

# Anarchism and Malthus

C. L. James

1910

John Stuart Mill, who knew little about the difference between Anarchism and Socialism, but sympathized with both, as far as he understood them, has left on record the sentiment that the Malthusian theory, long considered the fatal objection to Socialism, might prove the strongest argument in its favor. Being much of that opinion myself, I have long desired Malthus, a writer of whom everybody talks and whom nobody reads, to be more generally understood. His life and character strike me as very irrelevant to his reasonings; but since prejudice always insists on getting them in, and generally tells lies about them, here is the truth. Daniel Malthus was the friend and executor of Rousseau. It need not be said, he was a radical. He was also an author to whom some literary merit is attributed; but he always wrote anonymously. His social grade was that of an English "gentleman," living on an income derived from some sort of stock. That he was pretty rich, and that he met with financial reverses, may be inferred from the facts that he passed through the University of Cambridge as a student in the most expensive class; but his son, Thomas Robert Malthus, the economist, was sent there on a cheaper plan; at which time we also find that the family, though increased, had moved into a smaller house than that where he was born. Here, during the winter of 1797, the father and son had some arguments about the merits of *Political Justice*, a book recently published by William Godwin (husband of Mary Wollstonecraft, and father-in-law of Percy Bysshe Shelley). Godwin was an Anarchist of that early unscientific type which preceded Marx and Proudhon. Like his French contemporary, Condorcet, he vaguely entertained those ideas to which Saint Simon about twenty-four years later, gave precision. That prodigious increase of wealth-producing arts which marked the last quarter of the eighteenth century was transforming military into industrial organization. The trades of the soldier, the legislator, the judge, the jailer, the sovereign, and the hangman, would soon be discarded as useless by a generation whom commerce was bringing to understand human solidarity. Commerce itself, by its effect in cheapening the means of life, would be obliged to make way for Communism. The Golden Age, the Paradisiacal State, was not only before, instead of behind us — it was at the door. The courageous optimism which could think so when the greatest of popular revolutions was, after fearful bloodshed, in the act of transformation into a conquering military despotism, does credit to Godwin's heart, and his imagination; and the elder Malthus was delighted. But the younger pointed out difficulties. In Godwin's Utopia, life was to be maintained so easily that the "struggle for existence" (a phrase used by Malthus) would have ceased; and population, naturally, would increase fast. For things had by no means come to that

in the United States, where the settlers were still killing Indians and working negro slaves; where they had fought seven years against a tax, and were in the act of domestic rebellion for cheap whiskey. Yet even in the United States living was so easy, that population, aside from immigration, doubled every twenty-five years. No such rate of increase could possibly continue. As this is a point on which ignorant critics of Malthus continually blunder, we will try to get it clear. The ignorant critics speak about destructive effects of this increase as if these were equally remote with the earth's falling into the sun, or the extinction of the sun itself. But anyone who can use a table of logarithms may convince himself in five minutes that the progeny of one Adam and Eve, doubling every twenty-five years, would pack like oranges in a box, not after geologic aeons, but in a few centuries. Of course no such result is possible. Yet it would evidently happen but that something hinders. What does? Increase of the death-rate. This comes in various forms, all horrible to contemplate. Densely peopled countries, India, China, Egypt, Ireland, are mostly very liable to famine. Those happier in this respect have had dire experience that crowding and pestilence go together. Even where these destroying angels spare to smite for the sins of the people, the mortality of cities, notwithstanding all their opulence and knowledge, is invariably higher than that of the poorer, ruder country. But above all other things, war has been not only a check on over-population, but a proof that even very ignorant people know a check is needed. That they may not starve, cannibals fight and eat each other. Shepherds, indeed, cannot starve while their flocks are fed; for the flocks increase faster than the men.<sup>1</sup> But the flocks must have food as well as the men; and, because they increase faster, they reach the limit beyond which they cannot be supported, sooner. Then the shepherd-peoples also resort to war. They sweep across three continents under the black banner of Mahomet, or, perhaps, they are defeated, and almost annihilated, in a battle like that of Aqua Sextiae, by the richer and more civilized neighbors whose territories they have invaded. Either way, the problem of over-population is solved for some time, so far as they are concerned with it. In agricultural countries, war is less popular. But when a government able to suppress it through a wide region arises, famine takes its place, unless the birth-rate be reduced at the same time. A great object-lesson of the kind had recently been seen in India. The first of her recorded famines on a large scale occurred under Aurungzebe, — the first sovereign who really ruled all India. And observe, this could be attributed to nothing but cessation of war, which, when famine threatened, had previously offered a more hopeful way of dying; for, except cessation of war, there had been no important change in the customs of India to account for so terrible a change in the results. The alternative of war or famine is likewise so generally understood that, though backward agricultural peoples are less pugnacious than the cattle-breeders, war was everywhere, always, the principal fact in their history, till it ended, as war normally does, in extensive conquests like those of the Great Moguls. In the highest state of civilization, where there are important manufactures and extensive commerce, there is less war than anywhere else. But even so typically modern a country as England had been at war fifty years in the preceding hundred, and if we clear our minds of cant about "rights," "international law," "the balance of power," and other diplomatic flimflam, we shall find that the true object of a modern war is a commercial advantage, that nations get ready to fight for a commercial advantage when the pressure of increasing population makes the advantage sufficiently necessary, that increase of the population is the fundamental cause of war, — "*teterrima causa belli*" — as it

---

<sup>1</sup> This is one of Henry George's arguments to show that population may increase indefinitely — an argument utterly idiotic, as the next sentence shows.

