

## Malthusian Discontents

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I give here a brief overview of part of my argument from my new book in progress "Reproduction in the Classical Social Sciences," which examines the ways human and nonhuman reproduction was figured in political philosophy, political economy, and sociology between the late seventeenth century and the early twentieth century. I am going to focus on Malthus because his ideas are still widely evoked in much of the population literature. He is an unavoidable figure in demography and critical population studies and evoked at least in spirit in many environmental studies. I will address the ways his apparently technical and quantitative arguments were deeply engaged with new ideas about gender equality emerging from the French Revolution, and were intended to refute the claims being made by the revolutionary feminists for reform of marriage, divorce, inheritance, and legitimacy laws to give women more legal agency in and outside the family.

As an economist, Malthus is significant because of his introduction of the notion of scarcity into understandings of national wealth. His famous *Essay on the Principle of Population* (there were several versions) addresses the consequences of his claim that the both the underlying dynamics of population growth and the capacity for agricultural production are constants: Population increases geometrically while agriculture, constrained by land scarcity, grows arithmetically (Malthus 1798). Population growth is driven by the constancy of human sexual desire, and communities will continue to grow geometrically until they are checked by agricultural failure, famine, and epidemic, when they will shrink again. Because land is inherently finite, and cannot be increased, this dynamic can only be avoided by constraints on human sexual desire, particularly late, provident marriage. (I will come back to this point.)

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Malthus's concern with scarcity placed him at odds with the other major economists of the late eighteenth century, the physiocrats in France and Adam Smith in Britain. Despite being a clergyman, Malthus was the first to depart significantly from Linnaean science and the deist assumption that a benign and provident God regulated nature in such a way that human needs were met and food production and population were kept in a balance, if they were rationally governed (by economists). The centrality of land scarcity explains his appeal to some contemporary environmentalists who are concerned with planetary limits, and postulate that population reduction is one way to reduce the pressure on climate and resources (e.g., Haraway 2018).

However, for Malthus, particularly in his first version of his famous essay, scarcity is not only a quantitative calculation but a philosophical notion intended to rebut the revolutionary ideas about class and gender equality washing across Europe at the time he was writing. His original polemic, *An Essay on the Principle of Population As It Affects the Future Improvement of Society, with Remarks on the Speculations of Mr. Goodwin, M. Condorcet and Other Writers* (Malthus 1798), was written during the later years of the Revolution and, as the title implies, engaged not only with the statistical specifics of population growth but with a much broader argument regarding the nature of social progress and the possibilities of human perfectibility claimed by the *philosophes* of the French Revolution. His broad claim was that the scarcity of land and the inexorable nature of the human desire to reproduce meant that population would inevitably outstrip food supply and hence human life was condemned to perpetual immiseration, famine, and epidemic, so could not be perfected. He also had a specific argument about the need for women's rights to remain limited.

During the first years of the Revolution, women such as Olympe de Gouges had successfully pursued the idea of women's equality as citizens. The *droit intermédiaire*, the new legal code developed to institutionalize the rights of republican citizens, had extended new rights to women—divorce by mutual consent, legal majority at the age of twenty-one, equal inheritance rights for male and female children and, most strikingly, for both illegitimate and legitimate children. This comparative liberality was rapidly reversed with the onset of the Terror in 1793, when the feminist forces of the Revolution largely succumbed to the guillotine (Gerhard and Meunier 2016). (Under Napoleonic rule, this reversal was more thoroughly entrenched through the adoption of the French Civil Code of 1804.)

While Malthus never addresses the revolutionary feminist writing from the time directly, he does debate in *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, for several chapters, with William Godwin, whose *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793) was published only a year after his soon-to-be lover Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication on the Rights of Women* (1792). Malthus focuses on Godwin's

arguments in favor of perfect equality between the sexes. Here Godwin picks up on some of the revolutionary feminist and equalitarian claims being advanced by the revolutionaries. He proposes the abolition of marriage and its replacement with a system of friendship between men and women. Because corrupt institutions and legally enforced social relations inflame the passions and vices, the abolition of marriage would see a reduction in sensuality and the flowering of rational friendships between men and women untroubled by sexual desire. The species would be propagated not because of sexual desire but because reasonable men would see the fathering of children as a duty. This would have the effect of annulling patriarchal claims to particular children and the need for women to be forcibly restricted to motherhood, replaced with community support for all children born.

Malthus argues that such an arrangement would lead to massive overpopulation, and that relations between the sexes need to be characterized by female shame, indissoluble marriage, and an absence of social assistance for childcare, in order for population to remain at governable levels. He writes,

Mr Godwin considers marriage as a fraud and a monopoly. Let us suppose the commerce of the sexes established upon principles of the most perfect freedom....I cannot conceive a form of society so favourable upon the whole to population. The irremediableness of marriage, as it is at present constituted, undoubtedly deters many from entering into that state. An unshackled intercourse on the contrary would be a most powerful incitement to early attachments, and as we are supposing no anxiety about the future support of children to exist, I do not conceive that there would be one woman in a hundred, of twenty-three, without a family. With these extraordinary encouragements to population,...the numbers would necessarily increase faster than in any society that has ever yet been known. (Malthus 1798, 58)

So, scarcity of land leads Malthus to refute the possibility or desirability of gender equality. It is notable that engagement between his proposals and feminist thought is embedded in the original text, not introduced by contemporary feminism as we tend to assume.

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