

Reform and religious heterodoxy in Thomas Robert Malthus's first edition of *An Essay on the Principle of Population*

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Abstract

The first edition of Thomas Robert Malthus' *An Essay on the Principle of Population* is best understood as an exploration of human nature and the role of necessity in shaping the individual and society. The author's liberal education, both from his father and his tutors at Warrington and Cambridge, is evident in his heterodox views on hell, his Lockean conceptualization of the mind, and his Foxite Whig politics. Malthus' unpublished essay, "Crises," his sermons, and the last two chapters of *An Essay* (which were excised from subsequent editions) reveal a pragmatic, compassionate side of the young author that was underappreciated by both his contemporary critics and modern historians. The *Essay* has been mischaracterized by David McNally as a "Whig response to Radicalism" and by Patricia James as a reaction by Malthus against his father's liberalism. This article argues that when he wrote the first edition of *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, Malthus was himself a liberal dissenter and Foxite Whig rather than an orthodox Anglican or a Burkean defender of traditional class relations.

Keywords

Thomas Robert Malthus; *An Essay on the Principle of Population*; Lockean and Radical education

Reforma e heterodoxia religiosa na primeira edição do *Ensaio sobre o Princípio da População* de Thomas Robert Malthus

Resumo

A primeira edição do *Ensaio sobre o Princípio da População* de Thomas Robert Malthus é melhor entendida como uma exploração da natureza humana e o papel da necessidade na formação do indivíduo e da sociedade. A educação liberal do autor, advinda tanto de seu pai como de seus tutores em Warrington e Cambridge, é evidente em suas visões heterodoxas sobre o inferno, sua conceitualização lockeana da mente e sua política foxista. O ensaio inédito de Malthus, "Crises", seus sermões e os dois últimos capítulos do *Ensaio* (que foram retirados das edições posteriores) revelam um lado pragmático e compassivo do jovem autor que foi apreciado tanto por seus críticos contemporâneos quanto por historiadores modernos. O *Ensaio* foi caracterizado por David McNally como uma "resposta Whig ao radicalismo" e por Patricia James como uma reação de Malthus contra o liberalismo de seu pai. Este artigo argumenta que, quando escreveu a primeira edição do *Ensaio sobre o Princípio da População*, Malthus foi ele mesmo um dissidente liberal e foxista, ao invés de um anglicano ortodoxo ou um defensor burkeano das relações de classe tradicionais.

Palavras-chave

Thomas Robert Malthus; *Ensaio sobre o Princípio da População*; Educação lockeana e radical

Introduction

David McNally has claimed that Thomas Malthus' *An Essay on the Principle of Population* represented "a Whig response to Radicalism", and that Malthus (1766-1834) superseded Edmund Burke (1729-1797) as the preeminent counter-revolutionary of the early nineteenth century.¹ Beginning with the vitriolic attacks of Karl Marx (1818-1883) and Friedrich Engels (1820-1895),² the standard historiography has portrayed Malthus as a defender of the status quo who placed the inescapable penury of the lower classes at their own feet. Modern historians have, for the most part, continued this narrative. William Petersen used Malthus' personal library, which contained the sixteen-volume set of Burke's collected works, as evidence that he supported Burke.³ Tim Fulford discussed how Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834), William Hazlitt (1778-1830) and others within the radical dissenting community attacked Malthus' portrayal of human nature and his dismal economics.⁴ Patricia James, author of the most cited Malthus' biography, argued that the *Essay* was Malthus' anti-radical rebellion against his father's liberalism.⁵ This portrayal of Malthus is a product of an overly narrow compartmentalization of his economics from his views on politics and religion. This article argues that when he wrote the first edition of *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, Malthus was himself a Foxite Whig with heterodox religious beliefs rather than an orthodox Anglican or a Burkean defender of traditional class relations. The first edition of Malthus' *Essay* is best understood as a Lockean exploration of human nature and the role of necessity in shaping the individual and society.