always was. Now, Mr. Godwin is witness that war is the cause of government, slavery, serfdom, laws, punishments, unequal distribution of wealth. If, therefore, his Utopia, which is to banish all such things, were established, it could not last, and we should soon have them all back, unless a way be found of checking propagation. But, in truth, too much is conceded in supposing his Utopia established at all. Since men were cannibals, some slow approaches to it have, indeed, been made. The tortoise of industry may be tiring out the hares of lust and plunder; but Mr. Godwin himself shows us that they are a long way ahead of her still; and to imagine them laid asleep by his Arcadian rhetoric is to show ignorance of human nature. All which led Malthus Jr. to another series of reflections. What he called Positive Checks on population — those which increase the death-rate—are inevitable, if propagation goes on at American speed, which, under Utopian conditions, it should surpass. But, generally speaking, it does not go on so fast. There are, then, Checks on population, of a different sort — Preventive — those which diminish the birth-rate. It is evident that there are many checks of this kind — among them vicious practices. But on these, Malthus, a clergyman, had no mercy. He classed them as Positive Checks, — appearing to hold, rather dogmatically, that they restrain increase as much by raising the death-rate as by lowering the birth-rate; nor did he withhold this censure from the least injurious among them, such as those afterwards proposed by the Malthusian Socialist, Robert Owen.<sup>2</sup> The only check which Malthus would admit to be truly Preventive, or Prudential, is continence. This check is, certainly, far from inefficacious. The lowest savages, who graze like apes, know, indeed, nothing about it. But in the stage of hunting nomadism, a young man is not allowed to marry till the cruel rites of barbarian confirmation have proved him fit for his father's trade of war. If he cannot pass, he is good for nothing but a priest; and where priests do not fight (as sometimes they do) the general rule is that they are celibates. Among cattleraising nomads, polygamy prevails; and men who are not smart enough to acquire stock can get no wives. In the agricultural state, and still more the commercial, it is mere commonplace that to marry without the means of supporting a family is imprudent. Thus, from the lowest conditions of man to the highest, we find celibacy increasing uniformly with civilization, except as superstition sometimes intervenes to cause a factitious increase, which, we may suspect of being rather apparent than real. In that increasing celibacy whose causes are economic, much, no doubt, is loose; but much is genuine. It requires some force of character, some foresight, some judgment, to do what Jacob did for Rachel. Yet this is what many young men do in all social states, from the nomadic shepherd's upwards, but increasingly. If the qualities they show be among those which make success in the battle of life, as they very clearly are, has not Godwin's materialistic philosophy confounded effect with cause? Is it not this improvement of habits which has made increase in wealth and knowledge? If the latter fails, as we see it has so far failed, to "substitute the industrial *régime* for the military," is not that because the improvement of habits is by no means as general as are some of its superficial effects? A beggar may be made more comfortable in London than a king in Darkest Africa; but there is no making- a fool anything else than a fool, or saving him from being pushed to the worst place among competitors wherever he may happen to live.

---

<sup>2</sup> If he were wrong in this, he at least had something to say. Under the Roman Empire celibacy, of course, as a rule, impure, which, even under the Republic, had become a common way of avoiding the pecuniary pressure, increased to immense proportions. This saved the Roman peace from ending in famine, like the Mogul. But it did not avert dissolution of the Empire. Malthus would have been quite in the ordinary way of thinking if he attributed Roman misfortunes to Roman vice; and maintained that a chaste celibacy might have had better results.

From these discussions sprang the famous essay of Malthus which was published in 1798. The prodigious sensation which it immediately produced caused five editions to follow during the author's life. The second, and most important, appeared in 1803. This book, with expansions, revisions, replies to critics, — in short, the subject of this book, variously handled — is coextensive with Malthus' literary activity. (He had, indeed, written an earlier pamphlet called *The Crisis*, in defense of Pitt's administration; but, by his father's advice, he kept it out of print.) The first edition of the Essay described its topic as the Principle of Population viewed with relation to, the Future Improvement of Mankind. The motive of a critique on Godwin's *Political Justice* was still in Malthus' mind. He had also another reason for introducing his study in this way. Professing to be a Christian, and having recently taken holy orders, he knew well enough that he would be attacked on the ground of impugning the Divine goodness; and that no one would be so savage as his fellow-priests for this and other reasons. He, therefore, must have his theory about the future improvement of mankind, which, if not so rose-colored as Godwin's, must be sufficient for the pious purpose of vindicating the ways of God to man. Malthus professes, accordingly, to desire the future improvement of mankind as much as Godwin can desire it. The only question between them is about practicable means. Having argued as above that Godwin's Utopia, if set up, would fall; and, moreover, that it could not be set up, without a radical change in regard to an important relation which Godwin had forgotten to mention; Malthus proceeds to contend that his law of population, though it may seem hard to rebellious flesh, is in truth, the law of human progress from the brute state of the lowest savage upwards. As distinctly as his most illustrious pupil, Darwin, does Malthus perceive that "the struggle for existence" is what makes us progressively better fitted to exist. It is also what makes us more worthy. Terrible as have been the struggles, it is to them we owe it that we are not picking worms out of rotten trees, or ranging the seashore for carrion. It is because our ancestors were cannibals that they have, everywhere except in the most inaccessible jungles and islands, exterminated those weaker brothers of theirs who could be content with wild fruits or dead fish. That, as here, so at every later step in the struggle, whether between nations or individuals, the world has been made better by the success of the strongest, bravest, and shrewdest, can scarcely, indeed, be disputed, but it will not be adequately understood without our realizing that the improvement has been moral, no less than physical and intellectual. On a general view, it seems evident enough that the vices — sloth, cowardice, conceit, spite, envy, vanity, ill-temper, gluttony, lasciviousness, — are decided handicaps in the struggle, which must be, and are, wearing down, through the ill-success of those in whom they principally prevail. Of two only — avarice and falsehood — can it be pretended that they help anyone to outdo competitors. But too much is allowed in granting that they generally do. They may help an individual on a pinch. But compare nations, classes, sects, parties, whose lives are longer than those of individuals — nay, compare, not two but many, individuals — and it will be clear enough that neither piggishness nor rascality pays; that cunning, though an advantage in itself, is no such advantage as a reputation for veracity; that though generosity is often imprudent, it is not prudent to lack generosity. And thus the cynical saying that prudence is the only virtue God rewards, may be transfigured into this reverent sentiment that all the virtues can be deduced from the premises of one who will grant a sure reward to even prudence. Thus the actual causes of past improvement guide us to the process of future. The general direction is that in which Godwin can see no obstacles. War, slavery, punishments, inequalities of fortune and station, and the passions which cause them, are very bad things, to be avoided by every man, for himself, no less than for the sake of humanity. The man who will not fight if he can help it, is wiser than the bully. But it

