

# NEW PERSPECTIVES ON MALTHUS

EDITED BY ROBERT J. MAYHEW



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*University of Bristol*



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University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

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[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)

Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9781107077737](http://www.cambridge.org/9781107077737)

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First published 2016

Printed in the United States of America by Sheridan Books, Inc.

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library*

*Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data*

Names: Mayhew, Robert J. (Robert John), 1971– editor.

Title: New perspectives on Malthus / edited by

Robert J. Mayhew, University of Bristol.

Description: Cambridge, United Kingdom : Cambridge University Press, 2016. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2016008440 | ISBN 9781107077737 (hardback : alk. paper)

Subjects: LCSH: Malthus, T. R. (Thomas Robert), 1766–1834. |

Demographers – Great Britain. | Demography – History.

Classification: LCC HB863.N49 2016 | DDC 330.15/3092–dc23

LC record available at <http://lccn.loc.gov/2016008440>

ISBN 978-1-107-07773-7 Hardback

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## NEW PERSPECTIVES ON MALTHUS

Thomas Robert Malthus (1766–1834) was a pioneer in demography, economics and social science more generally whose ideas prompted a new ‘Malthusian’ way of thinking about population and the poor. On the occasion of the two hundred and fiftieth anniversary of his birth, *New Perspectives on Malthus* offers an up-to-date collection of interdisciplinary essays from leading Malthus experts who reassess his work. Part One looks at Malthus’s achievements in historical context, addressing not only perennial questions such as his attitude to the Poor Laws, but also new topics including his response to environmental themes and his use of information about the New World. Part Two then looks at the complex reception of his ideas by writers, scientists, politicians and philanthropists from the period of his own lifetime to the present day, from Charles Darwin and H. G. Wells to David Attenborough, Al-Gore and Amartya Sen.

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*For Clara: avec les tendres excuses de son Père pour ce qui va suivre*

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## *Acknowledgements*

David Nally acknowledges a Philip Leverhulme Prize as well as a Rockefeller Grant-in-Aid award and extends his thanks to the staff at the Rockefeller Archive Center – and to Nancy Adgent in particular – in Sleepy Hollow, New York. He also thanks David Beckingham, Philip Howell and Robert Mayhew for comments on an early draft and Stephen Taylor for his able research assistance.

Ella Dzelzainis thanks the British Academy for the award of a Postdoctoral Research Fellowship (2007–10) to research Malthus. Thanks are also due to Carolyn Burdett, David Feldman, Cora Kaplan and Robert Mayhew for their generous insights regarding earlier drafts and to the participants in the Malthus Reading Group at King's College, London (2009–12).

Niall O' Flaherty is very grateful to the editor and to Richard Bourke for insightful comments on earlier drafts of his chapter. He also thanks the Malthus Reading Group at King's College, London and Isabel Rivers for her helpful reading suggestions.

Robert Mayhew as a contributor thanks Philip Appleman for his reflections on editing Malthus for W.W. Norton. Thanks are also due to W.W. Norton for offering sales figures for Appleman's edition of Malthus. He also thanks Simon Winder and Joanna Prior at Penguin for sales figures and authorization to access the Penguin Archive at the University of Bristol respectively. For guidance in that archive, thanks are due to Michael Richardson and Hannah Lowrey.

As editor, Robert Mayhew would like to thank Linda Bree at Cambridge University Press for commissioning this collection of essays and also the two readers for the Press who gave such helpful comments on the project at the proposal stage. Also at Cambridge University Press, thanks go to Isobel Cowper-Cowles, David Morris, Chloé Harries and Anna Bond. Thanks also to Jenny Slater at Out of House Publishing for her speedy and diligent work at the proof stage. Thanks also to Karen O'Brien, not only for

offering the 'Afterword' for this collection, but for suggesting the approach to Cambridge in the first place with the germ of this project. Above all, he must thank all the contributors. When putting together his 'wish list' of contributors for a collection of essays showcasing contemporary scholarship about Malthus, he had no right to dare to hope that they would all take up the offer to contribute with such alacrity and enthusiasm. All contributors were given a tight deadline for the submission of essays in order to make publication in Malthus's anniversary year possible, but all replied by sticking closely to the schedule agreed while still offering work of an outstanding quality, which has made his task as editor both pleasant and easy.

