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MALTHUS, NINETEENTH-CENTURY SOCIALISM, AND MARX

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ABSTRACT. *This article examines radical and socialist responses to Malthus's* Essay on population, *beginning with the response of William Godwin, Malthus's main object of attack, but focusing particularly upon the position adopted by his most important admirer, Robert Owen. The anti-Malthus position was promoted and sustained both by Owen and the subsequent Owenite movement. Owenites stressed both the extent of uncultivated land and the capacity of science to raise the productivity of the soil. The Owenite case, preached weekly in Owenite Halls of Science, and argued by its leading lecturer, John Watts, made a strong impact upon the young Frederick Engels working in Manchester in 1843–4. His denunciation of political economy in the* Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher, *heavily dependent upon the Owenite position, was what first encouraged Marx to engage with political economy. Marx initially reiterated the position of Engels and the Owenites in maintaining that population increase pressured means of employment rather than means of subsistence, and that competition rather than overpopulation caused economic crises. But in his later work, his main criticism of the Malthusian theory was its false conflation of history and nature.*

I

One of the most momentous and yet curiously understudied achievements of the revolutionary moment at the end of the eighteenth century was the realization that there need no longer be such a thing as 'the poor'. This was a product of the new conditions of the eighteenth century. After the bitter and protracted religious and civil wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the eighteenth century was the first period in which the population of much of Europe experienced prolonged periods of internal peace. It was the first time, therefore, that observers were in a position to discern an underlying pattern or rhythm to economic life, a pattern that was relatively distinct from the bellicose politics of the courts and aristocracies of Europe. This was the context in which, for the first time, contemporaries could begin to discuss the

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meaning and implications of living in a commercial society or what would now be called 'capitalism'.

Habitual attitudes towards the poor had begun to become dislodged and the late eighteenth-century revolutions greatly hastened this development. References to the 'people' could no longer ignore or evade questions about representation, democracy, or equality. At the same time, the rich were reminded that their hegemony was provisional and contingent. In particular, from the 1740s, instead of early modern commonplaces about the place of the poor in the social hierarchy, there had been a growing tendency to incorporate the poor within civil society. This meant treating them as entitled to education, high wages, and 'the decencies' of life. The emphasis was upon the commonality of mankind – the narrow differences which Smith discerned between the prince and street porter – on the humanity of the poor and their capacity to participate in the culture of their more fortunate contemporaries. To consider them as fellow citizens, as they began to be considered in the era of revolutions, was no more than a logical next step in the process.[1]

But politically, this was threatening. Without a corrupt and powerful aristocracy to bribe the poor, without a priesthood to inhibit their powers to reason, with an educated citizenry able both to adjust to the changing pattern of the economy and to take seriously its civic responsibilities, a new era would begin. As Paine read Smith, the growth of commerce had brought 'the old system of government' to its present crisis: 'if commerce were permitted to act to the universal extent it is capable, it would extirpate the system of war and produce a revolution in the uncivilised state of governments'.[2]

In the early 1790s, this had been the optimistic vision, which radicals considered to follow from the new conception of commercial society found in Adam Smith. Smith accepted the truism that 'the demand for men like that for any other commodity, necessarily regulates the production of men; quickens it when it goes too slowly and stops it when it goes too fast'. But this did not mean that the poor only worked when pushed by 'necessity'. Among the reasons Smith gave for his support for high wages was that the labourer was likely to be encouraged by 'the comfortable hope of bettering his condition'. 'Where wages are high, accordingly, we shall always find the workmen more active, diligent and expeditious, than where they are low.' 'Fear', on the other hand, was, in almost all cases, 'a wretched instrument of government'. Smith never employed the notion of 'indolence' in connection with the labouring poor – reserving it only for the landed classes and the established clergy.[3]

[1] See Gareth Stedman Jones, *An end to poverty: a historical debate* (London, 2004), pp. 1–16.

[2] Thomas Paine, 'The rights of man: part two', in Moncure Conway, ed., *The writings of Thomas Paine*, II (London, 1894), p. 456.

[3] See Adam Smith, *An enquiry into the nature and causes of the wealth of nations* [1776], ed. E. Cannan (Chicago, IL, 1976), bk 1, pp. 19–20; Adam Smith, *The theory of moral sentiment* (12th edn, Glasgow, 1809), pt 1, sect. 3, ch. 2, p. 86. For Smith's position on wages, and on 'indolence' as a problem of the higher rather than the lower classes, see Emma Rothschild,

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All this helps to explain the traumatic shock to radicalism produced by the original edition of Malthus's *Essay on population*, appearing in 1798, especially its attack upon the assumptions of William Godwin, whose *Political justice* had been published in 1793. As heir to the tradition of 'rational dissent' and himself a former dissenting minister, Godwin had depicted the approach of a world in which evil, together with private property, government, and punishment, would wither away. Godwin looked forward to a prospect described by Benjamin Franklin, in which the mind would become omnipotent over matter and even death. According to Godwin, there was no original sin, nor were there any inherent differences between men. Man was an intellectually and morally progressive being. Moral and political improvement ('perfectibility') followed from the increase of knowledge. Inequality, justified by Mandeville and Hume, may have been necessary as the prelude to civilization, but it was no longer necessary to its support. 'We may throw down the scaffolding when the edifice is complete.' It was therefore only mistaken ideas of self-interest, not inherent drives or passions, which diverted man from 'benevolence'. As knowledge, and hence virtue, increased, man would become increasingly dependent upon reason alone. Both private property and marriage as forms of monopoly would be voluntarily relinquished and since 'the pleasures of intellect' would be preferred to the 'pleasures of sense', sexual pleasure would eventually fade away.[4]

