

Malthus: The Life and Legacies of an Untimely Prophet

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The temperature of our globe is rising, causing the population debate to heat up. The mounting stack of books in this field, to which I admit contributing several titles, often lacks historical perspective. Partisans of the two camps, Malthusians and Cornucopians, build Malthus up as hero or straw man, effacing the complexity of his arguments. Robert Mayhew, an intellectual historian and geographer, nicely points out in his new book, *Malthus*, how the man has been repeatedly truncated, his arguments airbrushed to suit the stock character demanded by friend and foe alike.

Malthus' *Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798) was a remarkable, radical achievement. Christian theology and Enlightenment rationalism shared little, but shook hands on the subject of population. Christianity cleaved to the 'God Will Provide' Cornucopianism of Scripture. Enlightenment rationalists yoked faith in man's ingenuity with a vision of human perfectibility and boundless possibility. Malthus perceived things differently. A country clergyman, he was struck by the hardship and premature deaths of commoners in his rural Surrey parish. Against the utopianism of a Condorcet or Godwin, Malthus counselled realism. Where Enlightenment intellectuals lived comfortable lives ensconced in a world of abstractions and ideals, Malthus focused squarely on building a picture from the ground up based on detailed quantifiable evidence. The *philosophes* ignored the masses, but Malthus invited them into history and urged that their suffering should guide social policy.

Observing reports from naturalists and explorers on all continents, Malthus averred that the animal kingdom and the lives of hunter-gatherers such as the Hottentots were light-years from that of Rousseau's Noble Savage. Rather than living in symbiotic harmony with nature, the world's creatures suffered brutal resource constraints, limits which continue to place a 'positive check' on population growth. Human sexual behaviour leads to arithmetic population increase, but nature grows her bounty of resources geometrically at best. The consequence is a periodic overshooting of population, resulting in misery and death. Malthus viewed the Barbarian invasions of Rome as an extension of the same principle, with overpopulation checked by warfare rather than famine or disease.

Malthus was hardly the fatalistic pessimist of stereotype. In his worldview, humanity had reached the point where it could rationally intervene with 'preventive' checks that could regulate the natural increase of humanity, thereby cheating the Grim Reaper. Nowhere in his work did he approve of letting Nature do its dirty work in the name of Social Darwinism. Above all, he was concerned to alleviate suffering.

But Malthus laced his realism with a heavy dose of puritanism. He believed people might have fewer children if they practiced sexual restraint. Like others of his generation, he frowned on contraception as morally corrosive. Hard work and thrift would cure the poor of their fecund ways. Accordingly, he inveighed against the Christian-inspired Poor Laws which offered no-strings sustenance to the destitute. These, he felt, removed the need to limit family size. Instead, he argued for a kind of workfare *avant la lettre*, which would ensure the poor factored in the costs imposed by the extra mouths they were bringing into the world. No wonder Marx considered him a bourgeois apologist while he incurred the ire of Victorian humanitarians like Dickens, whose hard-hearted Ebenezer Scrooge extolled the virtues of the Malthusian workhouse.

Mayhew treats his subject sympathetically, but the book admirably exposes the complete Malthus, warts and all. Nor is any quarter spared for critics, from the Romantics to Freud, all of whom twist Malthus to suit their agenda. Romantics such as Coleridge and Shelley, though often locking horns with Christianity and the Enlightenment, joined in the general assault on Malthus, citing his anti-humanism. Marx deplored his bourgeois moralism, rejecting the notion of resource scarcity. Nevertheless, as the book shows, critics tended to smuggle in Malthusian principles or espouse ideals that flew in the face of the evidence. The Romantics, for instance, simply exported the problem of scarcity by advocating the overseas settlement of excess Europeans. For Marx, a socialist order would 'regulate the production

of human beings,' though no further details were specified. Condorcet placed his faith in the idea that population density spurs human inventiveness, but he ignored the hunger and death around him to focus on his utopia.