does not do to forget that the best-tempered men will fight for life and those things without which life is worthless; that it is the direction of advantage in such necessary strife which has displaced those who thought fighting a sufficient end by those who very reluctantly adopt it as a means; that the one great error, of imprudence in giving life before providing material to support life, will continue, as long as committed, to make the struggle for existence inevitable. In the second edition of the Essay, all this elaborate Theodice disappears.<sup>3</sup> So do many rhetorical passages, chief among them the famous one about “Nature’s mighty feast,” which all the world quotes, and generally garbles. There was a reason for this change. Malthus was now a famous man. Attacks on his doctrines from the side of superstition had come, of course; but they did not amount to as much as he expected; and he had ceased to care for them.<sup>4</sup> By Socialists, if the term at this early date be proper, his work had been rather well received than otherwise — Godwin particularly using expressions which implied that he had learned by it; as, from his life and associations we should infer, he easily might. The day when demolishing Malthus appeared a part of every radical’s appointed task, did not come till Ricardo (died 1823) had drawn certain inferences from the theory of Malthus, about which more anon. Of more interest to Malthus’ scientific mind were criticisms on statistical and other positive grounds. He determined, therefore, in revising his Essay, to keep strictly within facts. Even the title was altered accordingly. His subject is declared to be, not the future improvement, but the past history and present prospects of mankind. In the substance of his reasoning there was one modification which his opponents naturally worked for all it was worth. In the edition of 1798 he had described the positive checks on population as “Vice and Misery,” the preventive as based upon “the fear of them.” A criticism, in which he admitted force, was that he had said nothing about hope. Ambition, the desire of improving one’s condition, is certainly a chief cause of continence, and this is something more than fear of vice and misery for oneself or his posterity. Acknowledging this, the tone of theorizing is certainly more optimistic than before. This change in Malthus’ language, rather than his meaning, together with the confession that he should have been more explicit at first, is the basis of the criticism often made by Coleridge and others, that the theory is a truism from which nothing can be inferred. That it is no truism, but an extremely complicated equation, may certainly be inferred from the facility with which critics misunderstand it, the multiplicity of ways in which they manage to do that, and the oft-recurring argument *ad verecundum* — it is very strange that Menu, Confucius, Moses, Solon, Cato, even the ascetic Roman Catholic publicists, should have held up increasing the species as a sacred duty; and that discovering the direful results of doing so should have been reserved for Malthus!<sup>5</sup> Of the four subsequent editions, nothing need be said here, except that

---

<sup>3</sup> George says that the Malthusian theory did not originally involve the idea of progress. Referred even to the later editions of Malthus, this is incorrect; but for the first it is ridiculous, and shows at once that George never read what Malthus wrote in 1798.

<sup>4</sup> Those acquainted with Malthus in after life say he was one of the gentlest and most amiable of men; which we are also told about Ricardo and Adam Smith. But there are letters of his tutor extant, from which it appears that he had been a most pugnacious boy; and a phrenologist, reading his works with knowledge of their occasions, would find ground on every page for saying: “Firmness and combativeness, Large!” Malthus said that the charges of discouraging benevolence, and commending infanticide and abortion, etc., etc., gave him pain, when they were honest misunderstandings; but, considered as polemical tricks, he had learned to despise them, and got over answering.

<sup>5</sup> George, whose “refutation of Malthus” is useful because it gives in epitome those of every one else, with exquisite consistency, suggests both these views; sometimes wondering ironically that this great truth never was discovered before; sometimes intimating that it does not amount to a great truth, because everybody knows all the

they become progressively more statistical, comprehensive, and bald, until even friendly critics thought he would have been clearer for taking less pains to be clear.

Amidst all these changes, which quite amount to making the book a new one, there is no wavering about the “main principle,” as Malthus termed it. The “main principle,” or Malthusian Theory, properly so-called, may be boiled down to this, that increase of the Positive Check (premature deaths) can be averted only by increase of the Prudential Check (fewer births). Its arithmetical self-evidence needs no further exposition, if the American figures, on which it was founded, be correct. In this respect it is characteristic of the author. Malthus was not a very consecutive thinker or lucid writer, though in his youth he was a florid one; but figures were his strong point (he came out of Cambridge with the high mathematical rank of Ninth Wrangler). His description of human increase in America as “geometrical” and increase of food as “arithmetical” has been pronounced affectedly technical by one of his few really competent reviewers (Mill); but it is not without justification. Population, doubling every twenty-five years, does not increase in a very rapid geometric ratio, like the pennies paid for nails in the problem of the horse’s shoes. Let such a population live, as long as it can, on flocks and herds, grain, commissions in exchange, or what you will; all, except perhaps the last, also increase in a geometric ratio, and faster than men, thus making their increase at the old rate practicable — true; while there is vacant land to be exploited; but how long will that be? The increase of land in pasture; of grain, under the intensest culture; of commerce, while the continents are being developed, is not, for want of land, at a geometrical rate — we put it high in supposing it arithmetical, thus: —

Years	25	50	75	100	etc.
People	x	2x	4x	8x	etc.
Produce	y	2y	3y	4y	etc.

Evidently, too, the principle is highly important. Not to mention “the future improvement of mankind,” if their “present prospect” be that forbearance from unchecked indulgence in an appetite they share with brutes is the only alternative from the double agony of unwelcome births and premature deaths: if “their past history” have for its key-note excessive births, necessitating premature deaths, by sacrifice to Moloch, as in Syria; legal infanticide, as at Rome; illicit infanticide, as in China;<sup>6</sup> abortion; famine; pestilence; war; the miseries and disgraces of slavery, which, in all its forms, is the result of war; between which propositions the first is mathematically demonstrable, and the other historically notorious; then recalcitration against the moral is the mark of a brute; the laws which still do in some measure encourage masculine sensuality, feminine dependence, and their hideous consequences, are the brutal laws of barbarians, who wanted food for powder because, like other men, they sought to gratify their desires with the least exertion, and because plunder is, in the barbarous state, the easiest way to live; nor can the voluble individual who, in our time, praises their polity, escape being deemed a brute on any ground but the contemptuous one that he is only an ignorant sensationalist. Most assuredly, the

---

truth there is in it, and governs himself accordingly. That Malthus actually stated all the truth there is in this, would never be suspected by a reader of George.

<sup>6</sup> Malthus, whose eye surveyed the world, did not, of course, overlook so huge a fact as infanticide. From a moral point of view, his judgment on it may be anticipated; but from an economic, he reasoned that it rather increased population than otherwise, being looked forward to, wherever tolerated, as a resort, before children are born; while, after that, parental affection limits it to a last resort.

whimper that Malthus attributes “vice and misery to a natural instinct with which are linked the purest and sweetest affections,” deserves no sympathy from one whose estimate of women’s rights and duties is at all above the Rooseveltian standard.