Following the benign picture of the progress of opulence found in Smith, Malthus's picture supposedly derived from similar premises was profoundly shocking. Written in the tradition of natural theology found in Edmund Law and William Paley, Malthus's *Essay* aimed to refute Godwin, not by citing Scripture or original sin, but by 'turning our eyes to the book of Nature, where alone we can read God as he is'. One of Godwin's main errors was to treat man as if he were a 'wholly intellectual creature' and could therefore be moved to give up private property through 'benevolence'. Malthus responded that it was to 'the established administration of property and to the apparently narrow principle of self-love that we are indebted for everything that distinguishes the civilised from the savage state'. It was not the unaided processes of mind which spurred men into action, but 'the wants of the body' that roused the brain of infant man into sentient activity. No sufficient change had taken place in 'the nature of civilised man' to suggest that he might 'safely throw down the ladder' by which he had risen to his present 'eminence'.[5]

'Social security and laissez faire in eighteenth-century political economy', *Population and Economic Development*, 21 (1995), pp. 711–44; see also Emma Rothschild, *Economic sentiments: Adam Smith, Condorcet, and the Enlightenment* (Cambridge, MA, 2001), ch. 2.

[4] William Godwin, *Enquiry concerning political justice* [1798], ed. I. Kramnick (Harmondsworth, 1976), pp. 751–2, 759, 763.

[5] [T. R. Malthus], *An essay on the principle of population as it affects the future improvement of society with remarks on the speculations of Mr. Godwin, M. Condorcet and other writers* (London, 1798), pp. 286–7, 351, 358.

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'Necessity' (the principle of population) provided the means by which man, 'as he really is, sluggish and averse from labour' was compelled into activity by God. 'The savage would slumber for ever under his tree unless he was roused from his torpor by the cravings of hunger or the pinchings of cold.' In this new and decidedly heterodox version of Christianity, original sin was no longer the product of *activity* – the disobedience of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden – but of *passivity*. 'The original sin of man is the torpor and corruption of the chaotic matter, in which he may be said to be born.'[6]

Life was no longer a state of 'trial' in which the Christian should accept his allotted rank with cheerfulness and humility, it was rather a state of 'universal exertion' whose strong and constantly operative stimulus was 'the superiority of the power of population to the means of subsistence. Had population and food increased in the same ratio, it is probable that man might never have emerged from the savage state.' Inequality formed part of this divine scheme. 'The principle according to which population increases prevents the vices of mankind … from obstructing the high purpose of the creation.' Such a law could not operate 'without occasioning partial evil'. But evil in this eccentric theodicy was a sort of good. 'Evil exists in the world, not to create despair, but activity.'[7]

Unlike Smith's poor, who were brought within the norms of civil society by sympathy, neighbourhood, custom, and education, the poor in Malthus's *Essay* of 1798, even when they knew better, were governed by 'their bodily cravings' – 'the cravings of hunger, the love of liquor, the desire of possessing a beautiful woman'.

> The labouring poor, to use a vulgar expression, seem always to live from hand to mouth. Their present wants employ their whole attention, and they seldom think of the future. Even when they have the opportunity of saving, they seldom exercise it; but all that is beyond their present necessities goes, generally speaking, to the alehouse.

The labourer would behave differently if he were assured that 'his family must starve, or be left to the support of casual bounty'.[8]

II

The initial response of radicals to Malthus was not very effective.[9] Radicals following Paine and his follower Cobbett, while happy to rely upon Smith for a

[6] Ibid., pp. 353, 354, 357, 363. For an account of the theological context of Malthus's *Essay*, see A. M. C. Waterman, *Revolution, economics and religion: Christian political economy, 1798–1833* (Cambridge, 1991), chs. 3 and 4.

[7] [Malthus], *Essay on population* (1798), pp. 11, 353, 364, 365, 369, 395.

[8] Ibid., pp. 86–7, 88, 254.

[9] Under the pressure of the anti-Jacobin campaign, the circle of radicals around Godwin broke up. See Mark Philp, *Political justice* (Ithaca, NY, 1986), pp. 220–2.

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justification of high wages, fell back upon traditional natural law arguments to justify relief to the poor. Their approach to property rights presupposed an original community of property, which they supported with citations from Grotius, Pufendorf, Seneca, and Blackstone. God had given the land to all in common. An original compact led to the division of the land. But the only motive for leaving the state of nature and entering civil society had been 'the benefit of the whole'. It was therefore impossible that the people could be made worse off than they had been in the state of nature. Against Malthus, this meant that the right of the poor to receive relief was 'as perfect as any right of property'.[10]

This juridical defence of the poor's right to relief did little to answer Malthus's supposedly factual claim relating the geometrical ratio of population increase to the arithmetical ratio of the increase of subsistence. Nor were Godwin's own attempts to reply more effective. In 1801, he stated that he regarded the ratios of population and subsistence as 'unassailable' and 'a valuable acquisition to the science of political economy'. He made little attempt to question the factual basis of Malthus's claim beyond noting that early marriage in Britain was 'uncommon' and wondering why

> The excess of power in the principle of population over the principle of subsistence has never, in any past instance, in any quarter or age of the world, produced those great and astonishing effects, that total breaking-up of all the structures and maxims of society, which the essay leads us to expect from it in certain cases in the future.