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*Introduction*  
*'Alps on Alps arise': revisiting Malthus*

Robert J. Mayhew

Fir'd at first Sight with what the *Muse* imparts,  
In *fearless Youth* we tempt the Heights of Arts,  
While from the bounded *Level* of our Mind,  
*Short Views* we take, nor see the *Lengths behind*,  
But *more advanc'd*, behold with strange Surprise  
New, distant Scenes of *endless Science* rise!  
So pleas'd at first, the towering *Alps* we try,  
Mount o'er the Vales, and seem to tread the Sky;  
Th' Eternal Snows appear already past,  
And the first *Clouds* and *Mountains* seem the last:  
But *those attain'd*, we tremble to survey  
The growing Labours of the lengthen'd Way,  
Th' *increasing Prospect tires* our wandering Eyes,  
Hills peep o'er Hills, and *Alps on Alps* arise!<sup>1</sup>

Thomas Robert Malthus, like most educated men of his generation, could routinely cite the poetry of Alexander Pope and did so in the book that made his name, *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798), where he drew on the *Essay on Man*.<sup>2</sup> To the student of Malthus, it is perhaps Pope's image of the benighted young scholar from *An Essay on Criticism* that is more apposite. Malthus's ideas, notably in their first expression in 1798, seem to exhibit a stark simplicity and a crystalline clarity that makes them easy to comprehend, and that leads to prompt acceptance or pre-emptory rejection. And yet scholars attending to Malthus's work find 'with strange Surprise' that the origins, intentions and impact of his ideas in their historical context are far more complex and contested than their beguiling simplicity of exposition might lead them to anticipate. The same dynamic applies to the reception of Malthus's ideas. It is easy to begin with the sense of a simple binary between admirers such as Darwin who found in Malthus a 'theory by which to work' and critics such as Marx who dismissed Malthus's work as a 'superficial plagiarism' in support of the

bourgeoisie. And yet here as well we find 'endless Science rise', in that such simple binaries are soon broken down on closer inspection. Marx, for example, drew on Malthus's analysis of under-consumption in his political economy, while Darwin's filiations with Malthus's ideas underwent complex changes over time and were carefully stage-managed as he sought acceptance in the Victorian scientific community. Throughout the 200 years since Malthus wrote, simple responses of acceptance or rejection have shaded into more nuanced intellectual engagements.

*New Perspectives on Malthus* traces new lines of scholarly surprise in understanding the ideas and legacy of Thomas Robert Malthus. The essays in Part I show that there are still important new things to say about where Malthus's ideas came from, about his intentions in framing them and about the ways in which they were understood and debated in his own age. The essays in Part II show new aspects of the vast panoply of responses to Malthus over the past two centuries. In so doing, the essays in *New Perspectives on Malthus* inevitably both chart the peaks of Malthusian scholarship and, *ipso facto*, add new ones to the landscape. And yet, of course, this book can inevitably only make selected surveys of the range of Malthus scholarship. As such, the aims of this introduction are threefold. First, to provide a simple introduction to Malthus's ideas and their evolution over time. Second, to give a sense of the broad swathe of reactions to Malthus's ideas over the decades down to the present. These two parts, therefore, provide the reader with an inevitably brief small-scale map of Malthus's ideas and their reception, of the broader landscape into which the subsequent essays can be placed as more detailed, large-scale charts of various peaks in Malthusian scholarship. And lying behind all of this is the third issue, which will be addressed in concluding this introduction: why, exactly, has Malthus had such a staggering impact on the ideas of his own age, on modern understandings of that age, and on every subsequent era down to our own?

### **Malthus's ideas: a small-scale map**

Malthus tends to be memorialized as the first writer about population, a sobriquet as misleading as that which makes Samuel Johnson the first author of an English dictionary. As Ted McCormick charts, Malthus in fact stood on the shoulders of centuries of previous work on demography and its implications for statecraft, most notably drawing on a complex set of debates in the generation immediately preceding him. Since the first appearance of Malthus's *Essay* in 1798, allegations have been made that Malthus plagiarized the ideas of Joseph Townsend's *A Dissertation on the*

*Poor Laws* (1786). As McCormick shows here and elsewhere, it is more plausible to suggest that Malthus drew on his predecessors but built a new argument, something the opening chapter of the *Essay* acknowledges as Malthus explains that his argument is 'not new' but draws on David Hume, Adam Smith and Robert Wallace.<sup>3</sup> And yet to understand why Malthus's contribution to debates about the nexus of population and politics became so notorious as to eclipse the work on which it drew and to which it contributed, thereby creating the misleading sense that Malthus was the father of demography, one needs to look both at the content of his *Essay* and at the heightened anxieties of the moment at which it emerged.

