unfavourable to the underprivileged partly because, by deploying extrinsic narratives, they smuggle in assumptions prejudicial to them at the outset.



Figure 1

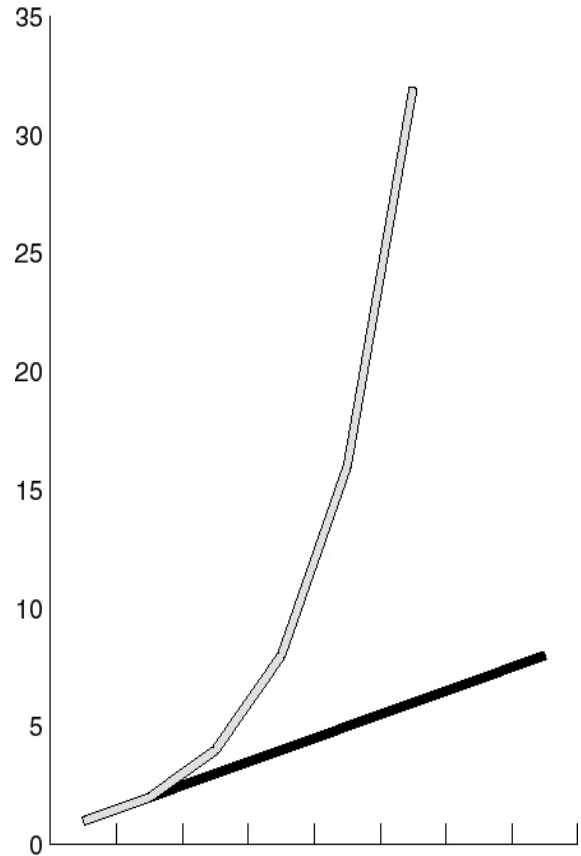


Figure 2

For instance, immigration to northern countries is sometimes criticized on the ground that “immigrants will adopt wasteful northern lifestyles”. This argument is advertised as nonracist 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 them. Those who already follow those lifestyles are treated as entitled to them. This questionable premise escapes notice when embedded in stories of undeserving Others moving into Our space; or the commons being

overexploited by free riders; or population bombs going off; or Our overloaded lifeboat in the middle of a lake in a storm being faced with the prospect of Oth-

ers from surrounding shipwrecks trying to clamber aboard. Among middle-class environmentalists, such stories have always enjoyed an appeal greater than that of other possible, equally cogent narratives: of human beings in faraway places being displaced or their commons enclosed by Our arms exports or corporate enterprises; of their lifeboats being sliced in two by industrial fishing trawlers or oil tankers; of “consumption bombs” going off in their midst; of people who walk around lakes when they see a storm coming rather than jump into leaky rubber rafts. Similarly, if population control programs have been disproportionately directed at women of color, it is not out of any scientific logic. Social problems are not caused by the XX chromosome, nor have women been engaging in parthenogenesis all these years.²⁵ It is rather that today's middle-class folk narratives about “population” put black females in the dramatic role of helplessly fertile Others in much the same way that Malthus's own narrative starred poor commoners.

WHY THE US-AND-THEM FEAR NARRATIVE NEEDS THE POLITICAL ECONOMY MODEL

If Malthus's political economy model needs an Us-and-Them terror framework to get off the ground, the Us-and-Them scare story also ultimately needs the political economy model. The model makes at least two contributions to the story. It helps construct a suitably alien Them for the narrative. And it conjures up a Fate that strives to lift a tale that scapegoats the poor for their own predicament to the level of tragedy.

The era in which the Malthusian discourse came of age – an era when the confines which had previously hedged in the market were being broken down, with all too few new constraints rising up to take their place - 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' former 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.”²⁶

Such suffering could not be ignored. It had to be addressed if not eased, accounted for if not justified. During Malthus's lifetime, explanations and proposals for action flooded the public realm. Added to old theories attributing pauperism to the poor's indiscipline or God's plan 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 Woll-

stonecraft to Charles Darwin, from Harriet Martineau to Karl Marx, from Robert Owen to Herbert Spencer.²⁷

Malthus's cod-predictive mathematics built on the elite tradition of blaming the poor for their plight by reducing the tensions of their culture to a seesaw battle between geometric and arithmetic series. This was more dehumanization than demonization. But if it scorned the sentimentalization of the poor practiced by Gainsborough and other painters, it had a similar effect of distancing the Other. Helping edit out the social background against which scapegoating of the poor might be seen for what it was, it pushed aside paternalistic observation or interaction only to replace it with calculation. The relentless Othering it enabled continues today whenever explanations of present scarcity invoking inequalities, land takeovers, wars, or erosion of commons are brushed aside with the riposte: “Yes, but what about *future* human numbers?” (This reply usually means future numbers of Them.) This invitation to leave aside the details of who We and They really are and jump to a mathematical terror myth of abstract, inexorable, monolithic future tensions between Them and Nature functions, as Malthus's own narrative did, to obscure the politics of both the past and the present.

