



80 THOMAS MALTHUS

1766 - 1834

In 1798, a previously obscure English parson, Thomas Robert Malthus, published a short but highly influential book entitled *An Essay on the Principle of Population as It Affects the Future Improvement of Society*.

Malthus's basic thesis was the idea that the growth of population tends to outrun the growth of food supply. In his original essay, Malthus presented this idea in fairly rigid form, claiming that population tended to increase geometrically (i.e., exponentially, such as the numbers in the series 1, 2, 4, 8, 16 . . .) whereas the food supply tended to increase only arithmetically (i.e., linearly, as the numbers in the series 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 . . .). In later editions of his book, Malthus restated his thesis in less rigid

terms, saying only that population tended to increase indefinitely until it reached the limit of the food supply. From both forms of his thesis, Malthus drew the conclusion that the bulk of mankind was doomed to live in poverty and near-starvation. In the long run, no advances in technology could avert that result, for increases in the food supply are of necessity limited, while "the power of population is indefinitely greater than the power of the earth to produce subsistence for man."

But can not population growth be checked in some other way? Indeed it can be. War, pestilence, or other disasters frequently reduce the population. But these scourges provide only temporary relief from the threat of overpopulation, and at an obviously unpleasant cost. Malthus suggested that a preferable way of avoiding overpopulation would be "moral restraint"—by which he appears to have meant a combination of late marriage, premarital chastity, and voluntary restraints on the frequency of marital intercourse. Malthus, however, was realistic enough to realize that most people would not exercise such restraint. He concluded that, as a practical matter, overpopulation was virtually inevitable, and that poverty was therefore the almost inescapable fate of most human beings. A pessimistic conclusion indeed!

Although Malthus himself never advocated population control through the use of contraceptive devices, the suggestion of such a policy was a natural consequence of his basic ideas. The first person to publicly advocate the widespread use of contraceptive devices in order to prevent overpopulation was the influential British reformer, Francis Place (1771-1854). Place, who had read Malthus's essay and was strongly influenced by it, wrote a book in 1822, advocating contraception. He also disseminated birth control information among the working classes. In the United States, Dr. Charles Knowlton published a book on contraception in 1832. The first "Malthusian League" was formed in the 1860s, and the advocates of family planning have continued to gain adherents. Since Malthus himself disapproved, on moral grounds, of the use of contraceptives, the advocates of

population control by means of contraception are usually referred to as neo-Malthusians.

Malthus's doctrine has also had an important effect on economic theory. Economists influenced by Malthus came to the conclusion that, under normal conditions, overpopulation would prevent wages from rising significantly above the subsistence level. The famous English economist David Ricardo (who was a personal friend of Malthus) stated: "The natural price of labor is that price which is necessary to enable the laborers, one with another, to subsist and to perpetuate the race, without either increase or diminution." This theory, generally referred to as the "iron law of wages," was accepted by Karl Marx, and became a critical element in his theory of surplus value.

Malthus's views also influenced the study of biology. Charles Darwin stated that he had read the *Essay on the Principle of Population*, and that this provided him with an important link in his theory of evolution by natural selection.

Malthus was born in 1766, near Dorking, in Surrey, England. He attended Jesus College of Cambridge University, where he was an excellent student. He graduated in 1788 and was ordained an Anglican clergyman in the same year. In 1791, he got a master's degree, and in 1793, he became a fellow of Jesus College.

The first version of his famous work was originally published anonymously, but it was widely read and soon brought Malthus fame. A longer version of his essay was published five years later, in 1803. The book was repeatedly revised and expanded, the sixth edition appearing in 1826.

Malthus married in 1804, at the age of thirty-eight. In 1805, he was appointed professor of history and political economy at the East India Company's College at Haileybury. He remained at that position for the rest of his life. Malthus wrote several other books on economics, the most important being the *Principles of Political Economy* (1820). That book influenced many later economists, particularly the important twentieth-century figure John Maynard Keynes. In his later years, Malthus received

many honors. He died in 1834, at the age of sixty-eight, near Bath, England. Two of his three children survived him. There were no grandchildren.

Since the use of contraceptives did not spread widely until long after Malthus died, it is sometimes suggested that Malthus was not really influential. I think that this view is incorrect. In the first place, Malthus's ideas strongly influenced both Charles Darwin and Karl Marx, perhaps the two most influential thinkers of the nineteenth century. In the second place, although the policies of the neo-Malthusians were not immediately adopted by the majority of the population, their suggestions were not ignored, and their ideas never died out. The present-day birth control movement is a direct continuation of the movement started during Malthus's own lifetime.

Thomas Malthus was not the first person to call attention to the possibility that an otherwise well-governed country might suffer from overpopulation. That idea had been previously suggested by several other philosophers. Malthus himself pointed out that both Plato and Aristotle had discussed the topic. Indeed, he quotes Aristotle, who had written, in part, "...in the generality of states, if every person be left free to have as many children as he pleases, the necessary consequence must be poverty...."

But if Malthus's basic idea was not entirely original, one should not underestimate his importance. Plato and Aristotle had only mentioned the idea in passing, and their brief remarks on the topic had been largely ignored. It was Malthus who elaborated the idea and wrote extensively on the subject. More important, Malthus was the first person to stress the overwhelming importance of the problem of overpopulation, and to bring this problem to the attention of the intellectual world.