

On Malthus' Contribution to Economic Thought

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Abstract

Thomas Malthus has become, over more than two centuries, one of the most frequently referenced economists with regard to demographics. As the author of *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798), he was the main disseminator of one of the most intriguing theories of population growth. His thinking has influenced many – from contemporaries, such as David Ricardo – to most of the “neo-Malthusian” schools of thought from the mid-1960s to the present day. This paper addresses some aspects of population theory discussed prior to the *Essay*, and the impact that this work had – with respect to both its influence and the critiques and replicas that his work suffered throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. The paper’s purpose is to draw up guidelines for a more precise interpretation of Malthus’ contribution to demographic, economic and, finally, social thought.

Keywords: Malthusianism; Malthus; Demographics; Population; Economic Thought.

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Introduction

The name of Thomas Malthus is almost an immediate reference when it comes to population science. The author of the bicentennial *Essay on Population* (1798) was the main disseminator of one of the most intriguing theories of population growth. His thinking has influenced contemporaries such as David Ricardo and "neo-Malthusian" schools of thought from the mid-1960s to the present day. There were those who, like Karl Marx, considered him a reckless plagiarist of population theories prior to the *Essay*.

The work that revolutionized twentieth-century economic thought, John M. Keynes's *General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money* (1936), pays tribute to Malthus in his most innovative principle, saying that "economic theory would have advanced much more" if it had followed the branch of thought of the Protestant pastor, who raised in his time strong antipathies even among his fellow clergy, pointing out the consequences of an unbridled population growth combined with an insufficient supply of material resources.

These notes address some aspects of population theory prior to the *Essay*, and the impact the such work had on both its influence and the criticisms and replicas that it has suffered throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Their purpose is to draw up guidelines for a more precise interpretation of Malthus' contribution to social thought.

Biographical Notes

Thomas Robert Malthus was born on February 13, 1766, in the county of Dorking, England and died on December 29, 1834, in the same country. Born into a family of rural Anglican aristocrats, Malthus had access to a scholarly education at an early age, devoting himself to the study of the classics of literature and philosophy, and even to botany.

In 1788, Malthus graduated in Mathematics from Jesus College at Cambridge University, and was ordained a pastor. In 1793, Malthus was admitted as a researcher at Cambridge, an office he would practice along with overseeing a parish in Albury. In 1798

he would launch an anonymous work, the *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, whose central thesis - that the population grew at rates higher than the product - had as a consequence the attribution of the phenomena of poverty and hunger to "population surplus".

Criticized by some and applauded by others, the work won several editions throughout the life of Malthus. Only in 1803, the pastor would assume the authorship of the Essay and at the same time, Malthus extended the concept of exhaustion of material resources to the question of product growth and distribution, with his book "A Research on Nature and the Progress of Income" of 1815 and the pamphlet "The Law of the Poor" of 1817.

A final controversy over the relationship between production and consumption with David Ricardo - at the time considered the greatest exponent of thought of what would later be called the "Classical School" (1776 - 1848)³ - would put Malthus' ideas on economy aside from the development of science. Malthus would stagnate his academic career in 1805, teaching at Haileybury College until his death in 1834.

The ideas about population present in the Essay, however, were widely used (even by Ricardo). Perhaps in a final search for recognition by the academic community, Malthus would return to them in his later years by writing the entry "Population" for the Britannic Encyclopedia of 1824, which would end up being edited as a pamphlet entitled "A Summary View of the Population Principle", in 1830.

Four years later, in Bath, a town near London, on December 29, Malthus would suddenly die of ill-health while visiting relatives at Christmas. Married since 1805, Malthus had three children. None of them gave him grandchildren. Thus, the largest representative of demographic control had no descendants or direct lineage.

The debate over the population at the time of Malthus

3 As nominated by J. A. Schumpeter on the *History of Economic Analysis* (1951). The historical markpoints are the *Wealth of Nations*, by Adam Smith (1776), and the *Principles of Political Economy*, by J. S. Mill (1848).