Yet however successful it was in making the poor and women into Others, the story Malthus told, as he was well aware, still had a morally ugly sound to it. Benevolence and equality die an early death; the impulse to provide welfare is to be resisted; misery, disease, and vice provide the only cure for population crisis: it is difficult not to see the harsh measures the tale advocated as a kind of violence or aggression. Uglier still were the events that the narrative sanctioned. 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 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.”²⁸

Equally ugly have been many subsequent applications of Malthusianism: the withholding of relief in times of famine in the 19th century, forced sterilization in the 20th, and the persistent defense of overconsumption among the well-off.

At some point, responsibility for this order of violence, even against Others, needs to be denied. The denial, far from being merely individual, as in Freud, becomes one of the necessities of power and the tasks of culture: a collective, public, ongoing, recurring ritual denial transformed into a kind of civility, a denial that stunts reasoning about violent institutions and presents aggression as its virtuous opposite. Malthus modernized the elite fashion of identifying the poor's

plight as their fate by using mathematics to explain why the killings troubling his society were unavoidable. The oppressed were recast as sacrifices and those who scapegoated them as upholders of society. While the dead 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. Paupers 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. During the 19th and 20th centuries, the Malthusian administration of poverty became a ritual in which millions were subjected to violence as the scapegoats for a social pestilence of which they themselves were the worst victims. As “overpopulation,” they were offered up to an implacable nature in everyday ceremonies preserving the idealistic image of a self-regulating market. In the process, Malthus's dry mathematics acted as a ritual denial of the discrimination in the terror myths and of the persecution that they both gilded and sanctioned. It is no contradiction that one *Economist* cover from the time of the 1992 Earth Summit stirred population fears by picturing a crowd of African children behind the headline “The Question Rio Forgets”, while a cover of a few years later presented similar African children as representatives of a deprived mass clamoring for sweeping privatization, “free markets,” and globalization. In one light, the “concern for the poor” to be found in Malthus and his followers can be seen structurally as that of a priest ridding the community of a plague through a sacrifice whose victims are open to later rehabilitation. The fact that the Malthusian story's implausibilities seem common sense to so many becomes less puzzling when the story is compared with other myths featuring what literary critic René Girard calls a “scapegoating delusion narrated from the standpoint of the deluded persecutors”.²⁹ Such myths, as Girard points out, very often feature unbelievable premises, which are nonetheless unanimously accepted. Beginning as panicky free-associations, which spread instantly through mobs in times of crisis, the premises are later remembered as established fact.

From this angle, too, it is easy to see why Malthus and Malthusians have often classified their narratives as tragedies. As Girard suggests, many tragedies can be read as sophisticated retellings of myths about the necessary sacrifice of troublemakers. In one variant of Malthus's tale, well-intentioned heroes are allowed briefly to enjoy 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,

resettles into a “darkly-tinted” equilibrium resembling modern capitalist society. The best-known neo-Malthusian narrative, authored by the eugenicist and plant biologist Garrett Hardin in 1968, even bears the title “tragedy”.³⁰ Reviving 19th-century critiques of commons regimes, Hardin's “Tragedy of the Commons” traces how a common pasture is destroyed when its users, a group of stick figures who, deprived of the benefits of private property, 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. Such tragedies are reimagined daily in the brains of influential economists eager to attribute environmental degradation to overnumerous commoners rather than their own policies and exploitation or social breakdown to insufficient rather than excessive privatization. Most would be astonished and offended by accusations of scapegoating, racism, or ethnocentricity, which are in fact almost never made. Throughout, a modern sense of tragic destiny is provided by the Malthusian mathematics and the hard crust of economics and biology which has formed around it, although the mathematics, economics, and biology must all be seen as continuous with the theodicy which animated Malthus's original writings. The same model that helps construct a Them easier to scapegoat also crafts a Fate which dresses up the scapegoating as a tragedy suitably ennobling to the ritual's participants.