Malthus was appropriated in myriad forms after death, his ghost apparent in all but name. Mill injected contraception into the Malthusian formula in the 1860s while several decades later, in 1877, the Malthusian League sprang up to distribute birth control pamphlets to the poor. Early in the twentieth century, Marie Stopes in Britain and Margaret Sanger in America drew on his legacy to promote their brand of feminist birth control. The growth of internationalism after World War II led many to think as world citizens inhabiting a finite globe. This gave rise to the green Malthusianism of the 40s and 50s. Fairfield Osborn's *Our Plundered Planet*, William Vogt's *The Road to Survival* and Karl Sax' *Standing Room Only* spoke of mass famine if the soaring birthrates of the developing world were not brought under control. This was also the period in which Paul Ehrlich 'Population Bomb' pamphlet (1954) saw the light of day. Reframed as a book in 1969, it went on to sell over a million copies.

Where green Malthusians overlooked Malthus' distaste for contraception, Social Darwinists skipped past his concern for the poor. For Malthus, the poor should emulate middle class fertility patterns to ease their plight. Social Darwinists concurred that the poor should reduce their fertility, but urged the better classes to breed. They applauded, instead of lamenting as Malthus did, the positive checks which killed off the 'unfit.' Preventive checks were reinterpreted as tools of racial hygiene rather than means of averting misery. The Chartists' *Book of Murder* (1838) foresaw the use of gas chambers to cull undesirables. This smeared Malthus but accurately prophesied the consequences of Social Darwinism, ancestor of Nazism. Though Malthusians overlook Malthus' hostility to contraception, anti-Malthusians incorrectly cast him as a heartless Social Darwinist celebrating nature's checks. He was no such beast.

Third World birthrates peaked in the 1960s, while the Green Revolution averted mass starvation. Ehrlich lost his storied bet with the Cornucopian neoliberal economist Julian Simon that resource prices would rise. Population concerns therefore ebbed from the 1970s to the 90s. The UN, meanwhile, sidelined talk of contraception as a sop to New Left and Third World sensitivities. Still, gross population continued to surge. Having reached 7 billion in 2011, the UN has us on our way to 11 billion by the end of the century. Concerns over global warming in the context of a rapidly industrialising developing world lend the population question a renewed sense of urgency. Such themes reverberate through recent works such as Alan Weisman's *Countdown* or Stephen Emmott's *Ten Billion*.

Much of the early part of the book is consumed by extraneous detail about the lives of eighteenth century intellectuals, spiced with overused adjectives such as 'Ariadnean' and 'niggardly.' The narrative soon hits its stride, however, and doesn't look back. Mayhew's signal contribution is to remind us that the population debate has been contentious for much of the period since Malthus' original Essay of 1798. In the early nineteenth century, Malthusians worried about overpopulation in the newly industrialising cities. Cornucopians looked to technology and new lands to absorb growth. Later in the century, as the demographic transition swept through Europe, they clamoured for population growth to sustain their armies and power overseas settlement and imperialism. Turning the page of the *fin de siècle*, eugenics combined a Malthusian approach to non-Europeans with a pronatalist posture on Europe. Today, Cornucopians like Ben Wattenberg and Philip Longman warn of birth dearth while Malthusians such as Stephen Emmott decry the opposite.

The book helps us understand the dangers of both pro- and anti-Malthusianism. Proponents can lapse into viewing humans as an abstraction, a de-humanising tendency fanned by eugenicists to legitimate forced sterilisation and genocide. Cornucopians, by contrast, abuse the idea of the sanctity of human life to shut down discussion of contraception, abortion and population limits. Their belief in human ingenuity and future perfectibility directs their gaze away from the millions who suffer and die as a consequence of excess births. No sane individual would permit pets to breed *ad infinitum*, but equally, nobody can maintain that humans resemble animals in taking no account of the

consequences of their actions. Between overblown fear and Panglossian optimism some median position is, surely, possible.

Our optimum population is related to the shifting constraints faced by individuals, nations and the planet - 'positive checks' which fluctuate from one age to another. Mayhew rightly points to the background hum of population debate over the past two centuries. But the pitch of debate rises and falls. The land frontiers of the nineteenth century released Malthusian pressure. Population explosion in the 1950s, 60s and 70s sharpened fears. The Green Revolution helped ease worries, but Global Warming, fed by an industrialising third world, is tightening the noose once more. The age of complacency is over and we are again moving toward the point when we may need to sound the Malthusian alarm. Let's hope we never get there.