Men, however, are not easily convinced of what they do not wish to believe. The windows of heaven have rained refutations upon Malthus for, now, a hundred and ten years. That the refutations do not refute is shown by the fact that they continue to rain. But though the shower gives no sign of slackening, originality in making the missiles was exhausted long ago. The modern student not only keeps his refutations of Malthus on the same shelf with his reconciliations of Genesis and geology, but knows, as soon as he looks into one, on what part of the shelf to put it.

Among refuters of Malthus we have specified two kinds, those who say the theory is a truism, and those who arraign it on some such *a priori* ground as impiety; being “dangerous to morals”; being pessimistic; being a stock argument of Tories and the privileged classes, — concerning which we shall say more.<sup>7</sup> A third class of refuters, probably as numerous as the rest put together, are the eclectics, who reproduce all the arguments of previous anti-Malthusians, without perceiving that they contradict each other. There are also many who attempt a *reductio ad absurdum*, and succeed triumphantly — in making themselves absurd. Such are those who accuse Malthus of representing vice and misery as rather good things than otherwise; of supposing we are in danger of an actual squeeze (!) of recommending infanticide, against which we have seen that he discovered a new argument; of being refuted by all the wisdom of antiquity. These are not always easy to distinguish from the *a priori* critics; but there is this important difference that Messrs. *a priori* fairly understand what Malthus meant, while the reducer to absurdity always misunderstands him grossly. A common case, which also illustrates the complexity of his alleged truism and the ease with which it can be misunderstood, is that of the man who asks for proof that population does increase, and reminds us of fishers washing their nets upon the rock of Tyre, or jackals howling among the ruins of Babylon. Now, *Malthus never said that population on the whole did increase* — not that I doubt it, but I might, without contradicting Malthus. He said that there was a powerful human instinct which tends to increase population; and therefore (which is an important point) that it must increase — unless the Positive Check or the Prudential hinders. But he was not so ignorant of what either can do as to be unaware that celibacy like that of the Roman Empire, especially after it became Christian, or a visitation like the Black Death, may diminish population very fast.

The theory of Malthus has, a good long while ago, converted all writers worthy to be called economists, all biologists, and all historians. Its first victories were among those emphatically to be designated as the men of his own time. The great party which had ruled England without intermission from 1715 to 1760, was breaking in the vortex of the French Revolution. Those among the Old Whigs who followed Burke and Pitt soon came to be indistinguishable from the Tories, whose ashes were warmed into life by a sympathetic reign and by the extinction of their evil genius, the exiled House of Stuart. Malthus’ place as a politician was among the New Whigs, whose

---

<sup>7</sup> Much the best criticism of this kind was made by Karl Marx. The capitalists, he says, have regular employment for a limited number of proletaires. What they call the surplus is an excess over that number. They are quite insincere in affecting a desire to reduce it, for it is the reserve of their army. Out of this “surplus” come the “scab,” the strike-breaker, the policeman, the common soldier where there is no conscription. This is true enough; and it is a good reply to hypocrites who find in the Malthusian Theory a “parry to demands for reform.” But what it has to do with the truth of the theory I do not see; nay, if we must be polemical, the fact that neglect of Malthus breeds strike-breakers seems to me an excellent reason why Socialists should be Malthusians.

importance began when the Napoleonic wars were over — with those who abolished slavery; repealed the Corn Laws; put an end to imprisonment for debt; took away the political disabilities of Jews, Catholics, and Dissenters; reformed the representative system; swept away the Draconian penal code; established the policy of peace. He deserves to be called a Liberal, because he was in favor of everything good which was ripe enough to be done during his own literary period; from the Peace of Amiens, in 1802, to the Reform Bill, thirty years later, and shortly before his death. But his celebrity, of course, is mainly in connection with political economy; his importance is known to ordinary readers chiefly on this account, that political economy was the especial field of England during the nineteenth century. The Manchester School, till lately dominant, looks to Malthus as its second founder; and, since schisms have arisen in that school, it is to the specific views of Malthus that there has been a reversion, from those of the long-idolized Ricardo.

David Ricardo, supposed, till Mill openly seceded from among his pupils, to have placed political economy on a basis of all-comprehensive demonstration, was six years younger than Malthus, who long outlived him. They were intimate friends, their disputes were always in perfect good temper; and since Ricardo continued to be read, but Malthus did not, very few people, until lately, knew how much they differed. It is from Malthus' supposed law of population that Ricardo deduced his famous law of rent, which George has made familiar to everybody, and on which Marx founded his "scientific Socialism." Population increases beyond the capacity of land, in use, to support it; other land, therefore, must be taken up; since men seek to gratify their desires with the least exertion, the best land will be improved first; between its yield and that of the inferior land intervenes a constantly increasing margin of rent, which is what makes the difference between rich and poor. It reduces wages to the minimum obtainable from the poorest land (the Iron Law of Wages, Lasalle called this). Yet worse remains. Since cultivation extends, this minimum is not a stationary but a diminishing quantity. True, the cost of living is diminished, and the laborer's real wages do not, therefore, fall as fast as the nominal, but they do fall, for those commodities the laborer chiefly wants are those most directly derived from the soil; and they are not being cheapened, but the contrary.<sup>8</sup> Ricardo is thus the true founder of "the Dismal Science." The extreme pessimism and determinism of his views, which have been compared to those of Calvin, did not prevent their "taking" with English capitalists, who, during the Corn Law battle, found in them a weapon against English landlords. But Ricardo also furnished Socialism with a weapon against both. Except the Anarchists, all Socialists who make any pretensions to scientific economic reasoning, begin with Ricardo. Their common burden is that government must, and, when these things become better understood, a democratic government certainly will, confiscate rent for the common good, and, they usually add, assume control of business. How their idol, the government, will, after all, manage to keep people from finding it harder to live as the Law of Diminishing Returns keeps shortening the result of their labor, these reformers do not, indeed, make quite as clear as could be wished. But here is where their prejudice against Malthus began. His name became associated, though Ricardo's rather should be, with the Law of Diminishing Returns. It is, therefore, a fact of extreme interest that Malthus decidedly rejected Ricardo's improvements on his system. *The difference between Anarchism and Socialism, as we usually understand the latter term, is the difference between Malthus and Ricardo.* Malthus, we remember, had never said