The last two chapters of *An Essay on the Principle of Population* are presented along with Malthus's sermons to show that he adhered to unorthodox (though not atheistic) religious views and advocated religious tolerance, in the manner of a liberal dissenter, or at least of an unorthodox 'broad church' Anglican. Politically, Malthus opposed the war against France, unlike Burke, and opposed the Poor Law, not because the traditional classes of society had to be maintained but because the Poor Law imposed unacceptable restraints upon the liberty of the poor. Radicals in both the religious and political spheres - atheists, Pantisocrats, and socialists - portrayed Malthus as an enemy of the poor and a defender of orthodoxy not because he was a Burkean conservative but because he was a liberal Whig and thus wanted evolution, not revolution.

¹ David McNally, "Political Economy to the Fore: Burke, Malthus, and the Whig Response to Popular Radicalism in the Age of the French Revolution," *History of Political Thought* 21, no. 3 (2000): 427-447, on 427.

² Friedrich Engels, "Outlines of a Critique of Political Economy," in *Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels Collected Works* (New York: International Publishers, 1975), III: 418-443.

³ Jesus College, *The Malthus Library Catalogue: The Personal Collection of Thomas Robert Malthus at Jesus College*. (Cambridge: Pergamon Press, 1983): 1.

⁴ Tim Fulford, "Apocalyptic Economics and Prophetic Politics: Radical and Romantic Responses to Malthus and Burke," *Studies in Romanticism* 40, no. 3 (2001): 345-68.

⁵ Patricia James, *Population Malthus: His Life and Times*. (London: Taylor & Francis, 1979), 54.

A Liberal education

Many of the people close to Thomas Robert Malthus during his formative years, including his father, his tutors, and even his first publisher, were politically radical dissenters. In 1782, Daniel Malthus (1730-1800) sent his son Robert,⁶ aged sixteen, to Warrington Academy, a dissenters' school where the Unitarian leader Joseph Priestley (1733-1804) had taught and shaped much of the curriculum. Warrington was dubbed the "Athens of the North,"⁷ but this is surely an exaggeration of its academic stature. The average class at Warrington Academy was no larger than fourteen pupils, and the academy lasted for only twenty-five years from 1758 to 1783. The sobriquet was more representative of the political goals of the Academy (and British dissenters of the time in general) in pursuing democratic and liberal ideals.⁸

While at Warrington, the young Malthus was tutored by Gilbert Wakefield (1756-1801). Wakefield grew close to Robert and eventually took him on as a private student when the academy closed in 1783. Wakefield was also an ardent Unitarian and political dissident. He saw the French Revolution as "the undoubted commencement of a better order of things, in which rational liberty, equitable policy, and pure religion would finally become triumphant."⁹ Wakefield's participation in a pamphlet campaign opposing the war with Revolutionary France would eventually get him into trouble with the state. In 1798, he was jailed and eventually died in prison after the publication of his pamphlet, "A Reply to Some Parts of the Bishop Llandaff's Address to the People of Great Britain." Patricia James says of the relationship between Malthus and Wakefield, "Robert was obviously fond of his second eccentric mentor, and a loyal friend to the family after his early death."¹⁰

Through Wakefield, Robert Malthus became friends with John Aikin (1747-1822) and his sister Anna Letitia Barbauld (1743-1825). Anna was already an outspoken author in the Unitarian movement when Malthus met her and would go on to advocate the abolition of the slave trade and support the French Revolution.¹¹ Her last publication, a poem entitled "Eighteen Eleven," also condemned England for waging war against France and drew such ferocious reviews that Barbauld gave up writing. John Aikin was also a central figure in the London Unitarian community, though he focused less on religion in his own writings than did his sister in hers. Malthus remained friends with the Aikin family throughout his life and was described by John Aikin's granddaughter as "a polite, handsome, kind old man, tall and slender, with dark eyes."¹² Malthus' personal library included at least three works by

⁶ T. R. Malthus went by Robert or Bob throughout his life.