In the second half of the eighteenth century, two historical events were gaining ground in Europe: the Industrial Revolution and the French Revolution. The environment of ideas characteristic of the Enlightenment placed the problem of poverty in the list of debated issues. Thus, several social thinkers of the period arose with no less numerous explanations for the phenomenon of poverty. The use of population data as a material for the more or less partial construction of these explanations resulted in three explanatory possibilities for the existence of poverty in relation with population rates. These possibilities are divided between the statements that:

- a) There is no correlation between population and poverty;
- b) There is a negative correlation between poverty and population; that is, the larger the population, the lower will be poverty; and
- c) There is a positive correlation between poverty and population; that is, the larger the population, the greater the poverty.

The works that did not observe any correlation between poverty and population go back to the *Confessions* of Charles Montesquieu (1721), who, among other assertions, affirmed that the population of the ancient world was larger than the one existing in its time without changing the proportion of rich and poor people. Apparently, Montesquieu himself made use of an old conception, according to which population growth was a consequence of economic growth. So one can say that the starting point of the discussions on poverty and population lies in the pole shift in the causal relationship between economic growth and population growth.

The first thinker to approach the question from this perspective seems to have been Giovanni Botero, in *Della Cause della grandezza e magnificenza delle città* (*On the Causes of the Greatness and Magnificence of the City*), work of 1589, in which an idea very similar to the Malthusian thesis appears. According to Botero, there would be two “natural forces” (defined as *virtus*⁴) that would act on the population, the *virtus generativa*

4 On the Machiavellian sense of virtue, as exposed on *The Prince*. The *virtu* term was of common use as a concept for “natural” principles or forces, among the renaissance thought. For this, see Roncaglia (2005, p. 63 and 67).

(birth equivalent) and *virtus nutritiva* (corresponding to the capacity of food production). The population would tend to increase to the limit allowed by fecundity (generative *virtus*). Livelihoods, on the other hand, would be subject to the barrier constituted by *virtus nutritiva*.

Malthus undoubtedly had access to Botero's thesis, for the Italian was quoted by William Petty in "Observations on the Dublin Bills of Mortality" of 1683, by Johann Süssmilch in his "Die goettliche Ordnung in den Veraenderungen der menschlichen Geschlechtsaus der Geburt, dem Tode und der Fortpflanzung desselben erwiesen " of 1741, and by Robert Wallace, in *The Numbers of Man in Ancient and Modern Times* of 1753⁵.

These represented a minority thinking at the time. François Quesnay, the leading exponent of Physiocracy, David Hume and later Adam Smith, in his "Wealth of Nations" (1776), looked at demographic pressure as a phenomenon then present without any causal correspondence with the level of poverty.

One of the first authors to suggest policies that linked population to the increase of national wealth was William Bell. Bell, in his 1756 paper "What Causes Principally Contribute to the Population of Population?", presented the thesis that the development of manufactures and trade, by withdrawing resources from the production of food, tended to generate a "reprobable" cut growth. To solve this problem, Bell maintained the need to favor the development of agriculture and to distribute land equally among the families of farmers.

Along these lines, other authors, such as Gianmaria Ortes, who in 1774 launched his "National Economy", would attribute to population consumption a limiting characteristic of total expenditure.

At Malthus's time, the dominant voice on the problem of economic growth in relation to population expansion was with authors like William Godwin, with his "Political Justice" of 1793 and with Condorcet, with his "Draft of the progress of the human spirit", of 1794. For Godwin, demographic pressure simply did not exist, since "three quarters of the known world were uninhabited," and each society would be able to find - in the

5 It is important to note that in this work, in particular, the thesis that a population has the capacity to grow geometrically appears for the first time.

proportion of its equanimity - self-regulatory mechanisms of balance between its population and production.

The Marquis of Condorcet, in turn, while acknowledging that "population growth would have the potential to compromise human progress," minimized such a "remote" risk and expressed a deep belief in technological innovations and contraception . It would be against these interlocutors that Malthus would launch his Essay in 1798.