---

<sup>8</sup> This is important. George repeatedly assures us that ability to create any kind of wealth is ability to create as much of any other kind. But if the Law of Diminishing Returns from Agricultural Lands be correct, this is not correct for the most important kind of wealth.



that population necessarily increases. Under the existing conditions, he believed population to be limited by the willingness of capitalists to employ labor; nor is there much doubt that this is substantially correct; though the “wage-fund doctrine” of Senior, McCulloch, and other Ricardians,<sup>9</sup> overdoes it. Now Malthus observed, nor could Ricardo deny,<sup>10</sup> that capital will not take up waste land unless it can get from such land as much as from those institutions which borrow and lend money for speculative enterprises. Except, then, as improved methods bring up the profit on waste land to the current rate of interest, there will be no rise of rent. Experimental cultivation by government, philanthropists, theorists, or communists, produces no such effect: — it must be business cultivation yielding profit and also wages up to rate. For one of Malthus’ most striking doctrines, in pronounced contradiction to Ricardo and all his followers, is that *real wages never fall*. Malthus studied history and society, which Ricardo, in his theorizing a mere formal logician and mathematician, did not. Ricardo, then, might vaguely think (for here, as often, he is not clear) that capital indemnifies itself for rent by cutting wages; but Malthus knew how tenacious labor is of every advantage it has gained in the war with parasites. He believed such gains to be continuous. He had a theory of their origin, which, if rather empirical, is sufficiently comprehensive, and, as usual, savors very much of Darwin.

What, with Fate-like persistency, has raised real wages since they consisted in the daily find of toads or lizards, which may take up all a Digger Indian’s time, is, in Malthus’ language, “accidents.” Some of these accidents were blessings very terribly disguised. One of the most important was the Black Death, which killed serfdom throughout the greater part of Europe, by reducing the number of laborers, and exciting such competition for their services that they could no longer be kept from migrating in search of high wages. Such “accidents” would do the laborer no permanent good, if he were quite the shiftless being which some bourgeois writers represent him. But, though generally ignorant and stupid, he has certain “strong instincts and plain rules,” which serve his turn. He will not work for less (real) wages than he is used to getting. Even down to the state of chattel slavery we can see this. Coolies may work for rice gruel; but it would never do not to make negro slaves more comfortable than many white men are. The “standard of comfort” among laborers, raised, from time to time, by “fortunate accidents,” and kept from falling by strikes, peasant insurrections, increase of continence, in short by the laborer’s determination to keep it up at whatever hazard, has been the guarantee of progress; for it is these struggles which increase knowledge.

Examples of the “accidents” are numerous. The breaking up of the Roman Empire killed chattel slavery, which requires extradition not to be obtained under the loose rule of the Barbarians. The restoration of slavery, though favored by circumstances in the colonies, had been stoutly withstood, and, in Malthus’ time, was evidently failing. The discovery of America, by relieving pressure in Europe, raised the standard of comfort there; and legalization of Trades’ Unions is evidence that it will not fall. The French Revolution made the peasants landowners, and the restored Bourbon dared not rob them; etc. Evidently, Malthus’ economy is not a dismal science. Believing a high standard of comfort the condition of social improvement, he was no prophet of “parsimony.” He encouraged, indeed, saving by retrenchment of expenses upon the lower appetites; but with a

---

<sup>9</sup> By making an actual sum out of the “wage-fund,” which in the works of Adam Smith and Malthus, is only a rhetorical phrase.

<sup>10</sup> This was reserved for George. Ricardo, a practical man of business, knew too much about the comparative incomes of landlords and capitalists, under varying conditions of time and place, to say that Rent was swallowing all which labor and capital ought to get from land above the poorest.

view to enjoyment, not mere money-making. The English proletaire who denies himself gin, if at all, that he may have good clothes, a furnished house, a lease, a library, is wiser than the French peasant who lives on black bread that he may buy more land. Malthus went further than perhaps any economist reckoned “orthodox” in recognition of the great truth that exchange is the chief source of riches and that starving to get ahead of each other, like the Coolies and the Jews in many places, makes all the people absolutely poor whomever it makes relatively rich. Thus his view of “progress and poverty” differed from Ricardo’s, it has been said, as Arminianism from Calvinism. Malthus refers everything to the individual, Ricardo to certain institutions, such as land ownership, which he took for granted. In the minds of Socialists, Ricardo’s principles tend to passive reliance on the Omnipotent Goodness of the State, those of Malthus to repudiation of the State, or Anarchism.

Ricardo’s positive dogmatism, plausible syllogizing, and coherent style, gave his writings an advantage over those of Malthus. As concerns conservatism they were equal, or rather Ricardo’s superabundant acknowledgment of indebtedness to Malthus made the latter appear to the generation which did not read him more conservative than the former really was.<sup>11</sup>

The Seniors, McCullochs, Bentham’s, Macaulays, Mills, Leckys, Martineaus, Marcets, and other orthodox exponents of Ricardo, contemporary with the Socialistic upheavals and panics between 1848 and 1871, but little aware to what purposes Marx and Proudhon were turning their instructor, deduced from Ricardo, whom they represented as the greater pupil of Malthus, notwithstanding the real difference, that labor depended for support on the wage-fund; that to lessen the wage-fund by frightening capital was to do laborers the worst of injuries; that the admitted harshness of the social state was due principally to a “natural monopoly” which government did not make and could not destroy; that artificial monopolies were, indeed, wrong and pernicious, for which reason a liberal government was preferable to a monarchy or oligarchy; but Anarchy, of course, would be the worst of anything, and Socialistic interference with the natural laws of production fostered Anarchy by promising impossibilities and causing disappointment; for which reason authority should be strictly upheld and Utopianism discouraged; above all that the only real remedies were parsimony and continence (a queer jumble, which shows how little these public instructors themselves understood the true relation of Malthusian economy to Ricardian). There was just enough truth in all this to be timely for conservative purposes. The fact, in direct contradiction to what Macaulay often says on the subject, is that great expropriations, like those of the monks by Henry VIII., of the Church and the nobles during the French Revolution, of the slave owners during our Civil War, have always, in the long run, conferred great benefits on the poor; but that, at first, they always cause increased hardship to the poor, not because there is any such thing as a wage-fund which supports productive laborers, but because a large part of the poor are unproductive laborers, whom panic among the rich at once deprives of their jobs, while time is required for the productive class to gain anything by fall of an unproductive: which immediate consequences of insecurity are so well known to the often unemployed proletaire that he is afraid of attempts at expropriation, and will not promote them unless his oppressors have first driven him to the wall. The unpopularity of Socialism, for there can be no doubt that on the