⁷ David L. Wykes, "The Dissenting Academy and Rational Dissent," in *Enlightenment and Religion: Rational Dissent in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, ed. Knud Haakonssen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 99-140, on 132.

⁸ See Daniel E. White, *Early Romanticism and Religious Dissent* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

⁹ John Aikin, "Memoir of Gilbert Wakefield," in *Memoir of John Aikin*, ed. Lucy Aikin. (Philadelphia: Baldwin, Cradock and Joy, 1824), 457.

¹⁰ Jesus College, xli.

¹¹ For more on Anna Laetitia Barbauld and the Aikins, see William McCarthy, *Anna Laetitia Barbauld: Voice of the Enlightenment*. (Baltimore: JHU Press, 2008); White, *Early Romanticism and Religious Dissent*; and Betsy Aikin-Sneath Rodgers, *Georgian Chronicle: Mrs. Barbauld & Her Family*. (London: Methuen, 1958).

¹² James, 424.

John Aikin along with three by Anna Letitia Barbauld.¹³ The Aikins may have also been responsible for introducing Malthus to the publisher Joseph Johnson (1738-1809), who later published Malthus's *An Essay on the Principle of Population* and Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man*. Johnson was the London agent for Warrington Academy, publishing texts by most of its teachers and students, so it is hard to say how exactly Malthus first met Joseph Johnson. However, John Aikin was particularly close to Johnson and served as the eulogist at his funeral. Robert Malthus later met William Godwin (1756-1836) and many others in the dissenting community through Johnson.

In 1784, Gilbert Wakefield helped Robert enroll at Jesus College, Cambridge. Like Oxford, Cambridge required that all students before graduation subscribe to the *Thirty-Nine Articles*, established in 1563 as the tenets of the Anglican Church. Nonetheless, Cambridge in the last third of the eighteenth century was not nearly the stronghold of orthodox Anglicanism that Oxford was. Edmund Law (1703-1787), the Bishop of Carlisle, was a powerful figure at Cambridge and had mentored many of the senior faculty including William Paley (1743-1805). In 1794, Law published a pamphlet entitled "Considerations on the Propriety of requiring Subscription to Articles of Faith" advocating religious toleration and denying that clergyman should be required to subscribe to particular doctrines. Brian Young has suggested that Law was driven to these conclusions by the Cambridge student and Unitarian Joseph Cornish (1750-1823) who in 1777 published a pamphlet entitled "A Letter to the Right Reverend the Lord Bishop of Carlisle." Cornish wanted Law to openly join the Unitarians who were led at the time by two of Law's protégés, Theophilus Lindsey (1723-1808) and John Jebb (1736-1786). While Law never took this step, his call for religious toleration did lead to an increased level of religious liberalism at Cambridge.¹⁴

While attending Cambridge, Robert was tutored by William Frend (1757-1841). Like Gilbert Wakefield, Frend was an active Unitarian and a formative influence on the young Robert Malthus. In 1787, Frend made his religious views very clear with his letter of resignation from his tutorship at Jesus College:

"Whereas I, William Frend, did at several times within the years 1780 and 1784, subscribe to the articles and doctrines of the church of England, as by law established, being now convinced, by an attentive study of the holy scriptures, that many things contained in the said articles, have no foundation whatever in the holy scriptures, I do hereby declare my disbelief of many of the said articles and doctrines, particularly of the second, the fifth, and the eighth Articles."¹⁵

Here, Frend is objecting to the *Thirty-Nine Articles*, particularly the second article, which asserts the divinity of Jesus Christ, the fifth article, which identifies the Holy Ghost, and the eighth article, supporting the Nicene Creed, which upholds the belief in the Holy Trinity. Frend followed up his passionate declaration of his Unitarian beliefs with numerous pamphlets including "Peace and Union Recommended to the Associated Bodies of

¹³ Jesus College, *The Malthus Library*.

