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Book Review: The New Worlds of Thomas Robert Malthus: Rereading the Principle of Population by Alison Bashford and Joyce E. Chaplin

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BOOK REVIEWS

ALISON BASHFORD AND JOYCE E. CHAPLIN

The New Worlds of Thomas Robert Malthus: Rereading the Principle of Population

Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016. 368 p. \$45.00.

It has been 218 years since Malthus published the first edition of *An Essay on the Principle of Population*. In 1798 he had a lesson to relay to his contemporaries about the true relationship between population dynamics, the prevalence of poverty, and the futility of social revolution. Poverty and revolution were central concerns for his generation and his *Essay* triggered spirited debate. Since then Malthusian thought has experienced periodic revivals as particular generations found relevant lessons in the *Essay* for understanding the population problems of their day. When death rates in developing countries plummeted after World War II, fears of population growth outstripping food supplies turned many policymakers in industrialized countries into ardent neo-Malthusians who saw family planning as the only humane solution to that crisis. Later in the century when rapid industrialization and economic growth spawned worries about worldwide environmental degradation and resource depletion, a new generation turned to Malthus for insights about the ultimate carrying capacity of “spaceship earth.” In *The New Worlds of Thomas Robert Malthus*, Bashford and Chaplin offer a “rereading of the principle of population” and find a lesson for dealing with a particular problem of our time. In the volume’s Coda they present a vision of our world as being one of climate change where “rainforest is logged, ice melts, and seas rise,” and of globalization that has left no place untouched. In this world many indigenous populations face extermination, as their lands are inundated by physical and cultural cataclysms (pp. 280–1). Few might think that Malthus’s *Essay* has much to say about this problem, and the authors admit that if one looks at the first edition this is largely true. But they focus on his greatly expanded second edition (1803) in which he describes in detail the living conditions of indigenous populations in the sparsely settled new worlds of the Americas, the South Sea Islands, Australia, and New Zealand. Here he reflects on how the arrival of European settlers during the centuries following Columbus’s voyages affected their survival chances.

The authors contend that in the totality of his writings on population, Malthus identified two moral predicaments, described by the authors as “moral hazards,” that were central to his principle of population. The first had to do with the poor of Europe. The principle of population held that the power of population was inherently greater than the power of production, which guaranteed that material constraints would relegate some to lives of misery. But the authors see Malthus, especially in the later editions of the *Essay*, seeking to minimize this outcome by identifying how informed economic, educational, and political interventions could reduce the amount of misery experienced. The second moral hazard concerned the hunting “savages” and the semipastoral “barbarians” who inhabited the new worlds of the Atlantic and Pacific. The hazard here was that European settlers, arriving with a production technology that could support higher population densities, would ignore the inhabitants’ just right to their lands and quickly isolate and

exterminate them. With respect to this second moral hazard the authors admit that Malthus was vague about how best it might be mitigated. Early on he suggested that government-sponsored plans to send the poor of Europe to these sparsely settled new worlds were ill advised. Such plans were costly, were unlikely to offer a permanent solution to European poverty as new poor would simply refill the lands vacated by emigrants, often failed, and when successful wreaked war and extermination on indigenous populations. But by 1830 he came to endorse government-sponsored schemes to send the poor of Ireland and Scotland to these lands. He recommended that the cottages of emigrants be torn down and their lands be given over to sheep so new poor would not refill them, and he had more positive assessments of their chances for success. He had little to say, however, about how to avoid the war and extermination such “success” was likely to bring. The authors nevertheless laud Malthus for recognizing, unlike most of his contemporaries, the inherent right of indigenous peoples to their native lands. It’s not apparent, however, that his enlightened position on this score should lead us to see a pro-indigenous people’s agenda as a Malthusian one.