It is important to note that the first official census conducted in the United States and England dates back to 1790 and 1801, respectively. Although a survey was required by King William I, the Conqueror, as early as 1086, shortly after the Battle of Hastings (1066), with the aim of mapping lands and assets that would be taken and distributed among his Norman allies in order to create a new aristocracy. The results of such survey would be know as the Domesday Book and would remain as source of political decisions for some centuries. In any case, all the above-mentioned population theorists elaborated their ideas on a very poor empirical basis, largely based on amateur counts, fiscal surveys, and parish records when available. Many resorted to data taken from the Bible. Most of them, in fact, only conjectured about hypotheses.

The Essay on Population and the Malthusian Principle

Published anonymously on June 7, 1798, the Essay had several editions and revisions while Malthus lived. "An Essay on the Principle of Population as it Influences the Future Improvement of Society: with remarks on the speculations of Mr. Godwin, Mr. Condorcet and other writers" was written in the historical contexts of the French Revolution and Industrial Revolution, the work dialogues directly with the ideas of social transformation of the former and the problems of wealth distribution of the latter. His central thesis - appropriate to bourgeois interests, enunciated in a directive tone, would gain the status of "principle," and soon his formulator would gain the status of author without actually having created it.

The central theme of the *Essay* can be summed up in three words: population, production and poverty. The cultural environment of the Enlightenment seems to have led the glances on the subject to the acceptance of the thesis that population and wealth go together⁶. Malthus would not be the first to disagree with this view, but rather the most efficient propagandist of the opposite thesis. Already in the first pages of his “*Essay on the population*”, it is possible to see the statement:

The population, when uncontrolled, grows in a geometric progression. Livelihoods grow only in arithmetic progression. (Malthus, 1982: 282, chapter I)

That is, means of subsistence would grow in a 1: 2: 3: 4: 5 progression ..., while population would increase by a ratio of 1: 2: 4: 8: 16: 32 type This would be the so-called population principle.

In all editions of the *Essay*, this principle would remain intact, by the author. It would, however, change the form adopted by Malthus to support it. In the first edition of 1798, Thomas Malthus merely based his principle on historical examples of European (mainly England) population data, comparing aspects of the population growth of antiquity with those of his day. There would be nineteen chapters distributed among: the enunciation of the principle of population (chapters 1 and 2); the above-mentioned historical background (chapters 3 to 7); criticisms of current literature on the subject (chapters 8 to 17); and a closing, with general propositions about the future of humanity, given the population principle (chapters 18 and 19).

One should note that almost half of the original essay is dedicated to the critique of concepts on the relationship between population and economic growth that were then in common use. Malthus, with his population principle, refuted Condorcet and Godwin's theses that a larger population would be able to generate a greater product. The difference between population and product growth rates would be the key. Using very few demographic data from England from earlier centuries – there was, in fact, very little empirical basis for any conjecture – Malthus dismissed the views of the so-called populists,

6 For more information on this subject, see SCHUMPETER, 1991, chapter 5.

who he regarded as 'overly optimistic' or 'irresponsibly credulous' in the productive capacity of a population growing.

The communicative power of the population principle was strong: it united a simplicity close to the mathematical formulation to the antithesis between the "geometric" and "arithmetic" progressions. Although in this first edition Malthus had not even made a rough estimate from demographic data, or even an mathematical demonstration of his central thesis, it was too good to be dismissed by the advocates of industrial capitalism. Placed against the wall by critics of the consequences of the Industrial Revolution – who saw poverty grow in the margins of the material progress of their time-these apologists clung to the Malthusian salvation table, attributing the cause of poverty to the excess of the poor, and last analysis, to the demographic discomfort of the less favored classes.

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Malthus' argument that any population would produce wealth in a smaller ratio than its numerical growth diverted analysts' eyes from the problem of their distribution. This conception was very costly to David Ricardo, in exposing the "law of diminishing returns" in his *Principles of Political Economy and Taxation* (1817). Ricardo, who maintained extensive correspondence with Malthus between 1803 and 1821, repeatedly expressed this intellectual debt with the pastor.