¹⁴ Brian Young, "Malthus among the Theologians," in *Malthus, Medicine, and Morality*, ed. Brian Dolan (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), 93-114, on 97-9.

¹⁵ James, 31-2.

Republicans and Anti-Republicans" in 1793. This pamphlet served as a call for dialog between the republicans and their opponents at the outbreak of the French Revolution. However, it was seen as supporting the French Revolution and led to Frennd's trial and expulsion from his fellowship at Cambridge (although he continued to receive the income from his fellowship until his marriage 1808).¹⁶ Frennd's ongoing work with Richard Price (1723-1791), Theophilus Lindsey,¹⁷ Joseph Johnson, and others made him a mainstay in the Unitarian community in London.

Robert Malthus's tutor at Warrington Academy, Gilbert Wakefield, and his tutor at Cambridge, William Frennd, were both politically radical dissenters. Through them, Malthus met and befriended the Aikins and Joseph Johnson, who were also central in the Unitarian movement. Because of their support for opposition leader Charles James Fox (1749-1806) and their support for the French and American Revolutions, the Unitarians drew the ire of Edmund Burke. Wakefield debated Edmund Burke openly and publicly in pamphlets, while Anna Laetitia Barbauld entered into dialogue with Burke through their literary works.¹⁸ It would be odd if Malthus did not absorb any of this group's religious, economic, and philosophical values. In the sections below, analysis of Malthus' writings will show that he did appropriate the dissenters' values of Lockean individualism, political sympathy for the French Revolution, and a set of religious heterodoxies into his worldview.

Malthus's religious heterodoxy

David McNally's portrayal of Malthus as an anti-radical carries both political connotations and the religious implication that Malthus was an orthodox, Anglican minister who rejected the dissenters' religious positions. The traditional historiography on Malthus often asserts his orthodoxy, as seen in James Bonar's note: "We cannot find anything in the writings of parson Malthus inconsistent with his ecclesiastical orthodoxy."¹⁹ While Malthus' more recent biographer, Patricia James, acknowledged his liberal education, she too concluded, "Marriage and success had, I think, combined to make Malthus sincerely more orthodox."²⁰ Indeed, in his later life Malthus actively cultivated his image as a reverend by making sure that his title appeared on the title page of each of his books. However, the young Reverend Thomas Robert Malthus was by no means an orthodox Anglican. John Pullen notes that in the first edition of *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, Malthus

¹⁶ Ibid., 48.

¹⁷ Theophilus Lindsey (1723-1808) was a leader of the Unitarian movement. He was friends with Richard Price and Joseph Priestley and was integrally involved in the establishment of the Essex Street Chapel, the first Unitarian church in London. His publications, including *An Historical View of the State of the Unitarian Doctrine and Worship from the Reformation to our own Times* (1783), and his sermons were often cited by Unitarians and dissenters more broadly. See Thomas Belsham, *Memoirs of the Late Reverend Theophilus Lindsey*. (London: John Murray, 1812) and Grayson M. Ditchfield, *Theophilus Lindsey: From Anglican to Unitarian* (London: Dr. William's Trust, 1998) and *The Letters of Theophilus Lindsey and the Cause of Protestantism in Late Eighteenth-Century Britain*. (London: Dr. William's Trust, 2007).

¹⁸ Gilbert Wakefield, *A Reply to the Letter of Edmund Burke, Esq. to a Noble Lord* (London, 1796). See also McCarthy, 286-90.

¹⁹ James Bonar, *Malthus and His Works* (New York: MacMillan & Co, 1924), 367.

²⁰ James, 120.

expressed “radical, if not heretical, views on hell, annihilationism, and divine omnipotence.”²¹ Malthus's views on annihilationism along with his Lockean conceptualization of the mind and the problem of evil align him much more closely with the dissenters than with the orthodox position of the Anglican Church.

