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# Malthus Was Not a Malthusian

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J. DANIEL HAMMOND

**W**hy would anyone today recommend reading Thomas Robert Malthus's two-centuries-old *Essay on Population* (1798)? My gosh, we're in the twenty-first century. The population crisis that Malthus predicted did not happen, thanks to human ingenuity providing scientific, technological, and moral progress. Malthus famously claimed that human population grows geometrically and food production grows arithmetically. Therefore, at some point population overtakes food production.

The Malthusian warning was and still is for disciples such as Paul Ehrlich that unless we take steps to control population, we will find ourselves in a crisis with mass starvation. But history reveals that Malthus and his followers were wrong. Malthus had a nice little model for the preindustrial and pre-electronic world in which he lived, but we have abundant food and, thanks to readily available artificial birth control, below-replacement fertility rates. Even in the poorest areas of the globe, rates of undernourishment and deaths from famine are historically low. Caloric intake, not population, is growing exponentially around the world. The United States is in a crisis of obesity, not hunger! Only someone whose view is blinkered by ideology could remain a Malthusian today.

Despite the fact that technological progress has provided abundant, low-cost food, declines in undernourishment and growth of overnourishment, as well as below-replacement fertility, all of which undercut Malthusian gloom, I argue that Malthus's

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*Essay on Population* is essential reading for 2020. Why? The short answer is that Malthus was not a Malthusian. He did not predict a population crisis unless population control was put into place. He did not even advocate artificial birth control. His *Essay on Population* has been badly misinterpreted by disciples and critics alike.<sup>1</sup> Read in the appropriate context, it is as important today as it was at the turn of the nineteenth century. Perhaps it is even more important. Malthus was prophetic in warning of dangers ahead. But the dangers were not of population overrunning capacity to produce food and other essentials. He warned against destruction of social institutions to make way for utopian schemes inspired by the ideas behind the French Revolution.

We must begin with *what* Malthus wrote in the *Essay* and *why* he wrote it. The what and why cannot be separated, for *why* he wrote is essential for knowledge of *what* he wrote. This is the problem of reading in the writer's context. Having the text and context in view, we will be able to see that the message in the *Essay* is as important today as it was at the turn of the nineteenth century. Malthus may best be labeled a conservative who warned of the dangers of antinomian social theories associated with the French Revolution. He is better paired with Edmund Burke than with Paul Ehrlich, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, or the Soros-funded Open Society Institute.

Malthus (1766–1834) actually tells us in his title why he wrote the essay. The full title is *An Essay on the Principle of Population, as It Affects the Future Improvement of Society, with Remarks on the Speculations of Mr. Godwin, M. Condorcet, and Other Writers*. The question that prompted the *Essay* was prospects for future improvement in society, not prospects for a population crisis. He wrote in reply to recent publications by his fellow Englishman William Godwin (1756–1836) and Frenchman Nicolas de Caritat, Marquis de Condorcet (1743–94). The origin of the *Essay* was a conversation with his father, Daniel Malthus, on “the general question of the future improvement of society” after reading Godwin’s essay “Of Avarice and Profusion” (1797). Malthus responded in detail not to this short commentary on avarice and profusion but to Godwin’s longer work, *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice, and Its Influence on General Virtue and Happiness* (1793). He devoted six of nineteen chapters in the *Essay* to Godwin and one to Condorcet’s *Outlines of an Historical View of the Progress of the Human Mind* (1795). The key questions for Godwin and Condorcet, and thus for Malthus, were whether man and society are perfectible and whether social institutions are the sources of defects in man and society. Having adopted the antinomian egalitarian spirit of the French Revolution, Godwin and Condorcet answered “yes” to both questions. Humans and society are perfectible. That they are not yet perfect is because of inequalities created and sustained by social institutions.