Still, Malthus was urged to better base his thesis. The second edition, of 1803, would see a totally restructured work. Even the title of the work would change to *An Essay on the Principle of Population; or a View of its Past and Present Effects on Human Happiness; with an Inquiry into our Prospects Respecting the Future Removal or*

Mitigation of the Evils which it Occasions. It would now be fifty-five chapters, distributed in four books. This would be the basis of all other editions (1806, 1807, 1817 and 1826).

In his preface, Malthus, then the declared author of the *Essay*, promises "a new work". But despite the greater volume, there are few changes in the substance of the population principle, and in the way it is grounded. In that sense, Malthus only added a greater number of demographic data that would corroborate his ideas exposed there.

One aspect, however, deserves note. In speaking of "obstacles" to population growth, Malthus added in this new edition that of "moral restraint" (voluntary celibacy) as a "moral" barrier to "natural" constraints, ie hunger and the plague, all of these as regulating elements of the "population surplus". Thus, according to the Rev., as an alternative to illness and starvation, celibacy would be left as a solution to the less favored classes in the distribution of the product.

Seen in perspective, the *Essay on Population* seems to have in its alleged strength its greatest weakness: there is insufficient quantitative evidence for Malthus' categorical, even mathematical, assertion. The observed transition from the first to the second edition shows an author moving from questioner to questioned. But the propaganda power of the Malthusian population principle – linking quantitative mystique to political expediency – would secure a prominent place in economic theory for this idea. But that would not be the only contribution to Reverend Malthus's economic theory. Nor is it the only contribution to economic demography.

The Principles of Political Economy and Effective Demand

Originally published in 1820, Malthus' *Principles* did not gain the same empathy of the *Essay* with the circle of political economists of his day. This work would remain more or less obscured for a century, until John Maynard Keynes rescued it for the principle of effective demand in his *General Theory*.

Malthus wrote the *Principles* in an entirely different context from the *Essay*. Europe's political and social conditions have changed significantly between works. The crisis, which at the end of the eighteenth century seemed to be lacking in means of subsistence towards a growing population, had changed in the early years of the nineteenth century to a crisis of lack of jobs and insufficient demand.

In the wake of that conjuncture, Malthus proposed something that seemed an absolute nonsense to the Ricardians of his day: instead of praising the virtues of saving (as had been done by theorists like Nassau Senior), he suggested measures to increase consumption and create new opportunities of job. Population growth was completely oblivious to the inadequacy of demand, which itself was a more serious problem for Malthus. According to him:

The effect of increasing the population to raise profits by reducing wages is very limited and soon contained by the lack of demand. (Malthus, 1982 (1820), 189)

To point out the risks of a crisis of overproduction inherent in the insufficiency of demand would transform Malthus into a heretic, in the eyes of current economic thinking (Heimann, 1971, pp. 91-92). Thus, the population principle would be incorporated into the Ricardian economic interpretation, while that of effective demand would be considered as "a misunderstanding".

Misunderstood for more than a century, the principle of effective demand would be recovered by John Maynard Keynes, the greatest exponent of economic thought of the twentieth century, who claimed that Malthus had discovered "the demonic of unemployment, which spreads through of the collapse of effective demand. "(Keynes, 1983a (1937), 187).

Critical reviews on the *Essay*

The principle of population, as enunciated by Malthus, was the substrate of the relationship between this and economic growth, to the so-called "classical school" of economic thought, a theoretical line composed by Ricardo, Stuart Mill, Say and other economists who adopted the Malthusian thesis as an uncontested axiom of the impossibility of solving the problems of income distribution. Given the population principle, it became impossible to improve the distributive pattern of the product, and even proved that social assistance to the poor would be harmful and counterproductive. The only way to improve the living conditions of workers – for those in favor of the Malthusian population principle – would be to reduce their numbers.

John Stuart Mill, in his *Principles of Political Economy* (1848), sought to alleviate some of the liberal rage of the "classics," giving technology an important role in postponing the effects of demographic pressures (see Chapter XII, , paragraph 2). Stuart Mill would also draw attention to the fact that the more unequal distributions of the product would accelerate the advent of population-based problems, approaching William Godwin's view of his *Political Justice*.