His main objection was to the ostensible moral absurdity of Malthus's position, 'that no evil is more to be dreaded than that we should have too little of them [vice and misery] in the world, to confine the principle of population within its proper sphere'.[11]

If Godwin's response was muted, it was not least because it was swept up in the anti-Jacobin hysteria of the 1790s. Following the publication of Thomas Paine's *Rights of man*, his effigy was burnt in over 300 towns and villages in the winter of 1792–3. Radicals in Scotland were sentenced to transportation from seven to eighteen years for 'exciting disaffection to government'. These were also years of real social and political crisis. In 1797 – the year in which, according to Godwin, reaction reached its height – there was a threatened invasion by the French through Ireland, and a mutiny in the fleet. There were also dearths or semi-famines, both in 1795 and 1801 – the crisis, supposedly

[10] This standard radical position continued through into the Chartist period. 'Every member of a political state is entitled to certain privileges, which are either the residue of natural rights, whose surrender is not required for the public good, or those civil liberties, which society provides and guarantees on lieu of the natural rights so given up.' *Northern Star*, 14 Sept. 1839, cited in Josh Gibson, 'Natural right and the intellectual context of early Chartist thought', *History Workshop Journal*, 84 (2017), pp. 194–213.

[11] 'Thoughts occasioned by the perusal of Dr Parr's Spital sermon' [1801], in M. Philp, ed., *Political and philosophical writings of William Godwin* (7 vols., London, 1993), II, pp. 197, 202.

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occasioned by pressure of population on subsistence, appeared to be confirmed by what was happening in the countryside.

In the 1780s and early 1790s, Adam Smith's work was popular among radicals and used by Thomas Paine. But after his death in 1792, there was a concerted attempt by anti-Jacobins to appropriate Smith's work. Timid academics like Dugald Stewart denied that Smith's writings had radical political implications.[12] More spectacularly, Smith's work was fiercely endorsed by Edmund Burke as an argument against relief in his *Thoughts and details of scarcity* of 1795. Not only did Burke argue vehemently against government intervention to alleviate the dearth of that year, but his notorious advice to the poor was that 'patience, labour, sobriety, frugality and religion should be recommended to them; all the rest is downright fraud'. Labour was 'a commodity … an article of trade … to provide for us in our necessities is not in the power of government'.[13] In the reactionary climate of the late 1790s, it came to be accepted that Burke's argument represented the position found in the new science of political economy, including the works of Adam Smith. It was in these conditions that the dwindling, though still important, number of romantic followers of Godwin renamed political economy 'the dismal science'.[14]

Given the actuality of famine in 1795 and again in 1801, it is not surprising that Malthus's original *Essay* made such a deep impact, and that the followers of Godwin made little attempt to contest Malthus's ratios. In the years after 1810, however, Godwin found a new champion in the writings of Robert Owen, with whom he was in almost weekly contact for a decade.[15] Owen and his followers were the first publicly to contest the supposed arithmetical progression of the means of subsistence. As advocates of the alliance between enlightenment and scientific progress, they pointed not only to the fact of vast uncultivated stretches of land in the world, but more importantly the ability of science, particularly chemistry, to transform the productivity of the soil.[16] In his most famous work, *A new view of society*, which appeared between 1813

[12] See Stedman Jones, *An end to poverty*, pp. 70–1; Emma Rothschild, 'Adam Smith and conservative economics', *Economic History Review*, 45 (1992), pp. 74–96; Anna Plassart, *The Scottish Enlightenment and the French Revolution* (Cambridge, 2015).

[13] Edmund Burke, 'Thoughts and details on scarcity', *The works of the Right Honourable Edmund Burke* (12 vols., London, 1808–13), VII, pp. 376, 377, 386, 391, 404; and see Richard Bourke, *The political life of Edmund Burke* (Princeton, NJ, 2015), part 5.

[14] See Philip Connell, *Romanticism economics and the question of 'culture'* (Oxford, 2001), p. 30; see also Donald Winch, 'Mr Gradgrind and Jerusalem', in Stefan Collini et al., eds., *Economy, polity and society: British intellectual history, 1750–1950* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 243–66.

[15] Between 1813 and 1818, Owen made 'about fifty visits to Godwin', Gregory Claeys, ed., *The selected works of Robert Owen* (4 vols. London, 1993), I, p. xxiii; see also P. H. Marshall, *William Godwin* (New Haven, CT, 1984), pp. 310–12.

[16] From 1831, Owenites were particularly excited by the experiments of Justus von Liebig, who had started analysing organic compounds using the *Kaliapparat*. This promised substantial improvements in soil fertility. See Catherine Jackson, 'Visible work: the role of students in the creation of Liebig's Giessen Research School', *Notes and Records of the Royal Society of London*, 62/1 (2008), passim.