Malthus referred to the French Revolution as a “blazing comet” that “seems destined either to inspire with fresh life and vigour, or to scorch up and destroy the shrinking

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1. For more on the history of interpretation of Malthus, see Hammond 2015.

inhabitants of the earth” (1798, 7). Addressing Godwin, he compared the revolution to a botanist who attempts to perfect a plant without regard for its organic unity in design:

By endeavouring to improve one quality, he may impair the beauty of another. The richer mould which he would employ to increase the size of his plant, would probably burst the calyx, and destroy at once its symmetry. In a similar manner, the forcing manure used to bring about the French revolution, and to give a greater freedom and energy to the human mind, has burst the calyx of humanity, the restraining bond of all society; and, however large the separate petals have grown, however strongly, or even beautifully a few of them have been marked; the whole is at present a loose, deformed, disjointed mass, without union, symmetry, or harmony of colouring. (1798, 75)

Of Condorcet’s fealty to the revolution even unto his death while imprisoned by the Jacobins, Malthus commented:

Mr. Condorcet’s *Esquisse d’un tableau historique des progrès de l’esprit humain*, was written, it is said, under the pressure of that cruel proscription which terminated in his death. If he had no hopes of its being seen during his life, and of its interesting France in his favour, it is a singular instance of the attachment of a man to principles, which every day’s experience was so fatally for himself contradicting. To see the human mind in one of the most enlightened nations of the world, and after a lapse of some thousand years, debased by such a fermentation of disgusting passions, of fear, cruelty, malice, revenge, ambition, madness, and folly, as would have disgraced the most savage nation in the most barbarous age, must have been such a tremendous shock to his ideas of the necessary and inevitable progress of the human mind, that nothing but the firmest conviction of the truth of his principles, in spite of all appearances, could have withstood. (1798, 44)

In a word, Condorcet was in the grip of an ideology.

In the *Outlines*, Condorcet divided human history into ten epochs. Epoch one was “the first degree of civilization” when men were “united into hordes.” Pastoral and agricultural epochs followed. The fourth epoch was marked by “progress of the human mind in Greece.” Development of the mind continued, and virtues advanced with growth of knowledge as the sciences grew apart from philosophy. Then humans arrived at the sixth epoch, which was “disastrous.” In this epoch, the human mind descended

from the height to which it had raised itself, while Ignorance marches in triumph, carrying with her, in one place, barbarian ferocity; in another, a more refined and accomplished cruelty; every where, corruption and perfidy. A glimmering of talents, some faint sparks of greatness or benevolence of soul, will, with difficulty, be discerned amidst the universal darkness. Theological reveries, superstitious delusions, are become the sole genius of man, religious intolerance his only morality; and Europe, crushed between sacerdotal tyranny and military despotism, awaits, in blood and in tears, the moment when the revival of light shall restore it to liberty, to humanity, and to virtue. (Caritat 1795, 57)

Progress resumed in the seventh through ninth epochs—from the time of the Crusades through the formation of the French republic. The tenth and final epoch was the future. Condorcet expected future progress with the spread of liberty and reason.

Condorcet thought the laws of nature allowed for the organic perfectibility of plant and animal species.

This law extends itself to the human race; and it cannot be doubted that the progress of the sanative art, that the use of more wholesome food and more comfortable habitations, that a mode of life which shall develop the physical powers by exercise, without at the same time impairing them by excess; in fine, that the destruction of the two most active causes of deterioration, penury and wretchedness on the one hand, and enormous wealth on the other, must necessarily tend to prolong the common duration of man's existence, and secure him a more constant health and a more robust constitution. . . . Would it even be absurd to suppose this quality of melioration in the human species as susceptible of an indefinite [*sic*] advancement; to suppose that a period must one day arrive when death will be nothing more than the effect either of extraordinary accidents, or of the slow and gradual decay of the vital powers; and that the duration of the middle space, of the interval between the birth of man and this decay, will itself have no assignable limit? (Caritat 1795, 135–36)

With reason and liberty replacing superstition and slavery, humans could look forward to their perfection.

Such are the questions with which we shall terminate the last division of our work. And how admirably calculated is this view of the human race, emancipated from its chains, released alike from the dominion of chance, as well as from that of the enemies of its progress, and advancing with a firm and indeviate step in the paths of truth, to console the philosopher lamenting the errors, the flagrant acts of injustice, the crimes with which the earth is still polluted? It is the

contemplation of this prospect that rewards him for all his efforts to assist the progress of reason and the establishment of liberty. (Caritat 1795, 137)

Godwin looked back to a golden primordial state of human equality:

In the uncultivated state of man diseases, effeminacy and luxury were little known, and of consequence the strength of every one much more nearly approached to the strength of his neighbour. In the uncultivated state of man the understandings of all were limited, their wants, their ideas and their views nearly upon a level. It was to be expected that in their first departure from this state great irregularities would introduce themselves; and it is the object of subsequent wisdom and improvement to mitigate these irregularities. (1793, 1:63)

In Godwin's view, the source of vices is in social institutions such as private property rather than in human nature. He wrote (and Malthus quoted) the following:

The spirit of oppression, the spirit of servility, and the spirit of fraud, these are the immediate growth of the established system of property. These are alike hostile to intellectual and moral improvement. The other vices of envy, malice and revenge are their inseparable companions. In a state of society where men lived in the midst of plenty, and where all shared alike the bounties of nature, these sentiments would inevitably expire. The narrow principle of selfishness would vanish. No man being obliged to guard his little store, or provide with anxiety and pain for his restless wants, each would lose his own individual existence in the thought of the general good. No man would be an enemy to his neighbour, for they would have nothing for which to contend; and of consequence philanthropy would resume the empire which reason assigns her. Mind would be delivered from her perpetual anxiety about corporal support, and free to expatiate in the field of thought which is congenial to her. Each man would assist the enquiries of all. (1793, 2:208)

In response, Malthus conceded that this imagined state of equality would be blissful. The problem was that this society was purely imaginary, unconnected with reality.

Man cannot live in the midst of plenty. All cannot share alike the bounties of nature. Were there no established administration of property, every man would be obliged to guard with force his little store. Selfishness would be triumphant. The subjects of contention would be perpetual. Every individual mind would be under a constant anxiety about corporal support; and not a single intellect would be left free to expatiate in the field of thought. (1798, 52)

Malthus brought the population principle to bear on Godwin's vision: "But let us imagine for a moment Mr. Godwin's beautiful system of equality realized in its utmost purity, and see how soon this difficulty might be expected to press under so perfect a form of society. A theory that will not admit of application cannot possibly be just" (1798, 52–53). In Godwin's vision, marriage has been abolished and with it personal responsibility for rearing children. Children are raised communally. Godwin expected that sexual passions would diminish as they are replaced by the pleasures of intellectual conversation between the sexes. Birth rates would decline, and scarcity of foodstuffs would appear only when the earth was fully populated, if at all. Malthus responded:

I cannot conceive a form of society so favourable upon the whole to population. The irremediableness of marriage, as it is at present constituted, undoubtedly deters many from entering into that state. An unshackled intercourse on the contrary, would be a most powerful incitement to early attachments: and as we are supposing no anxiety about the future support of children to exist, I do not conceive that there would be one woman in a hundred, of twenty-three, without a family.

With these extraordinary encouragements to population, and every cause of depopulation, as we have supposed, removed, the numbers would necessarily increase faster than in any society that has ever yet been known. (1798, 53)

Here we come to one of the several instances in which Malthus used a mathematical model of population and food. He assumed that in the beginning there are 7 million well-fed people. Suppose population doubles in twenty-five years, which is ten years more than the most rapid population Malthus knew of, the one in the back settlements of America. Suppose food production also doubles in twenty-five years. After a quarter century, the doubled population is as well fed as the population there in the beginning, with twice as many people and twice as much food. But

[d]uring the next period of doubling, where will the food be found to satisfy the importunate demands of the increasing numbers.[*sic*] Where is the fresh land to turn up? where is the dressing necessary to improve that which is already in cultivation? There is no person with the smallest knowledge of land, but would say that it was impossible that the average produce of the country could be increased during the second twenty-five years by a quantity equal to what it at present yields. (1798, 54)

Suppose that, however unlikely it may be, food production increases by the same absolute amount as before. Malthus boasted that his argument against Godwin was so strong that this concession to fantasy weakened it not at all. There are 7 million fully fed people to begin with; after twenty-five years there are 14 million fully fed people. But

after another twenty-five years, there would be either 21 million fully fed people with 7 million unfed people or 21 million people who had three-fourths of a full diet. From there on, the food shortfall would become larger and larger.

This hypothetical exercise is faithful to Godwin's vision, for there are no institutions giving rise to vicious activity. But there will be vicious activity, from human nature and hunger. "In so short a period as within fifty years," Malthus stated, "violence, oppression, falsehood, misery, every hateful vice, and every form of distress, which degrade and sadden the present state of society, seem to have been generated by the most imperious circumstances, by laws inherent in the nature of man, and absolutely independent of it human regulations" (1798, 55). Malthus reminded his readers that this example is counterfactual. There could not be 7 million people or any other number without food. Food is necessary for life!

