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 Excerpt  
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## *Introduction*

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

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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 towring *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!"

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,

the Elizabethan Poor Laws had operated in England to relieve extreme distress when the price of bread rose above a certain threshold. Malthus had two objections to the Poor Laws. First, he argued that 'they may be said ... in some measure to create the poor which they maintain'.<sup>8</sup> The Poor Laws decoupled the ability to have children from the ability to support them as the state would aid *in extremis*, and as such weakened the power of Malthus's preventive check, the exercise of foresight in determining when and whether to have children. Reducing the power of the preventive check *de facto* increased the number of children people had, hence the claim that the Poor Laws created those they supported. Second, Malthus noted that giving the poor more money to buy food could not in the short term increase food supply and therefore would lead the price of foodstuffs to increase. Such increases would lead those who were just above poverty to be drawn into a reliance on poor relief: as a result the Poor Laws 'may have alleviated a little the intensity of individual misfortune, [but] they have spread the general evil over a much larger surface'.<sup>9</sup> For these reasons, Malthus advocated the abolition of the Poor Laws and their replacement with a system of workhouses where people would labour for their entitlement to food. He also argued that state incentives should be focused on the increase of tillage and food production as only an increase in food supply could alleviate want rather than redistribute it. It was Malthus's ideas about poverty and the Poor Laws that galvanized opponents in a spectrum from Christian moralists through Romantic poets to Karl Marx to vitriolic denunciations of Malthus in various idioms, and yet as Niall O' Flaherty shows in his chapter, Malthus's ideas about poverty evolved to be far more nuanced and systematic than their critics allowed and were anything but mere cronyism towards the wealthy.

Attending to food production as the core of economic wellbeing also explained the third consequence Malthus detected in his principle of population, the need to correct Adam Smith's definition of wealth.<sup>10</sup> Malthus came in the generation after Smith's epochal economic treatise, *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), and was a lifelong supporter of, and advocate for, Smith's ideas. Malthus was as keenly aware as Smith that he wrote at a time of massive change in the economic structure of British society, as agrarian production came to be far less dominant in the face of rapidly expanding commercial and manufacturing sectors. And yet for Malthus, far more than Smith, this diversification of the economy was not an unbridled good if it did not bolster food supply. Just as the Poor Laws could not increase the quantity of food, so for Malthus merely monetary wealth of the sort that manufacture and trade could create might only

lead to increased nominal wealth. In taking this line, Malthus was in some ways drawing on the earlier economic ideas of the Physiocrats, but he was more immediately drawing out a consequence of his own principle of population: if food is necessary for survival, only the production of more food can create the conditions in which more people can survive, in which the same number can survive in greater comfort or in which both processes can take place simultaneously. This question of the relationship in Malthus's work between political economy and its grounding in the physical environment is taken up by Fredrik Albritton Jonsson's essay in this volume.

The fourth and final set of consequences Malthus drew from his principle of population related to religion, the topic addressed in the final two chapters of the *Essay*.<sup>11</sup> For an ordained clergyman to see in God's dispensation to humankind a system of laws that could, in Malthus's own words, 'be fairly resolved into misery and vice'<sup>12</sup> was to pose a dilemma. How could the existence of a wise and good Christian God be reconciled with such laws of population? In a response that many would condemn on its publication but that derived from the rationalist Anglicanism of his Cambridge education, Malthus argued that as 'the first great awakeners of the mind seem to be the wants of the body',<sup>13</sup> so the principle of population in fact spurred the individual to greater efforts and societies in aggregate to civilizational advance. As such, the misery and vice of the principle of population 'produces much partial evil; but ... a great overbalance of good'.<sup>14</sup> The human ability to plan coupled to nature's niggardliness meant that for Malthus a timeworn truism had new truth to it: 'necessity has been with great truth called the mother of invention'.<sup>15</sup> There is no evidence that the closing theological chapters of the *Essay* were mere 'window-dressing'. On the contrary, they appear to have been a deeply felt expression of Malthus's beliefs, and yet he removed them from all the later editions as they were received with great nervousness on publication. Where the intention of the *Essay* had been to oppose revolutionary fervour at the crisis point that was 1798, the final two chapters smacked too strongly of a similar radicalism in the eyes of many readers.