Regardless, the rereading of Malthus’s principle of population story by Alison Bashford, the Vere Harmsworth Professor of Imperial and Naval History at the University of Cambridge, and Joyce E. Chaplin, the James Duncan Phillips Professor of Early American History at Harvard University, has much to offer, even for those who thought they already knew this story. As erudite historians of Malthus’s time and place, their account (Chapter 2) of what he was reading, writing, and discussing before composing the *Essay* in 1798 highlights the origins of the various components of his initial argument. The first edition’s full title made clear his intent: to counter the “speculations of Mr. Godwin, M. Condorcet and other writers” about the possible “future improvement of society.” He did this with a compact and abstract argument, ostensibly showing that population would constantly press on the means of subsistence, checked only by the mass of humanity experiencing lives of misery (famine, disease, war) and vice (various forms of illicit sex). But with such a neat and seemingly unassailable proof of humanity’s non-perfectibility why, then, did Malthus write a second edition?

The authors note that Malthus had a substantially different objective for his second edition. No longer concerned with constructing an “impregnable fortress” to surround the “abstract truth” that population must always be kept down to the level of the means of subsistence, he now sought to empirically catalog the actual means various peoples used to achieve this balance. His identification in the second edition of an additional check to population other than misery or vice, one of moral restraint (delaying sex and marriage until capable of providing for children), illustrates his new, less doctrinaire approach. When Captain James Cook first arrived in 1770 on the very sparsely settled east coast of New Holland (Australia), he noted: “By what means the population of this country are reduced to such a number as it can subsist, is not perhaps easy to guess” (p. 97). The authors see this observation as inspiring Malthus to take a more empirical look at the workings of the principle of population, especially for the societies of the new worlds. Unlike the heavily populated agriculturally based societies of Europe, Asia, and Africa, whose numbers could be seen oscillating around their carrying capacity in response to the presence or

absence of droughts, floods, epidemics, and wars, these newly discovered almost empty lands required greater scrutiny to uncover how the principle of population was controlling their numbers. Malthus set out to do just this in the early chapters of the second edition.

In Chapters 3 to 5 the authors describe Malthus's 1803 treatment of the population dynamics of New Holland, the Americas, and the South Sea Islands. They examine the accounts of the early European explorers that Malthus referenced and note where he accepted their descriptions of indigenous behaviors that kept numbers in check and where he ignored them. For instance, he never explicitly acknowledged the cultivation of crops practiced in numerous Native North American communities even though many commentators had noted this practice. In part this was due to Malthus structuring his treatment of societies in accordance with the stadial theory of human development conceived earlier by Scottish theorists: humans advanced in stages from small hunting and gathering groups, to nomadic pastoral societies, to more densely settled agricultural societies, and finally to commercial societies that traded goods for foods. Having Native North American communities solidly ensconced in the hunting-and-gathering savage stage allowed Malthus to avoid issues that might be seen as questioning the soundness of stadial theory. When looking for the population checks that societies in the new worlds employed, he found them to be many and varied: requiring certain pregnancies to be aborted, abandoning deformed babies, killing infants whose mothers had died, female infanticide, abusing women of child-bearing age, having a low level of passion between the sexes, "libertinage" among women before marriage, certain sexual and reproductive customs that lessened fertility, high levels of violence against women, and war among men. In the end he found every community had developed a finely tuned set of practices that kept its numbers within the bounds of available subsistence, one that he noted was often disrupted by the arrival of Europeans.

In Chapters 6 and 7 the authors examine the evolution of Malthus's thought from 1803 to 1830 on slavery and emigration, topics of great public concern that some had related to his principle of population. The authors make a convincing case that Malthus's position with respect to each was influenced not just by his theory but also by personal factors. In 1796 his widowed cousin inherited a large Jamaican sugar plantation with numerous slaves, and in 1798 she married his brother. When this plantation became embroiled in a legal battle over ownership, Malthus found himself with power of attorney, arguing for his family's interest. At the same time Parliament was considering a bill to end the slave trade, with opponents using Malthus's principle of population to argue that the trade actually benefited the black population as a whole. The slave trade produced more spaces in Africa that were quickly filled by greater numbers of Africans surviving and therefore was responsible for a worldwide net increase in Africans. This use of his principle of population so upset Malthus that he hastily added a footnote to the 1806 third edition of his *Essay* with the modest argument that the Caribbean slave trade was demonstrably bad because slaves there were not reproducing themselves.