---

<sup>11</sup> Thus Henry George, whose premises are taken straight out of Ricardo, thinks it necessary to refute Malthus, of whose real relation to Ricardo he knew very little. Extension of cultivation is, according to Ricardo, the cause of rent. Its own cause (George supposes) is, for Malthus apud Ricardo, increase of population. To save Ricardo without adopting Malthus, George ingeniously argues that it is not increase, but concentration, of population which extends cultivation. The truth is, Malthus had not said it was either.

whole it is unpopular, is due to this fear, addressed on two sides; by the conservative Ricardians, as stated; by the Ricardian Socialists, like Engel and Lassalle, because they talked of legislative expropriation. Amidst the fulminations of Ricardian orthodoxy the few critics who pointed out (like Richard Jones) that Ricardo's best-known theories are arbitrarily deductive, and bear no clear relation to visible facts,<sup>12</sup> were dinned and flashed away, with the inevitable valediction that "they had failed to understand Ricardo." But the cocksureness of the Epigoni, as economists of this period have been called, did not quite go the length of imputing ignorance to John Stuart Mill. If there was anything he did not know, it was what they knew still less. The reaction began, accordingly, when he, originally, like his father, a Ricardian, decidedly rebelled. The Malthusian direction of this movement has been very inadequately acknowledged. The Optimistic school of Carey and Bastiat builds on Malthus' law that real wages never fall. The Historical Economist, now the most influential among those reckoned orthodox, follows the line of investigation which Malthus laid down, but to which he could not hold Ricardo. On the Socialistic side of the fence, Ricardianism is sure to age in proportion as it does on the other. How far the new Socialistic economy of Anarchism is indebted to Malthus, we have yet to see. But the affinities of American and Russian Anarchism with his thought are as clear as those of Marx and Proudhon with Ricardo's.

Though Malthus' writings were neglected during the fifty years or so of Ricardo's pontificate, his name lived. As the demonstrator of a principle evidently revolutionary, therefore of transcendent importance, not only to Economy, but Biology, History, Ethics, and Religion, he was known, by reputation, to students of all these subjects. For want of reading him, they often misunderstood, but they had tolerably clear his "main principle," that unrestricted propagation means a high death-rate, involving a "struggle for existence," which hitherto has been the determinant of progress: though "moral restraint" on propagation would be better.

The anatomical and physiological affinities of higher animal and vegetal types with lower had, before Malthus' time, suggested to Buffon, Monboddo, and a few others, the idea that species arise by Evolution. But their theories on the subject were mere guesses, which commanded little attention from the scientific world. The glory of placing organic development on the positive basis of Heredity, Natural Selection, and Sexual Selection, belongs to Darwin. The fact that species do arise by evolution has been experimentally demonstrated by Haeckel; and the world no longer contains a naturalist who disputes it; though there continues to be controversy upon such minor points as whether post-natal variations are hereditary.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> No disrespect at all is meant Ricardo by anything said here. He greatly advanced knowledge by establishing the true relation of rent to price, which Adam Smith misunderstood, and by showing that when the price of bullion is said to rise it is really that of paper money which falls. His maxim that, under free competition labor buys labor, is the basis of Marx' theory concerning Surplus Value and of philosophic Socialism. Like Ptolemy in astronomy and Galen in medicine, he long had the ill-luck to be influential largely through his mistakes; but that any man can be that is the measure of his abilities.

<sup>13</sup> Bourgeois writers have seized upon the doctrines of Malthus and Darwin as upon an argument against co-operation, almsgiving, and above all, anything like communism. The struggle for existence, they tell us, is the source of progress. For the strong to assist the feeble in living, but above all propagating, is to weaken the social organism, as well as to raise impracticable expectations and increase misery by adding disappointment to its pains. This is unquestionably true for compulsory charity. It is true for all voluntary charity whose final result is to encourage dependence. And in the present general condition of dependence, *all almsgiving has a tendency to do that*. But two things are overlooked. First, co-operation is not charity, but trade: — for benefits given, benefits are expected. Secondly, the pauperizing effect of charity depends on a previous degradation of the recipient. No man is morally worse for the helping hand of a fellow-worker. Every man is, for the beaming condescension of a patron. Socialistic writers,

History, by right the greatest among sciences, since it supplies material for all which require the use of records, was in a wholly empirical condition before the epochmaking work of Buckle: — for the so-called philosophic history of an earlier time did not, as Macaulay remarked, rise above the level of essay-writing on the philosophy of history. Fragmentary and in some matters of detail incorrect as Buckle’s writings are, they forever establish the method, which is entirely Malthusian. That social progress depends on substitution of Preventive for Positive Checks on population; which, in turn, depends on substitution as incentives to action, of more varied desires for the simple animal appetites of food and sex, and this again on leisure, in which such desires germinate; that ignorance, and its most legitimate offspring, superstition, are the great standing obstacles to this happy change, operating to dull the new desires and content men with their barbarous ancestors’ ways; these propositions, indeed, involve somewhat more than the “main principle” of Malthus; but they are all among his authentic statements, not the innovations of Ricardo and others. Since Buckle’s time, they have constituted the great working hypothesis by which all historic phenomena have been elucidated.<sup>14</sup> Ethics, previous to that evolutionary philosophy in which Malthus was the first wise master-builder, presented a ruinous chaos, in which the blind forces of tyranny and superstition essentially hostile to each other but foes to knowledge, met in refluent eddies like infernal rivers. Private experience had taught men that sensual and other excesses are haunted by Remorse. Superstition, seeking to escape this phantom, but without a guide, has always tended to Asceticism. Even those forms which we call immoral — the glorification by some religions of prostitution and still more nauseous vice, of mutilation, drunkenness, human sacrifice, war, appealed, as is well known among comparative students of human error, not to the lusts of the flesh themselves, but that despair and rage which springs from deception by these tempters — it was really ascetic self-torture which was glorified, and the “consecrated” persons whose houses Hezekiah took away from the Temple were holy because they served the appetites of others in ways not agreeable to themselves. On the other hand, governments, military institutions, designed to serve the purposes of man’s most violent passions, as rapacity, lust, and vengeance, invariably encouraged sensuality to breed fighters, invested war with the glamour of heroism, and cultivated that view of commerce which makes exchange a disguised robbery. Hence the muddled and inconsistent ideas of morality given us by two sets of teachers thus radically opposed, but of whom one was in a measure coerced or bribed by the other. Except for naturally arising conflicts among themselves, their only use of logic has been to invent reasons why the king has a right to govern wrong, why wives should obey their husbands, how it can be an Englishman’s duty to kill a Frenchman, and equally the Frenchman’s