Godwin had allowed that "there is a principle in human society by which population is perpetually kept down to the level of the means of subsistence" (1793, 2:209). But he had not identified the principle. Malthus asked:

Is it some obscure and occult cause? Is it some mysterious interference of heaven, which at a certain period, strikes the men with impotence, and the women with barrenness? Or is it a cause, open to our researches, within our view, a cause, which has *constantly* been observed to operate, though with varied force, in every state in which man has been placed? Is it not a degree of misery, the necessary and inevitable result of the laws of nature, which human institutions, so far from aggravating, have tended considerably to mitigate, though they never can remove? (1798, 55, emphasis added)

We see here that Malthus did not *predict* a population crisis in Great Britain or anywhere else. The principle that keeps population down to the means of subsistence is *always at work*. Malthus used the population principle to rebut radical visions of pure egalitarian societies shorn of institutions such as property rights and marriage. Even if such a community were established, population pressures would lead to "vice and misery," which would prompt inhabitants of the community to rediscover the very institutions that were torn down.

For two centuries, Malthus has been regarded as a prophet of doom, the man responsible for making economics the "dismal science" (see Levy 2001). The economist Kenneth Boulding wrote in the foreword to the University of Michigan Press edition of Malthus's *Essay* that the "whole purport of the argument" is to show that "the geometric increase of population will soon outrun any conceivable increase in the food supply" (1959, vi). We have seen here, however, that this was not "the whole purport of the argument." It was not the purport of the argument at all. Under this conventional reading of the *Essay*, Malthus would have little relevance today, with food supplies growing worldwide and population peaking in much of the world. But with our alternative reading, which is faithful to text and context, the *Essay* does have lessons for our time. The sentiments that inspired Condorcet and Godwin are very much with us

still. Intellectually and spiritually, the French Revolution is not over. It is an ongoing enterprise that is gathering force. Institutions that in the past kept us connected with realities of God, nature, nation, community, and family as well as even with realities of our bodies are being abandoned. These institutions are falling prey to anomie and corruption. And they are under assault from without, made under the flags of reason and liberty and led by academics, legislators, and jurists. The list of institutions under assault goes on and on—the Constitution, marriage and family, citizenship, religion, science, even human biology. Nothing is given; nothing is sacred; everything is constructed and deconstructed. Not that there are no longer bright moral lines that you cross at your peril. But the lines are drawn and redrawn in the dynamic political game of sorting out the oppressors and the oppressed.

The revolution that was to bring liberty, equality, and fraternity to the French people gave them instead the first modern genocide, the brutal “pacification” of conservative and pious inhabitants of the Vendée in 1794 (see table 1). Such atrocities have recurred repeatedly, with political movements of “liberation” soaking the land in blood. Intellectuals who embrace the ideology that Malthus criticized are more often than not in the vanguard of these movements. These intellectuals are bred in colleges, graduate programs, and even professional schools, where the pursuit of truth and justice and of politics rightly understood has been abandoned or outright denied. Their place is filled with the ideology of total politics as raw power. Perhaps Malthus was overly optimistic. He believed utopian experiments in denial of laws of nature and human nature would lead ultimately to recovery of civilizing structures. This may be the case and certainly was for some of the small nineteenth-century utopian communities. But in the larger picture the questions remain: How much misery and vice will it take for socialism to lose its appeal, for biologists to speak the truth they know of when human life begins, for physicians to recover the Hippocratic Oath’s charge to do no harm, even at the patient’s request? How much misery and vice will it take for modern gnostics to accept and defend the truth that Malthus knew and defended—that there is reality independent of our desires? Life is

**Table 1**  
**Casualties of Intellectual and Spiritual Descendants of the French Revolution**

Event	Civilian Deaths
Vendée (1793–94)	300,000
German National Socialism	15.5 million
Russian communism	20.0 million
Chinese communism	65.0 million
Abortions in United States since 1973	60.9 million

*Sources:* Courtois et al. 1999; Masson 2004; “Documenting the Numbers” 2019; National Right to Life Educational Foundation n.d.



better when we conform our wills to reality rather than futilely trying to shape reality to our wills.

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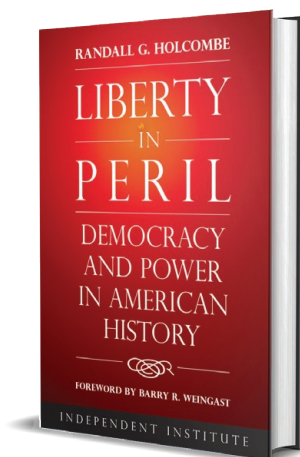
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