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and 1816, Owen argued that while Malthus was correct to state that 'the population of the world is ever adapting itself to the quantity of food raised for its support', and that he 'has not told us how much more food an intelligent and industrious people will create from the same soil, than will be produced by one ignorant and ill-governed. It is, however, as one to infinity.'[17]

This was the message systematically propagated by the various movements formed along Owenite lines from the late 1820s onwards – and culminating between 1839 and 1845 in the construction of 'Halls of Science' in all the major cities of Britain.[18] The 'Hall of Science' was the Owenite secular alternative to the Christian church. Here the branches met, attended lectures, held soirées, and conducted services where 'social hymns' were sung praising the virtues of community and sociability, and sometimes baptizing children. They attracted large followings. Tens of thousands attended Sunday lectures, while under the auspices of the Rational Society, and, according to Greg Claeys, up to two million pamphlets were produced in one year.[19] Their main aim was to propagate the socialist condemnation of competition, the power and potential of industry, and the promise of a just economic system. Branch lecturers were employed to propagate the Owenite critique of competitive political economy.

If the Owenite critique of Malthus came to form one prominent source of the Marxian critique of political economy, this was due to the activity of Friedrich Engels, who between 1842 and 1844, worked for his father's textile firm in Manchester. Engels was a regular attender of the Manchester Hall of Science, one of its 8,000 signed up members, and he praised the socialist lecturer there, John Watts, as 'an outstanding man, who has written some very talented pamphlets on the existence of God and on political economy'.[20] In 1843,

[17] Robert Owen, 'A new view of society; or, essays on the principle of the formation of the human character (1813–1816)', in Claeys, ed., *Selected works of Robert Owen*, I, p. 96; and see also ibid., p. 165, where it was argued that there was no necessity in nature 'for the population to press against subsistence' and that there could be 'no doubt that it is the artificial law of supply and demand, arising from the principle of individual gain in opposition to the general well-being of society, which has hitherto compelled population to press upon subsistence'. A similar point was made in his 1826 essay, *The social system*, addressed to Americans, Claeys, ed., *Selected works of Robert Owen*, II, p. 68. In 1841, he argued that 'the enormous, and, if true, alarming statements of Mr. Malthus 'were true, only, when man knew not how to use his hand or his head, except to gather food which nature spontaneously provided for him; and before he knew how to domesticate animals, to cultivate the soil, or to take fish'. 'A development of the principles and plans on which to establish self-supporting home colonies', Claeys, ed., *Selected works of Robert Owen*, II, p. 358.

[18] Gregory Claeys, *Citizens and saints: politics and anti-politics in early British socialism* (Cambridge, 1989), p. 250.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Friedrich Engels, 'Letters from London' (*Schweizerischer Republikaner*, 9 June 1843), *Karl Marx/Friedrich Engels collected works* (50 vols., Moscow, London, and New York, NY, 1975–2005 (henceforth *MECW*)), III, p. 385; see John Watts, *The facts and fictions of political economists* (Manchester, 1842). This text was based upon seven lectures by Watts at the Manchester Hall of Science between September and November 1842. According to Gregory Claeys, Watts's

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writing for the Owenite *New moral world*, he reported to his German readers that he had met with English socialists, 'with whom I agree upon almost every question'.[21] It was his closeness to the Owenites, particularly Watts, which led him to write his *Umrisse* – his 'Outlines of a critique of political economy' – for the *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher*, edited from Paris by Karl Marx and Arnold Ruge in 1844.[22] Engels's essay in turn led Marx to turn his attention to the *Critique of political economy*, which was to preoccupy him for the next thirty years.[23]

In 1842, Watts had produced *The facts and fictions of political economists*, which provided the most systematic Owenite critique of the Malthusian position. Engels relied heavily on Watts's work. Indeed, at that stage, it is likely that much of the *Umrisse* was based, not upon Engels's own reading of the political economists, but upon Watts's resumé of their positions. Over one fifth of Engels's essay was devoted to an attack on Malthus. Like Watts, Engels relied upon the work of Archibald Alison, *Principles of population*, to refute the Malthusian picture of subsistence.[24] The United Kingdom, it was claimed, could cultivate enough corn to feed six times the current population, and any growth of population would simultaneously result in a matching increase in productive capacity.

Engels also built upon Watts's main substantive criticism of Malthus: that population did not increase faster than the means of subsistence, but the means of employment.[25] Employment did not expand sufficiently because economists possessed an artificial conception of demand. The competition which Malthusianism explained as a function of overpopulation, where demand for key goods would inevitably surpass supply, was explained by Engels, following Watts, as the result of competition engendered by the market's inability to assimilate the real demand of all existing consumers, and to expand such demand to match an ever-increasing capacity to produce. The growth of population was regulated by the laws of competition and was therefore exposed to 'periodic crises and fluctuations' – a point, as Engels noted, also highlighted by Malthus.[26]

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emphasis on utility was probably derived from William Thompson and he had likely read Owen and Gray as well. Gregory Claeys, *Machinery, money and the millennium: from moral economy to socialism, 1815–1860* (Princeton, NJ, 1987), p. 219.