From the great critics of the 'classical school', such as Sismondi, the Utopian Socialists, and the Scientific Socialism of Friederich Engels⁷ and Karl Marx, only the latter escaped the double rhetorical trap of criticism with a sentimentalist bias (as Proudhon does in his *Philosophy of Misery*) , or of proposals unreasonable for his time (as the phalanstors of Charles Fourier). Marx, in particular, would examine Malthus's thesis in detail and scientifically.

This is not to say that Marx was less intense than the others in his criticisms. Quite the opposite. According to him, speaking of the *Essay*:

(...) this writing, in its first form, is nothing more than a superficial plagiarism ... of the writings of De Foe, Sir James Steuart, Townsend, Franklin, Wallace, etc. and does not contain an original proposition at all (Marx, 1982, v1, p.177)

7 Engels would seek to disassociate Charles Darwin's theory from any Malthusian conception. In *Anti-Dürhing*, there is a significant passage in which the author says that it would not be necessary "Malthusian glasses to understand the Darwinian idea of the struggle for survival ..." (Engels, 2015, p.99)

Marx's charge is serious. Once these authors have been compared, the evidence gains materiality. In defense of Malthus, as mitigating such accusation, several arguments were put to the check by several authors, with varied results.

But Karl Marx did not restrain himself to this question. The principle of population, whether authentic or not, represented a veritable "dogma of economists." It fit more detailed examination to him.

While Proudhon, Sismondi, and others attributed the ills of the population to market imperfections, Marx noted that a "general population law" would exist only for irrational animals and plants. Every economic system would have its own population law, and that of Malthus would correspond to that of the capitalist mode of production. Thus, the absolute population surplus exposed in Malthus's theory would correspond to a relative overpopulation, for Marx. This would be characteristic of a determined phase of capitalism, given when one moves from commercial capitalism to the dynamic circuit of industrial capitalism. The increased demand for labor, at one point, and a subsequent change in the composition of the organic capital combined, would generate the "relative" population surplus, which would shape the "industrial reserve army," a true the reduction of workers' wages. The demographic surplus would not be given in this way, by virtue of its endogenous force, in an absolute way, but in function of the operability of the capitalist mode of production, hence its relativity.

Ultimately, Malthus's population law would reflect, for Marx, the condition of an economic system that serves as a population, not the other way round. Such a problem would not exist in a society which had abolished private ownership of the means of production.

Joseph Alois Schumpeter analyzed the question quite broadly in his *History of Economic Analysis* (1951). He recognizes the genealogy raised by Marx in accusing Malthus of plagiarism. It even extends the arch developed by the German philosopher, by extending beyond Steuart, Wallace and his contemporaries the authorship of the principle arrogated by Malthus, reaching the relationship between Botero's nutritious and genitive virtus. But in giving his verdict, Schumpeter uses plausible attenuators. First, taking into account Malthus' work, he defends his methodological contribution to economic thought:

The man whose work stirred up people's minds are just as elicit as passionate appraisals was ipso facto in mediocrity. The man who realized that some economic problems are like the problems of *maximis et minimis in fluxions* [calculus] was no dunce. (Schumpeter, 1991, p. 481)

After examining Marx's triple charge against Malthus – Marx also attacks Malthus' ideas on land rent and crises of insufficient consumption – although he ingeniously dissociated from Malthus the possibility of plagiarizing Sismondi or Ricardo (and burden of proof to Marx, accusing him of committing the same crime as Malthus), Schumpeter still sees himself with the utter lack of originality of the principle of population in his hands. Neither the mathematization proposed by Malthus escapes from closer examinations of the works of Petty and Wallace. The truce comes in the form of a suggestion that Malthus has coordinated and reformulated preexisting ideas:

The case therefore differs essentially from the bulk of all those cases, still more frequent in economics than in other sciences in which a proposition that we associate with an individual name has been anticipated by its forerunners. This does not amount to a charge of plagiarism or even to a denial of 'subjective originality'. But it does reduce Malthus' contribution to effective co-ordination and restatement. (Schumpeter, 1991, p. 578)

However, Malthus was not limited to being a reproducer of an idea convenient to the ruling class of his day. The Malthusian principle of effective demand, based on insufficient consumption, was completely discarded by the classics and remained on the fringes of dominant economic thinking until Keynes's *General Theory* (1936). David Ricardo, in his *Notes to the Principles of Malthus*, would regard the thesis of the crisis generated by insufficient effective demand as an effect of the pastor's "confusion" on the processes of production and distribution (Ricardo, 1982). Nothing more consistent with economic thinking of the time. For Keynes, more than a century later, nothing more wrong.

Malthus' contribution to demography and economic thinking.

According to Eduard Heimann (1971, p.91), Malthus' contributions to economic thought were divided into two measures: one in population theory; another, in the theory of economic crises.

The Malthusian principle of population, if not entirely original in its conception, was in its formulation and adherence to a problem then considered as imminent to the conjuncture. Faced with the expansion of the division of labor, increasing urbanization, and population growth in English cities, Malthus pointed out the merit of his conclusions to a social problem arising from the unbridled expansion of the productive forces. With the population principle, Malthus took sides with what would be consolidated as the classic view of the population problem in economic theory.

In elaborating his theory of economic crises, however, Malthus would take a more risky path. On this, says Heimann (1945: 98-9):

The full sense of Malthus' achievement, both intellectually and morally, can only be appreciated as we realize that he had to break with the official school of thought, of which he was one of the glorified chiefs, to do full justice to his problem.

The questioning and inversion of the so-called "Say's Law" would put the explanation of the economic crises for the insufficient demand, at the same time, the economic and demographic thought of Malthus from another perspective, and this, in turn, master of the theory elaborated to his time. If the *Essay* had proved to be a point of support for the classical view of the relationship between product and population - and a convenient justification for the poverty generated by the expansion of industrial capital - the *Principles* presented real inconveniences to the capitalists of the day, such as the need for classes to be more wealthy in order to spend as much as possible on their income, the need for the undertaking of public works that ensure the level of employment of the economy, etc.

It is remarkable that a great crisis of capital (1929), characterized by high unemployment, would set the tone for the "recovery" of this nuance of Malthusian thought.

Conclusion

As a whole, Malthus' work and his contribution to economic thought, in the light of both his most violent critics - who accuse him from the most unrealistic plagiarism to the most apologetic platitude of capital, with traces of hypocrisy and even intellectual dishonesty - as of the modern explanation of the origin of capitalist crises, having been unjustly ostracized by the theoretical mainstream of its time, but rescued by the facts - offers an impasse, characterized by the contradictions that the very trajectory of the thought of Malthus leaves to the historical examination.

It is probable that this "contradictory inheritance" is the long-term legacy of Malthusian thought; in part because of his property of adherence to the conjunctures in which he was called to offer explanation; in part because of the lack of internal cohesion between the overpopulation and underconsumption theses. If the overpopulation thesis shows Malthus, in the best of judgments, as a coordinator of ideas of his time, the underconsumption thesis, questioned in Marx as a plagiarism of Sismondi (Marx, 1982), is assumed by Schumpeter as a solution, still that insufficient, original, after examination (Schumpeter, 1991).

From the point of view of the methodology of economic thought, Malthus can be considered a vanguardist in his time, by the adoption of both the modeling of economic explanation and the deductive-hypothetical system of formulation of "Laws" of movement in society. Contrary to this, Ricardo's criticisms of the *Principles* shows a Malthus also vulnerable to fallacies of composition and inducement vices condemned not only by the classical synthesis but also by other Kantian-Popperian-based schools of subsequent decades. It is surprising at the end, for the scholar, that just the neoclassical, ie, hypothetical-deductive, or falsificationist bias theories, according to Blaug (1999), seeks to

re-enact, at one time or another, the population principle, which is justified only by its evident ideological convenience.

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