The authors note that while millions of West Africans had been shipped as chattel slaves to the Americas for centuries, Malthus had avoided talking at all about this massive population movement in the first two editions of his *Essay*,

suggesting that his family's connection to slavery made it a sensitive topic for him. In a similar fashion the authors contend that his professorship at the East India Company College, the training institution for a company responsible for nearly half the world's trade at the time, might have compromised his willingness to examine the worldwide population consequences of Britain's ongoing imperial expansion. Clearly, the particular time, place, and circumstance in which Malthus found himself significantly affected the contours of his theory, one ostensibly based on two unchanging natural laws. Not that this tendency was limited to Malthus. In Chapter 8, the authors examine the reception his *Essay* received during his lifetime in America and other countries of the new worlds. Unsurprisingly, given that the arguments in the *Essay* are malleable and evidently capable of being formed into justifications for a range of policy positions, most residents of the new worlds had little difficulty finding reasons to reject Malthus's more problematic recommendations, such as respecting indigenous people's inherent right to their land.

The authors' research adds considerably to our understanding of what Malthus was about in his three-decade-long project of elaborating and illustrating the principle of population. What started as a compact argument to use in an ideological debate became a quest to understand the various means societies have evolved to balance their numbers and resources. The hitherto neglected role that the new worlds played in this quest gets a full airing. The new worlds' relative emptiness when discovered was a puzzle in need of explanation. Their unprecedented growth rate when settled by Europeans, often doubling every twenty years, was an alarming measure of the power of population. Additionally the authors offer a fascinating examination of the project's ethical dimensions, and as a result the portrait of Malthus assumes a greater ethical complexity, even if the source of his ethics remains somewhat obscure. Although the authors offer an extensive analysis of the 1803 edition, they never reconcile the contrasting positions Malthus took within it with respect to the two moral conflicts seen arising from the working of his principle of population: the most appropriate treatment of the poor of Europe and of the new worlds' indigenous people.

At least from a twenty-first-century ethical perspective, one that is particularly sensitive to issues of race and inequality, it seems as though Malthus employed a totally different moral compass when addressing each of these two issues. Early in the 1803 edition he seems a man of the twenty-first century in his revulsion at the plight of indigenous peoples being driven into starvation: "There are many parts of the globe, indeed, hitherto uncultivated, and almost unoccupied, but the right of exterminating, or driving into a corner where they must starve, even the inhabitants of these thinly peopled regions, will be questioned in a moral view" (p. 9). Yet later in the same edition, he seems lacking any twenty-first-century moral sensibilities when he tells a poor child that starvation is his proper destiny: "A man who is born into a world already possessed, if he cannot get subsistence from his parents on whom he has a just demand, and if the society do not want his labour, has no claim of right to the smallest portion of food, and in fact has no business to be where he is" (p. 531). He goes on in this notorious passage, which disappeared from future editions of the *Essay*, to rebuke any guest at "Nature's mighty feast" who might even think of making room at the table for this starving person. Why the

two totally different moral assessments of starvation? Why does Malthus consider the starvation of indigenous peoples to be a moral tragedy while he considers the starvation of European poor to be a moral necessity? In the Coda the authors suggest that Malthus's revulsion at the plight of indigenous peoples makes him a man for the twenty-first century. But he is never likely to experience that recognition until his two very different moral stances are reconciled. It is possible that in his mind both stances flowed directly from the principle of population. In a world where numbers and resources are in balance, Malthus sees "possession," especially "prior possession," as offering a bulwark to protect all of human kind from being driven into poverty. The inequality found in a "world already possessed" is a virtue that allows at least some to live in prosperity and plenty. Is it possible that simple prior possession explains why Malthus thought that the indigenous peoples of the new worlds had an intrinsic right to their lands? Did his revulsion at their starvation derive from this source, and not from a simple natural reaction to the presence of great human suffering? There still remain some unanswered questions surrounding Malthus's population thinking—but many fewer than before the publication of this very insightful volume.