[21] Friedrich Engels, 'The progress of social reform on the continent' (*New Moral World*, 21 Nov. 1843), *MECW*, III, p. 407.

[22] Friedrich Engels, *Umrisse*, 'Outlines of a critique of political economy' (written Oct.–Nov. 1843), *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher*, 1844, *MECW*, III, pp. 418–44.

[23] For the development of Marx's critique of political economy, see Gareth Stedman Jones, *Karl Marx: greatness and illusion* (London, 2016), ch. 10.

[24] A. Alison, *Principles of population and their connection with human happiness* (2 vols., Edinburgh, 1840), I, chs. 1 and 2.

[25] Engels, 'Outlines', p. 438.

[26] Ibid., p. 438.

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The basis of the Owenite criticism of political economy was its opposition to competition. For Engels as for Watts and the Owenites, the essential characteristic of competition was the separation of interests. In trade, the aim was 'to buy cheap and sell dear', and thus to create diametrically opposed interests in every exchange. Free trade would make this system universal. This 'ignominious war of competition' had done its best to dissolve nationalities, to 'universalise enmity' and to 'transform mankind into a horde of ravenous beasts'. It would go on to produce 'the dissolution of the family' through the 'economy's own beautiful invention, the factory system'. Competition based on self-interest would turn into its opposite and breed monopoly. Watts, and following him, Engels, believed that free trade would be a means of enabling a few to monopolize riches and command the labourers of the world; the middle class would disappear, giving way to a world divided into millionaires and paupers.[27]

But Engels also went beyond the Owenite critique of competition in two ways: first, by following Proudhon in ascribing the contradictions of political economy to the corrosive logic of private property; and secondly, by following Feuerbach in relating the development of private property and competition to 'the unconscious condition of mankind'. Political economy or the 'science of enrichment born of the merchant's mutual envy and greed' bore 'on its brow the mark of the most detestable selfishness'.[28] It was 'the elaboration of the laws of private property'. According to Engels, political economy presupposed private property, while never questioning its existence. Despite its purportedly 'philanthropic character', the 'premises' of the free-trade revolution in economics in the eighteenth century contained both an endorsement of 'the state as such', and an unquestioned acceptance of 'the *validity of private property*'.[29]

According to Engels, 'the contradiction of competition' was 'exactly the same as that of private property'. The inability to perceive their identity had only been enabled to develop in what, following Feuerbach, Engels defined as 'this unconscious condition of mankind'. What distinguished man from animal in Feuerbach's theory was not consciousness, but 'species consciousness'. Man's lack of 'species consciousness', the ontological loss of humanity, was ascribed to the 'inversion' associated with religion in Feuerbach's theory of 'abstraction' – and in the radical communist gloss added by radical Young Hegelians like Engels, Marx, and Moses Hess – with the establishment of money and private property.[30] For the past eighty years, these 'trade crises' had arrived 'just as regularly as the great plagues did in the past – and they have brought more misery and immorality in their train than the latter'. So, 'this 'constant

[27] Ibid., pp. 432–3, 441.
[28] Ibid., p. 418.
[29] Ibid., pp. 420–4.
[30] Ibid., p. 427. 'Value, the primary factor, the source of price, is made dependent on price, its own product. As is well known, this inversion is the essence of abstraction; on which see Feuerbach.' Feuerbach's original point had been that God did not create man. Man created God.

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alternation of over-stimulation and flagging' 'goes on unendingly'. 'This law', 'which is purely a law of nature and not a law of the mind', would 'finally result in a social revolution such as has never been dreamt of in the philosophy of the economists'.

> What are we to think of a law which can only assert itself through periodic upheavals? It is certainly a natural law based on the unconsciousness of the participants. If the producers as such knew how much the consumers required, if they were to organise production, if they were to share it out among themselves, then fluctuations of competition and its tendency to crisis would be impossible. Carry on production consciously as human beings – not as dispersed atoms without consciousness of your species – and you have overcome all these artificial and untenable antitheses.[31]

When the stage was reached in the development of production 'where there is so much superfluous productive power that the great mass of the nation has nothing to live on, that the people starve from sheer abundance', the economist, who 'has never been able to find an explanation for this mad situation', invented 'the population theory'.[32] Like the Owenites, Engels in the *Umrisse* focused heavily upon Malthus's population theory, 'this vile, infamous theory, this hideous blasphemy against nature and mankind'.[33] Its argument was that the 'inherent tendency of population to multiply in excess of available means of subsistence' was 'the root of all misery and all vice'. 'Here at last we have the immorality of the economist brought to its highest pitch.' In contrast to the 'sham philanthropy' of 'the liberal system of free trade', 'the Malthusian population theory' was: 'The crudest, most barbarous theory that ever existed, a system of despair which struck down all those beautiful phrases about philanthropy and world citizenship. The premises begot and reared the factory system and modern slavery.'[34] This 'crazy assertion that the earth lacks the power to feed men' was 'the pinnacle of Christian economics'. Around a year later, having met Marx in Paris, Engels's language changed, but the sentiment remained the same. In his *Condition of the working class in England*, Engels claimed that 'Malthus's Law of Population and the New Poor Law framed in accordance with it' was 'the most open declaration of war of the bourgeoisie upon the proletariat'.[35]

As is well known, Engels's essay made a deep impression on Marx. What particularly impressed him was the connection Engels made between the Owenite critique of political economy, particularly its belief in competition, and Proudhon's depiction of private property. Furthermore, Engels's essay reinforced connections already made by other Young Hegelians, notably Moses

[31] Ibid., pp. 433–4.
[32] Ibid., p. 436.
[33] Ibid., p. 437.
[34] Ibid., pp. 419–20.
[35] Friedrich Engels, 'The condition of the working class in England' (1844–5), *MECW*, IV, p. 570.