---

who generally know too much to attempt refuting Darwin, attempt instead to show that the conflict by which the world has advanced was a conflict of species, not individuals of the same species, among whom co-operation, not competition, has been the rule. Among those who have secured this side of the matter due attention, Kropotkin is the most distinguished. Whether he has contracted anything like a prejudice by the way, may be inquired later. It is hardly deniable that with men, the struggle has been very largely between nations and often individuals.

<sup>14</sup> To illustrate, it was a favorite subject of controversy among writers who, like Montesquieu, made any attempt at philosophic history, whether the ancient world were more or less populous than the modern? We may not know much about the world; but, on Malthusian principles, it is absurd to suppose that France, for example, could have had anything like her present population when her soil was mainly covered by forests supporting only half-wild cattle and hogs; when Paris was a village, and Lyons a rural *oppidum*, when silk was unknown and wine imported at such prices as a slave for a jar. A phenomenon which these early writers noticed, was that, after a great migration of barbarians, like the Scythians or Northmen, their countries remained quiet for many years. The explanation was that they were “biding their time” — living, probably, on ice and air. It is, now, that, until the principle of population restored their numbers, none were left at home but children and old people.

to kill him.<sup>15</sup> Malthus taught even governments that hungry and dependent numbers are a source of weakness, not strength.<sup>16</sup> His name is so familiar that Race Suicide speeches and bills to put a tax on celibacy have none but humorous effect. It was he who convinced the rulers that, much as they feared educating the ruled, they had no choice. Though the “Mercantile” economy, and its practical corollary, Protection, received their fatal wound from Adam Smith, the root whence they spring remains in his *Wealth of Nations*; and the stump-puller destined to eradicate it was constructed by Malthus. The root is the doctrine that parsimony enriches. The stump-puller is the Malthusian proof that it can enrich only individuals, and this only on condition of having neighbors less parsimonious than themselves — that exchange is what principally causes increase of wealth; that if a people are all parsimonious, like the “Jewtown” Hebrews, they must be poor. But the ultimate services of Malthus to ethics were more radical than this. The advice of Bacon to treat ethics as an inductive science — to ascertain, by observation and experiment, what effects are actually produced on character by heredity, education, example, society, solitude, religious belief, the civil law, by the indulgence of particular habits, the reading of particular books, the following of particular trades, — a sort of knowledge whence we might expect to learn something about how undesired propensities can be corrected and others cultivated — had been neglected for three centuries while the doctors continued to dispute as usual about whether Revelation, Moral Sense, or Expediency furnished the readiest method of making out perfect the foolish institutions of their respective countries — all this, chiefly, because they lacked a guide into the better way. The first height on which the light of positive discovery began to shine was the effect upon morals of Heredity. The point of radiation was the Darwinian Theory, and the Darwinian Theory, in the express words of its originator, only applies Malthus’ doctrine to the whole animal and vegetable kingdom.

In religious speculation, we have already seen what the original Theodice of Malthus was. It is the one which has become fashionable. That it is much more simple, affecting, and sublime, than the grotesque myths which preceded it, has become commonplace. But of more importance is the fact that it dissipates the most odious and most unfailing trait of merely subjective piety — its intolerance. Sin is always stupidity: it is, therefore, a sin (an injustice) in the sinner who counts himself partially reformed to be angry with the thicker-headed fellow-sinner who is not reformed at all: and thus, too, sin vindicates its character as stupidity; for being angry with sinners is not at all the right way either to reform them or to prevent others from following their example.

Thus far-reaching has been the influence of Malthus. Expounding it should serve to illustrate the absurdity of attempting his refutation by rehashing arguments all of which have long been commonplace. A fortress like Gibraltar is not to be overthrown with a pop-gun. A structure as lofty and secure as that which has arisen upon the foundation laid by Malthus must be “rock-rooted in the crust of the earth, and buttressed with the everlasting hills.”

Refutations continue to rain, however. Of these criticisms which show only the writer’s limited acquaintance with his subject (and they are the immense majority) it is unnecessary to say more. There are, however, two kinds not uncommonly heard from persons who know what they

---

<sup>15</sup> James Fitz James Stephen (the crazy snoozer who tried Mrs. Maybrick) says, in his *Liberty, Equality and Fraternity*, a reply to Mill’s *Liberty*, that there is no absurdity about this paradox. If he had not said so, we might perhaps have imagined that there was.

<sup>16</sup> Pitt, next to Napoleon the chief modern anthropophagus, had actually prepared a bill for a bounty on children; but withdrew it in deference to the arguments of Dr. Parr and others among Malthus’ earliest converts.

are talking about. One disputes the validity of the geometric and arithmetical ratios.<sup>17</sup> A sufficient reply was given by Mill. The increase of unchecked population is geometrical. That of food may be more than arithmetical. But what is the use of talking about increase of food when geometrical increase of population, if it did not bring back the Positive Check in other ways, as, of course, it would, must soon restore that Check in the inexorable form of crowding? The other criticism, much more practical, is perhaps intended only as a criticism, not a refutation; but if this be meant the critics ought to say so, — first, in order to clear themselves of identification with the Sadlers, Godwins, Coleridges, De Quinceys, Georges, and others whose refuted refutations ring hollow down the corridors of time; secondly, that they may avoid exercising a pernicious influence upon readers less informed than themselves. The criticism is based on the obvious fact that since Malthus wrote, wealth, at least in England, has increased much faster than population — a fact from whose significance the one word emigration takes a great deal — but here become possible suggestions which make this criticism a phase of the others — we do not know what intenser cultivation may effect — the actual habits of mankind are not such as to bring in the Positive Check, etc., etc. “Speak unto us smooth things; prophesy unto us deceits!” We do know that intenser cultivation will never banish need for the Prudential Check: and the habits of mankind are such as to invite the Positive when they are such as to invite wars for a harbor or a diamond mine every few years. I am sorry to say that Kropotkin’s *Fields, Factories and Workshops*, contains passages which are adapted (I cannot believe intended) to encourage in careless readers the loose idea that “everything is lovely” except certain human institutions (which, saving only the subjection of women, are not causes but effects).