Malthus's *Essay* was published at the peak of the Irish Rebellion of 1798, this being the moment when English society faced the most serious threat it ever would of an invasion bringing the principles of the French Revolution to its shores. It was the counter-revolutionary ambitions of Malthus's *Essay* that gave it a notoriety no previous work about the politics of demography had achieved, ambitions that became clear by the end of an opening chapter advertising the book's achievement as being an 'argument [that] is conclusive against the perfectibility of the mass of mankind'.<sup>4</sup> Malthus hoped the conclusiveness of his argument would come from its logical construction. True to his mathematical training at Cambridge University, Malthus argued from a set of axioms, via empirical evidence for what he saw as quasi-Newtonian 'laws of nature,' to what he believed was an unavoidable conclusion whose acceptance would explode revolutionary utopianism.

Malthus's axioms are laid out in the opening chapter of the *Essay*: that 'food is necessary to the existence of man' and that 'the passion between the sexes is necessary, and will remain nearly in its present state'.<sup>5</sup> The second of these axioms was highly controversial because radical writers, most notably William Godwin who was Malthus's prime target in the *Essay*, had argued that sexual desire would wither with the progress of civilization. And yet, as Gregory Claeys shows in this volume, Malthus's relationship with Godwin's ideas was not one of mere hostility, the filiations between their ideas on utility and social productivity being far more nuanced. Taking Malthus's axioms as read, they do not in and of themselves create a problem until the addition of a second set of arguments; namely, the claim that population tends to grow at a faster rate than food supply: 'population, when unchecked, increases in a geometrical ratio. Subsistence increases only in an arithmetical ratio. A slight acquaintance with numbers will show the immensity of the first power in comparison of the second.'<sup>6</sup> If one accepts this imbalance between the rates of increase



of population and food, an ongoing societal problem has been uncovered, namely how to balance population and food resources. And yet Malthus was aware that his two ratios needed to be substantiated by evidence. For this reason, he presented evidence from around the globe to show that at each stage of social development one found evidence of a need to control population increase to make it balance with available food resources. Malthus envisaged this control in terms of what he called 'checks' and singled out two types. 'Positive' checks were natural forces that adjusted population growth downward and thereby brought it back in line with available food resources, these checks being famine, disease and warfare. It was here that Malthus pioneered the naturalistic explanation of famine as the product of food shortage that was one of his most important legacies and whose modern ramifications are traced in David Nally's chapter in this volume. 'Preventive' checks were human or social forces that achieved the same balancing act by less violent means; Malthus was aware that with societal advance people had come to limit procreation by delaying marriage or by practising sexual restraint within marriage, each of which actions would reduce fertility levels. He was also aware that families could seek to balance family size against standard of living, choosing to reduce the number of children they had to ensure their relative affluence. Preventive checks, of course, opened up a social interpretation of food scarcity, the other side of the genealogy Nally traces, and one that is normally posited as a critique of Malthusian reasoning however much it was in fact imbricated in his argument from the outset. On Malthus's account, over time preventive checks had become more important and ensured that the aegis of positive checks was weakened. Even allowing for social advance, however, the world Malthus inhabited was one where poor harvests could lead to food riots such as those that wracked Britain in the 1790s, and where epidemics and 'sickly seasons' were occasional reminders of the more than merely vestigial power of positive checks.

Malthus had laid out his conceptual and historical case about the propensity of population to outstrip food resources by the conclusion of Chapter 7; the rest of the *Essay* went on to plot the political, economic and religious consequences of accepting his argument. We can identify four main lines Malthus pursued. First, and as already implied, the principle of population exposed the optimistic manifestos of radical personal and societal development that had been flowing from those enthused by the French Revolution as mere delusions. Second, Malthus saw in his principle of population grounds for scepticism about the ways in which poverty was alleviated by the state.<sup>7</sup> For the better part of two centuries,