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Hess in his essay, 'On the essence of money', upon which Marx himself had built in his essay, 'On the Jewish question'. If 'conscious life activity' involved 'the co-operative working together of different individuals', in the 'inverted' world of money and private property, this 'species-activity' was displaced by the 'egoistic' satisfaction of private needs. Man's 'species attributes' thus became mere means towards individual self-preservation.[36] In early 1844, Engels's essay inspired Marx to embark upon his own 'critique of political economy'. Political economy provided the *theory* of civil society, or as he later described it, its 'anatomy'.

Historians have generally treated the discussion of Malthus found in the various writings of Marx and Engels as part of a single critique. This was the approach adopted by Ronald Meek in his *Marx and Engels on Malthus*, an anthology which highlighted both the supposed monstrosity of Malthus and stressed his role as the defender of bourgeois class interests.[37] The assumption of a single critique derived from Engels's own account of the formation of Marx's 'materialist theory of history', put forward in his 1886 essay, 'On the history of the communist league'. 'When I visited Marx in Paris in the summer of 1844', he wrote, 'our complete agreement in all theoretical fields became evident and our joint work dates from this time.'[38] In the twentieth century, this assumption of a joint theory became a canonical point of orthodoxy among communists, determined to defend the seamless unity of 'Marxism'.

III

But closer examination of relevant texts suggests significant differences of approach. Initially, Marx was happy to reiterate the attack on Malthus, which Engels had developed in the *Umrisse*. In 1844, in the Paris-based *Vorwärts*, in an essay attacking Arnold Ruge's position on social reform, Marx derided the acceptance by the English parliament of Malthus's 'philanthropic' theory, according to which 'pauperism *in general*' was 'an *eternal law of nature*'. 'Pauperism' was defined as '*poverty which the workers have brought upon themselves by their own fault*'. It was not therefore a misfortune to be alleviated, 'but rather a crime which has to be suppressed and punished'. Or, as Malthus himself put it, 'the state can therefore do nothing but leave the poor to their fate and, at most, make death easy for them'.[39]

Marx and Engels were agreed about the reactionary character of Malthusianism. But political consensus obscured differences of philosophical

[36] Moses Hess, 'Über das Geldwesen', in Wolfgang Mönke, ed., *Moses Hess: Philosophische und Sozialistische Schriften 1837–1850* (Vaduz, 1980), pp. 331–45; Karl Marx, 'On the Jewish question' (1844), *MECW*, III, pp. 146–74.

[37] Ronald L. Meek, *Marx and Engels on Malthus* (London, 1953).

[38] Friedrich Engels, 'On the history of the communist league', *MECW*, XXVI, p. 318.

[39] (Karl Marx), 'Critical marginal notes on the article "The king of Prussia and social reform. By A Prussian"' (*Vorwärts!*, 60), *MECW*, III, pp. 194–5.

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formation and outlook, particularly on the question of the relationship between history and nature. Engels's position was closer to that of the Owenites – the 'English socialists', with whom in 1843 he agreed 'upon almost every question'. Both he and they built upon the prevailing assumptions of a sensationalist and materialist approach dating back to the end of the seventeenth century and prevalent among socialists in Britain and France in the 1840s.

Man, according to this account, was an animal, a natural being who pursued pleasure and avoided pain. His or her character was shaped by the environment in which he or she was raised. As Robert Owen put it in *A new view of society*, man was born with a desire to obtain happiness and also endowed with faculties which enabled him to 'receive, convey and compare' ideas. The ideas themselves came from outside: 'the knowledge which man receives is derived from the objects around him, and chiefly from the example and instruction of his immediate predecessors'.[40] Or as Owen insisted, 'the character of man is formed *for* him, and not *by* him'.[41] Improvement would be brought about by the removal of harmful religious ideas, better methods of education, and the increase in scientific knowledge. In this way, changes in the environment would lead to a transformation of human nature and an increase in human happiness.

In Engels's version of this conception refashioned through the philosophy of Feuerbach, the determination of humans as 'sensuous' beings by the external environment was the result of man's lack of 'species consciousness'. In the end, however, competition and private property would produce a process of self-destruction, and usher in a new world. Little did 'the economist' realize that 'with all his egotistical reasoning' and his 'dissolution of all sectional interests', he was preparing the way 'for the great transformation to which the century is moving – the reconciliation of mankind with nature and with itself'.[42]

In contrast to the 'unconscious' and passive natural being, depicted in the *Umrisse*, Marx in 1844 stressed that Man was not merely 'a natural being', but a 'human natural being', whose point of origin was not nature, but history. History was the process of Man becoming 'species being' and the basis of man's ability to treat himself 'as a universal and therefore a free being'.[43] Similarly, in early 1845, following Max Stirner's devastating attack on Feuerbach in *The ego and its own*, Marx criticized Feuerbach for associating

[40] Owen, 'A new view of society', p. 70; in 1798, Malthus also treated man as a passive being shaped by nature. But it was a nature specifically designed by God. Mankind was likened to pieces of clay, moulded into unique shapes, but with no control over how they were moulded. Ultimately, the advance from savagery to civilization had not been a human achievement. This advance had been the effect of a mighty process of God … a process necessary to awaken inert, chaotic matter into spirit.' [Malthus], *Essay on population* (1798), pp. 375–6. The nature described by Malthus had been designed by God to promote self-improvement.