To conclude the story of Malthus. One of the lies is that he had thirteen children! He had three, of whom only two survived him. His wife came from a part of England which he is known to have visited many years before. It is probable there was a long engagement. Malthus certainly was a good deal older at marriage than the average. His life and teachings appear, therefore, to have been entirely consistent. Among the many attempts to refute him one was by suggesting that man in his developed state might be above the desire of sex, and that the need for propagation might be superseded by terrestrial immortality! Malthus treated this fully as respectfully as it deserved. He said that, while bondage to the desire was a potent source of vice and misery, the desire itself was a principal source of the moral virtues and of happiness, with which it would be by no means desirable, if it were credible, that mankind in general should dispense. The effect of these discussions on Godwin’s active imagination may be seen on comparing his famous novels. *Caleb Williams* (1794) gives no hint of anything supernatural. It is a powerful arraignment of “*Things As They Are*.” In *St. Leon* (1832) the hero attains terrestrial immortality, and, like the Wandering

---

<sup>17</sup> To illustrate again the facility with which these things may be misunderstood, dependent on the complexity of that relation which some try to evade by calling it a truism — I have said here, in the name of Malthus, too, that what enables a high rate of propagation to go on is increase of the death-rate. But the death-rate, from all causes and in all places of statistical census taken together, has decreased notably since we began to have reliable returns (which is only since about 1700 A. D.); and what little we know about earlier times indicates that the death-rate has always decreased, on the whole, since men emerged from the grazing state of savagery, where the average duration of life is said to be only thirteen years. How do these statements agree? Simply enough. Who said propagation had gone on unslackened? The reasoning of Malthus, and mine, has all been to the effect that the Prudential Check has gained on the Positive almost continuously since men emerged from utter barbarism, except where increased facility of living has, for a time, caused it to be neglected. Wherever that happens — as when a prairie changes into a Chicago — we may see that the death-rate does increase as soon as that facility of living which relaxed the Prudential Check encourages propagation sufficiently to recall the Positive.

Jew, finds it the greatest of all imaginable curses; but, pervading the story is the subthought of Godwin's invincible Optimism — a Salathiel, a St. Leon, would not be miserable in a world where all the people were immortal. The time which Godwin chose for his attempt at refuting Malthus is also significant — it was in 1820, when Ricardo was deducing from the Malthusian theory corollaries whose legitimacy no one then seems to have disputed except Malthus himself. Malthus died, from disease of the heart, in 1834, the sixty-eighth year of his age. Godwin followed on the 7<sup>th</sup> of April, 1836. Of the two, Malthus had best maintained his philosophic dignity. The Anarchist Godwin stooped to accept a sinecure office from the Liberal administration of Earl Grey. Malthus declined the tardy favor offered by government to him. "In their death," says the best biographer of Malthus, "they were still divided; but, *si quis piorum animis locus*, they are divided no longer, and think hard thoughts of each other no more."

Before the eyes of both there was growing up a power unobserved of either, but predestined to solve their problem. Commerce could never cheapen itself out of existence while population, varying with cheapness of food, kept up the struggle for existence: nor, though commerce which cannot do that teaches solidarity, could it prevent recurrence of those crises when "the eyeless I howls in darkness." But increase of the Prudential Check on population has always kept up with, or rather it has gone before and been the source of, economic progress. Its increase has depended on that of hope, this on increase of liberty, increase of liberty on those "accidents" by which Providence has from time to time interfered to give men intent on enslaving each other and themselves another call to reflection. If, then, there be a tendency in the bourgeois system which brings liberty and hope to women; from that we really may expect revolutionary changes. For the female is the less amorous sex. The last proposition, which certainly does sound rather like a stock assertion, may have been unknown to both Godwin and Malthus. But no reader of Darwin can help knowing that it has been demonstrated by exhaustive application to every animal species and been found the clue to progress through heredity. Women have never chosen to breed food for gunpowder. They have submitted to do so only because they could not help themselves. Now there is in the bourgeois system a tendency which, by bringing liberty and hope to women, promises far more energetic restraint on propagation than the world has ever known, — a tendency which capitalists view with indifference; reactionaries, and Socialists not infrequently, with alarm; judicious friends of humanity, with unmixed satisfaction. The wages paid directly to women in the factories first afforded to proletarian women, unprotected by settlements and other contrivances of the rich, a means to live which was not easily taken from them. True to the maxim that it is not misery but hope which works improvement, they, who till now had been well enough content not to own themselves, became refractory the moment they had something to lose. The entire modern movement for the property rights of married women, equality of pay with men for all working women, opening of all the trades to women, political equality of the sexes, easy divorce, began with employment of women as breadwinners, which came in as a necessity of the bourgeois situation. That complete emancipation of women, defect in food for gunpowder, cessation of war, the downfall of those appliances for plunder which war created, are all threatened by this movement, there can be no occasion for me to prove. Mr. Roosevelt will show you that — and afterwards gnash his teeth. The Malthusian Theory is the fatal objection to every form of Socialism, even if called Anarchism, which encourages man to think that he can enslave women and escape the most righteous retribution of being a slave himself. It is the strongest possible argument for that kind of Socialism or Anarchism which proposes,

through complete emancipation of women, to abolish the fundamental tyranny from whence all others spring.



The Anarchist Library  
Anti-Copyright



C. L. James  
Anarchism and Malthus  
1910

Retrieved on 31 August 2010 from [quod.lib.umich.edu](http://quod.lib.umich.edu)  
Mother Earth Publishing Association  
210 East 13<sup>th</sup> Street, New York

**[theanarchistlibrary.org](http://theanarchistlibrary.org)**