The *Essay* made Malthus's name as a writer and yet he was clearly dissatisfied with it from the outset. One of the first traces we have of Malthus after the publication of the *Essay* is a letter to his father requesting a raft of books about demography and an array of travel writings.<sup>16</sup> No sooner was the *Essay* published, then, than Malthus started working to deepen his knowledge and strengthen his arguments. And the trip Malthus took with friends to Scandinavia in 1799, while clearly recreational, was also part

of this project. Malthus's travel diaries are filled with comments on crop yields, food prices and manufacturing, and as such they betray the interests of the economist on the road. Malthus also showed himself keenly alert to the impact of weather on social and economic activity (hereby reverting to the environmental groundings of economic activity), travelling as he did in the wake of the exceptionally hard winter of 1798, the consequence of which had been to test preventive checks to the limit and even see a reversion to positive checks in some places. Above all, however, what is important about the Scandinavian travel diaries is that they witness a transition from Malthus the abstract philosopher of social laws to Malthus the empirical observer more concerned with the nuance and complexity of the links between population, production and policy than with simplifying them for political purposes.<sup>17</sup>

The first published product of Malthus's increasing preoccupation with the complex interactions of nature, politics and economic activity was a pamphlet on the heated debates about high food prices in the England to which Malthus returned from his continental sojourn. Malthus's *Investigation of the Causes of the Present High Price of Provisions* (1800) might seem a continuation of the anti-revolutionary rhetoric of the 1798 *Essay*, arguing as it does that high prices are not due to landowners or merchants storing food to cash in on high prices by artificially limiting supply. On the contrary, for Malthus 'the sole cause' of prices having been inflated so greatly relative to the dip in food supply is the impact of the Poor Laws artificially inflating the entitlements of the poor. And yet it is at this point that the more nuanced approach of the later Malthus is witnessed. For all his continued theoretical hostility to the Poor Laws – '[which] I certainly do most heartily condemn' – he is prepared to accept that pragmatically in the context of 1800 they have alleviated extreme need and that this is a material good. This essay was also Malthus's most sophisticated exposition of his ideas about the naturalistic origins of food scarcity, a theme that echoed down to the twentieth century, as David Nally chronicles. At the end of the *Investigation*, Malthus advertised that he was working on a new edition of the *Essay* and that it would be made 'more worthy of the public attention, by applying the principle directly and exclusively to the existing state of society, and endeavouring to illustrate the power and universality of its operation from the best authenticated accounts that we have of the state of other countries'.<sup>18</sup>

In a sense, Malthus somewhat misled his audience by retaining the title from 1798 for the so-called 'great quarto' or 1803 *Essay*, for it was stretching credibility to see it as merely a new edition of an extant book. The topic remained the same, as did the central focus on the principle of

population, its history and socio-economic ramifications, and yet the 1803 *Essay* was four times longer than its predecessor, being a massive tome of 200,000 words despite the removal of the theological sections from 1798. Taken as a whole, the changes Malthus made took the *Essay* of 1803 in the direction of a detailed empirical investigation of the principle of population and away from being an abstract argument about Newtonian laws of social mechanics. Malthus's advertisement of his intention to produce a new version of the *Essay* as quoted above from the *Investigation* was extremely fair in its foreshadowing of the new balance of that work, picking out as it did two key changes. First, just as Malthus had said he would use the best accounts, so Books I and II of the 1803 *Essay* conducted an exhaustive survey of the operation of the principle of population, both in 'the less civilised Parts of the World, and in Past Times' (as the heading to Book I had it), and then in the 'different States of Modern Europe' in Book II, starting from Malthus's own experiences of Norway and Sweden before proceeding around the continent and ending with Britain. These two books, far longer than the entirety of the 1798 *Essay*, replaced the short 'global tour' of the first edition and evidenced Malthus's longstanding interest in historical and geographical writing. Taken together, Books I and II were the illustration of the principle of population 'from authenticated accounts' that the *Investigation* had promised. These sections of the 1803 *Essay* have been neglected in terms of their argumentation and implications by scholars, a neglect rectified in this volume by Alison Bashford and Joyce Chaplin's engagement with Malthus's treatment of colonial and indigenous knowledge. The second key change for the 1803 *Essay* was its greater attention to the political and economic implications of the principle of population for modern societies. While the *Essay* still criticized Godwin and thereby continued to betray its genesis in the tensions of 1798, this was overwhelmed by greatly expanded discussions of the definition of wealth (itself a continuation of Malthus's jousting with Adam Smith), of the impact – baleful or otherwise – of the Corn Laws on food supply, by the new and somewhat less astringent approach to the Poor Laws that O' Flaherty analyses in this volume and, most importantly, by a more sanguine analysis of the power of the preventive check to population. On this last topic, Malthus conceded that he had been overly pessimistic in 1798; European demographic data showed the power of moral restraint and economically motivated forethought in checking fertility. While the power of population to outstrip food supply remained a basic predicate of Malthus's reasoning, he accepted that in modern European societies, the preventive check was effective in staving off the imbalance of

food and population on a long-term basis. As such, Malthus was reaching towards an awareness of an epochal change in the interrelation of population growth and economic growth whose reality economic historians have endorsed statistically.