[41] Owen, 'A new view of society', pp. 61–2.

[42] Engels, 'Outlines', pp. 423–4, 441–2.

[43] Karl Marx, 'Economic and philosophic manuscripts of 1844', *MECW*, III, pp. 332–3, 337.

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man only with sensuousness rather than with '*practical* human sensuous activity'. According to Marx, Feuerbach did not see that the sensuous world he invoked was 'the product of industry and the state of society' and that 'the social system' was modified in accordance with 'changed needs'.[44]

Engels's presentation of Malthus's work as a 'hideous blasphemy against nature' ignored the similarities between Malthus's assumptions and those of other eighteenth-century writers on the prospects of the poor. In 1798, Malthus's assumptions had been similar to those Smith or later Ricardo. Like other commentators, Malthus had believed that the long-term tendency of real wages was static.[45] Population increase was limitless, while the supply of land was fixed. Therefore, although there had been an increase of real wages in the eighteenth century, eventually, the cultivation of the land would be subject to declining marginal returns and opportunities for profitable investment would become exhausted. The same forces which increased rent, both nominal and real, would raise the price of food, increasing nominal but depressing real wages, and would lead eventually to the prospect of the 'stationary state'. Engels's replacement of 'means of subsistence' by 'means of employment' did not in itself dispose of the point made by Tony Wrigley, that in an 'organic economy', the productivity of land set limits to the scale of industrial activity no less than the level of food consumption and that the output from land was subject to declining marginal returns.[46]

Engels also failed to take account of the important changes of position adopted by Malthus in the second 1803 edition of his *Essay*. Attempting to explain the continued increase in real wages in eighteenth-century England, Malthus had assumed that in old states, the rate of population increase had been limited, and progression towards a 'stationary state' therefore relatively slow.[47] But both these assumptions were overturned by the results of the 1801 census. The census showed that in fact there had been a substantial increase of population, and yet no surge in mortality or decrease in real wages.

This unexpected finding had led Malthus to revise his initial understanding of the possibilities of improvement in the prospects of the labouring population. It now became clearer that such possibilities varied according to the different types of polity, culture, and level of economic activity found in different societies. The 1803 *Essay* contained a general survey of the 'oscillations' of population found in uncivilized societies like Tahiti (based on the observations of Captain Cook), a summary of general historical trends and a comparative study of the different countries of contemporary Europe. These investigations revealed that in certain societies, a 'preventive check' in the form of deferred

[44] Karl Marx, '*Ad Feuerbach*' (the so-called 'Theses on Feuerbach'), *MECW*, v, pp. 39–40.
[45] See E. A. Wrigley, *Poverty, progress and population* (Cambridge, 2004), p. 230.
[46] Ibid., pp. 244–6. As he points out, Smith's story about pin-making did not solve this problem.
[47] Ibid., p. 233.

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age of marriage had replaced threatened surges in mortality and that this might promise an escape from poverty.[48]

These enquiries underlined the central importance of 'prudential constraint' leading to higher levels of comfort among labouring families, and a 'decent pride' or elevated sense of worth, which, once attained, was unlikely to be abandoned. This for Malthus provided grounds for optimism, for it suggested the means by which the poor might 'climb the ladder' of civilization.[49]

If Malthus's position nevertheless remained contentious, it was above all because of his position on the poor law. From the start, the operation of the poor law had been Malthus's principal object of attack. If 'prudential constraint' promised the most hopeful means of escaping poverty and destitution, the poor law stood in its way. It prevented the emergence of 'decent pride', by providing support to the industrious and the indolent alike. It thus blocked 'prudential constraint' (delayed age of marriage), and the possibility of fostering the improvement in the expectations and behaviour of the labouring poor. The problem with this position was that his enquiries subsequent to 1798 had shown that the poor law had little effect on the behaviour of the labouring poor.[50] Thus, his continued demand for the abolition of poor law relief not surprisingly could be interpreted as an example of political animosity and class spite, particularly when it became identified as the principal justification for the more punitive treatment of poverty associated with the deeply unpopular new poor law of 1834.