CONCLUSION

Malthusianism has never really worked as a science. Nor does it amount to much as history. But it has always succeeded brilliantly as a prismatic compound of practices in which mathematics, economics, and Christian theology cannot be separated from metaphor, middle-class scare story, sacrifice ritual, and tragedy. It is partly through this inner breadth that Malthusianism has been able to organize so many productive scientific and bureaucratic enterprises and enter common sense through so many doors. Malthus's triumph, and the triumph of his successors, is that of conjoined poet, priest, and rationalist.

Malthusianism lives on, ubiquitous, resilient. Among its adherents, it is a part of both manners and identity. It writes the rules for how human beings are to contend with nature and how the blood of the past is to be commemorated to sanctify the violence of the future. But those who refuse to be its scapegoats struggle on as well, in alliances challenging neoliberalism as well as old and new forms of prejudice. To stand their ground, they need a narrative intensity and virtuosity to match its own.

NOTES

1. T. R. Malthus, *Essay on the Principle of Population* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993 [1798]), 25.
2. Ian Hacking, *The Taming of Chance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 22.
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4. Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction and the Meaning of Liberty* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999); Jael Silliman and A. Bhattacharjee, eds., *Policing the National Body: Race, Gender and Criminalization* (Boston: South End Press, 2002).
5. Betsy Hartmann and Anne Hendrixson, "Angry Young Men: The Strategic Demography and Geography of Threats," in *Making Threats: Biofears and Environmental Anxieties*, eds. Betsy Hartmann, Banu Subramaniam, and Charles Zerner (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield).
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7. Ben Zuckerman and Stuart Hurlbert, "Is Overimmigration in the U.S. Morally Defensible?" *San Diego Union Tribune*, 3 August 2001.
8. David M. Levy and Sandra J. Peart, *The Secret History of the Dismal Science: Economics, Religion and Race in the 19th Century*, Library of Economics and Liberty 2001 <<http://www.econlib.org/library/Columns/LevyPeartdismal.html>>, (15 January 2002).
9. Paul Ehrlich, *The Population Bomb* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1968), 1.
10. William Cobbett, "The Valley of the Avon" in *Rural Rides*, reprinted in A. Pyle, *Population: Contemporary Responses to Thomas Malthus*, (Bristol: Thoemmes, 1994 [1826]), 316-317; 299-321.
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12. Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation* (Boston: Beacon, (2001[1944])).
13. Joseph Townsend, *A Dissertation on the Poor Laws*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971 [1786]).
14. Malthus, *Essay*, 84
15. Malthus, *Essay*, 84.
16. Malthus, *Essay*, 85.
17. A.M.C. Waterman, *Revolution, Economics and Religion: Christian Political Economy 1798-1833* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 27-28.
18. Philip Mirowski, *Machine Dreams: Economics Becomes a Cyborg Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 9.
19. Hacking, *Taming of Chance*, 21.
20. James Steuart, *An Inquiry into the Principles of Political Oeconomy: Being an Essay on the Science of Domestic Policy in Free Nations* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1998 [1767]).
21. Malthus, *Essay*, 14.
22. Carol Rose, "Property as Storytelling: Perspectives from Game Theory, Narrative Theory, Feminist Theory," *Yale Journal of Law and the Humanities* 2 (1990): 52, reprinted in Carol Rose, *Property and Persuasion: Essays on the History, Theory and Rhetoric of Ownership* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1994), 37-57.
23. John Barrell, *The Dark Side of the Landscape* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980); Martin Postle, *Thomas Gainsborough* (London: Tate Publishing, 2002).
24. Malthus, *Essay*, 43.
25. I owe several of these examples to Christine von Weizsäcker and Sarah Sexton.
26. Quoted in E.P.Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Penguin, 1980 [1963]) , 192

27. Polanyi, *Great Transformation*, 2001 [1944]; Barbara Kerr, *Bound to the Soil: A Social History of Dorset 1750-1918* (London: John Baker, 1968), 96; R. Ashcraft, "Lockean Ideas, Poverty and the Development of Liberal Political Theory," in *Early Modern Conceptions of Property*, ed. J. Brewer and S. Staves, (London: Routledge, 1996), 43; 3-61.

28. E.P.Thompson, *The English Working Class*, 295.

29. René Girard, "Generative Scapegoating," in *Violent Origins: Ritual Killing and Cultural Formation*, ed. R.G. Hamerton-Kelly (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1987), 79; see also Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Richard Wollheim, *The Sheep and the Ceremony* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979); Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977); Hermann Rebel, "Dark Events and Lynching Scenes in the Collective Memory," in *Agrarian Studies: Synthetic Work at the Cutting Edge*, ed. J. C. Scott, and Nina Bhatt (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2001), 44-65.

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