Malthus spent the rest of his life adjusting details of the argumentation of the 1803 great quarto, with further editions emerging in 1806, 1807, 1817 and 1826.<sup>19</sup> After 1803, and building on his reputation as the foremost political economist in the generation after Adam Smith, Malthus engaged in pamphlet commentary on the key economic issues of the age, each of them deriving from the interests he had first addressed in the 1798 *Essay* – issues around bullion and whether Britain should go back onto the Gold Standard, the economic condition of Ireland and the likely impact of emigration on that condition, and the definition of value and the valuation of commodities. In many ways, the most highly charged issue Malthus addressed was the Corn Laws, a topic about which he wrote two pamphlets. The Corn Laws were a system of state intervention in the operation of the market, and to that extent were akin to the Poor Laws, and yet Malthus was far more positive about their worth. The reason for this lay in his continued belief that the land and its produce was the only true source of real wealth. Where many liberals, following what they saw as Adam Smith's lead, argued that the Corn Laws were an expensive and inefficient intervention in the operation of market forces, Malthus argued for their importance on two grounds. First, and as he said in his 1814 pamphlet on the topic, 'security is of still more importance than wealth'. The maximization of nominal wealth was, for Malthus, meaningless if it endangered our ability to feed our population; political embargoes, warfare and the increased wealth of corn exporting countries such as the USA and Russia could all block food supplies flowing to Britain and at that point the country would face crippling food scarcities regardless of its ability to pay for food. And resting behind this concern with food security was the second reason to support the Corn Laws; without food security there could be no political security. The turmoil of 1798 that had first engaged Malthus stayed with him as a concern throughout his life; as he put it in 1815, the labouring classes are 'the foundation on which the whole [social] fabric rests'.<sup>20</sup> And if those classes could not feed themselves – something that both the increased price volatility of a free market in corn and the increased vulnerability to political and economic changes elsewhere in the market rendered more likely – then the maintenance of peace and prosperity could be endangered by loosening the protectionism the Corn Laws enshrined.

Malthus's interventions on the Corn Laws once again pointed to his caution about markets. And this caution was also a strong vein running through his final great work, *Principles of Political Economy* (1820). *Principles* addressed many of the same themes as the *Essay* but from a different angle: Malthus argued that the *Essay* had 'endeavoured to trace the causes which practically keep down the population of a country to the level of its actual supplies', while his *Principles* aimed to show 'what are the causes which chiefly influence these supplies, or call the powers of production forth into the shape of increasing wealth'.<sup>21</sup> At its simplest, then, Malthus depicted the *Essay* as focusing on the demand side of the interrelationship between food and population while *Principles* attended to the supply side. While the *Principles* is Malthus's great engagement with the economists of his day, especially David Ricardo, what is most lastingly important about it is its claim to make Malthus one of the first great analysts of market failures. Emerging as it did after a long period of economic depression in the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars, *Principles* was preoccupied with the fact that demand and supply could be chronically out of kilter. Emerging from Malthus's analysis of the Corn Laws and the Poor Laws was an awareness that a mere need for goods was not synonymous with an effective demand for them. And likewise from the supply side, the mere existence of un- or under-utilized resources in terms of land or labour did not mean they would be used. Finally, and putting these two things together, one could have a need for goods alongside underutilized resources, but a market would not put these two things together productively without the lubrication of effective demand.

The last decade or so of Malthus's life saw him propelled to public fame. Thus he was twice called to give evidence to parliamentary Select Committees, one concerning machinery and its impact on the labouring classes in 1824 and one concerning the likely impact of a scheme of Irish emigration on that country's economic prospects in 1827. In the same decade, Malthus was a founding member of the Political Economy Club, a dining society that has been seen as the first attempt to give some scholarly coherence to the study of economics; was elected as a Fellow of the Royal Society; and was given a stipendiary prize by the Royal Society of Literature. In the final year of his life, Malthus was also instrumental in the establishment of the Statistical Society of London (the forerunner of today's Royal Statistical Society) and his name was inextricably linked with the passing of the New Poor Law, although his actual influence on that law was indirect at best.<sup>22</sup>