When Marx again addressed these themes in his first systematic critique of political economy – the so-called *Grundrisse* – written in the 1850s, his approach to Malthus was more nuanced. Malthus was acknowledged for having 'an inkling of the fact that profit, i.e. not profit but *real surplus value*, must be calculated not in relation to the capital advanced, but to the living labour, whose value is objectively expressed in wages', although the conclusions he drew from this observation were condemned as 'trivialities'. He also praised him, alongside Sismondi, for criticizing Say's argument for the identity of supply and demand, by showing that the consumption of workers in no way amounted to a '*sufficient* consumption for the capitalist'.[51]

[48] See Niall O'Flaherty, 'Malthus and the end of poverty', in Robert. J. Mayhew, ed., *New perspectives on Malthus* (Cambridge, 2016), pp. 74–104. Malthus was particularly impressed by the evidence of relative prosperity built upon the practice of the deferred marriage of the living-in unmarried 'housemen' in Norway, compared with the relative poverty and misery of comparable early marrying labourers in Sweden.

[49] On this basis, Niall O'Flaherty has contested the supposed 'pessimism' of Malthus and placed him alongside Smith, Hume, and Paley as part of a 'moderate enlightenment' tradition.

[50] As Walter Bagehot put it, 'in its first form, the *Essay on population* was conclusive as an argument, but it was based on untrue facts; in its second form it was based on true facts, but it was inconclusive as an argument'. W. Bagehot, *Economic studies* (London, 1880), p. 137; and see Arnold Toynbee, *Lectures on the Industrial Revolution in England: popular addresses, notes and other fragments* (London, 1884), pp. 105–14.

[51] Karl Marx, 'Economic manuscripts of 1857–8', *MECW*, XXVIII, pp. 487, 340.

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But his principal criticism directed at Malthus's theory of population was his attempt to conflate history and nature. Not only did Malthus consider '*overpopulation* as *of the same kind* in different historical phases of economic development', but he reduced

> those very complicated and changing relations to one relation, in which, on the one hand the natural propagation of mankind, on the other the natural propagation of edible plants (or means of subsistence) confront each other as two natural series, the one geometric and the other arithmetic in progression. In this way he transforms historically distinct relations into an abstract numerical relation which he simply plucks out of thin air, and which is based on neither natural nor historical laws.

'The monkey', he went on, 'assumes that *the increase of mankind* is a purely natural process, which requires *external* CONSTRAINTS, CHECKS, if it is not to proceed geometrically'.[52]

Like Engels before him, Marx stressed that it was means of employment rather than means of subsistence which determined whether or not a worker belonged in 'the category of surplus population'. In Marx's view, the decisive objection to the attempt by Malthus to relate 'a certain number of men to a certain quantity of means of subsistence', had been raised by Ricardo, who

> Straight away countered this by correctly pointing out that the quantity of available grain is quite immaterial for the worker if he is without *employment;* that it is therefore the MEANS OF EMPLOYMENT and not of SUBSISTENCE which determine whether or not he belongs in the category of surplus population.[53]

But the original point of criticism made by Engels and the Owenites, that crises of subsistence, when they existed, were rather the result of the harmful effects of competition than of pressure of population, were now situated in a larger framework, which interpreted famine, distress, or unemployment as the consequence of human activity in particular types of economy rather than of natural forces.

In *Capital*, Marx repeated his main point about the conflation of history and nature, and at the same time added a sharper political edge: 'It was of course, far more convenient and much more in conformity with the interests of the ruling classes, whom Malthus adored like a true priest, to explain this "overpopulation" by the eternal laws of nature, rather than by the historical laws of capitalist production.'[54]

Malthusian population theory was now set in a particular historical context. The great sensation produced by the book 'was due solely to party interest'.

> The French Revolution had found passionate defenders in the United Kingdom; the 'principle of population', slowly worked-out in the eighteenth century, and then, in the midst of a great social crisis proclaimed with drums and trumpets as the infallible

[52] Ibid., pp. 524, 525.
[53] Ibid., p. 526.
[54] Karl Marx, 'Capital, volume one', *MECW*, XXXV, p. 529.

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antidote to the teachings of Condorcet &c., was greeted with jubilance by the English oligarchy as the great destroyer of all hankerings after human development.[55]

Malthus, according to Marx, was 'hugely astonished at his success' since the work was nothing more than 'a schoolboyish superficial plagiary of Defoe, Sir James Steuart, Townsend, Franklin, Wallace, &c., and does not contain a single sentence thought out by himself'.[56]

But in other respects, his treatment of Malthus was more moderate. Malthus was no longer a moral monster. He was acknowledged for his insights into the accumulation of capital and his critique of hoarding. Marx also cited with approval Malthus's misgivings about the extension of piece work, and reproduced his contention that 'really hard work during twelve or fourteen hours, or for any longer time, is too much for any human being'.[57] He was no longer the epitome of all that was most hateful in 'the bourgeoisie'.[58] He was now treated as a figure of comedy.

[55] Ibid., p. 611.
[56] Ibid., pp. 578, 584.
[57] Ibid., p. 556.
[58] 'Parson Malthus' was depicted as a prime character in an anti-clerical comedy, alongside – Parson Wallace, Parson Townsend, and his own pupil, the arch-Parson Thomas Chalmers – a gallery of Protestant priests treating population theory as an expression of 'the economic fall of man'. In a mock homage, Malthus was congratulated as a fellow of a Cambridge college for taking 'the monastic vow of celibacy'. Others among these Protestant priests, while preaching to the labourers 'the principle of population', had 'shuffled off' this command. They had taken 'Be fruitful and multiply' as their special biblical mission 'in such a degree that they generally contribute to the increase of population to a really unbecoming extent'.

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