In 1796, having graduated from Cambridge and received his first appointment as a clergyman, Robert Malthus wrote an essay entitled “The Crises, a View of the present Interesting State of Great Britain, by a Friend to the Constitution.” While this essay was never published, the fragments that remain reveal some of Malthus' feelings towards dissenters:

“An instance of the evil effects of this kind of policy occurs in the present state of the Dissenters in England. As a body, though there are certainly many individual exceptions, they may now almost be considered as professed enemies to the State as well as the Church; yet at the revolution of '88, when the constitution was fixed in its present state, the nation was greatly indebted to them for their assistance; and since that time, till of late, they have been among the firmest friends of the constitution. If during this period, the tests that related to them had been removed, and they had been admitted to equal privileges with the rest of the community; we should never have seen the present violent opposition from them to the established government. And perhaps if the mother church prompted by an universal charity had extended her pale to admit a set of men separated by such slight shades of difference in their religious tenets, such a conduct, so far from endangering the holy building, I must ever think would have added strength and safety both to the Church and the State.”²²

Here we see that Malthus did not view the dissenters as necessarily religiously or politically subversive, but rather they were struggling with exclusion from the state. Following the Glorious Revolution of 1688, freedom of religious practice was guaranteed to Protestants in England through the Act of Toleration of 1689, but only members of the Church of England could hold political office, be appointed to positions within the government and military, or graduate from Oxford or Cambridge. Here, Malthus argues that the Anglican Church could have relaxed their theological beliefs to bring a broader segment of Protestants into the Church, or the government could have relaxed their tests to allow dissenters a broader role in society. Young Malthus was not a hardliner, theologically or politically, and here he displays sympathy for dissenters.

In what remains the definitive biography of Malthus, Patricia James has suggested that “Crises” represented the nascent views of a young Robert Malthus and that the 1798 *An Essay on the Principles of Population* represents his more mature views. In the first line of the preface of *Essay*, Malthus says that the book “owes its origin to a conversation with a friend, on the subject of Mr. Godwin's *Essay*, on avarice and profusion.”²³ The friend alluded to

²¹ Jesus College, lx.

²² James, 51.

²³ Thomas R. Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, (London: J. Johnson, 1798), i.

here was Malthus's father, Daniel, and Robert's ideas on the principle of population had long been a subject of debate between them.²⁴ Robert Malthus spends much of his essay rejecting Richard Price's assertion (with which Daniel Malthus presumably agreed) that the population of England was stagnant or even declining.²⁵ Malthus argued instead that the population of England and populations in general inevitably grow, creating shortages of food and other resources. Here we see a rejection of his father's and Price's ideas on population, but to what extent did Malthus reject the liberal views of his father and his religious and political tolerance?

The idea of Robert Malthus rebelling against his father and his Unitarian educators is undermined by the emphasis that Malthus places on Lockean philosophy in *An Essay on the Principle of Population*. John Locke's philosophy was central in the curriculum of Warrington Academy and in the beliefs of the larger Unitarian community. Locke's conceptions of individual liberty and his materialist epistemology were molded into a support for the pursuit of personal religion and commercial growth that were central tenets of the dissenting community. Richard Price, a leading theologian and philosopher in the Unitarian community, drew on Lockean liberty to argue for "civil rule by will of the people."²⁶ Price was also a politically active Whig who took part in trying to repeal the *Test and Corporation Acts* that barred dissenters from attending schools, voting, or holding public office.²⁷ For Price and the much of the dissenting community, John Locke (1632-1704) had provided a unified and coherent philosophy that advocated self-rule over tyranny and reason over dogma. Lockean empiricism also drove the development of the materialistic epistemologies of David Hume (1711-1776) and David Hartley (1705-1757). Locke's concept of individual liberty became a central tenet for the religiously and commercially individualistic dissenters.

Within the text of *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, Malthus extends the Lockean precept of a material mind into a central tenet of religion by proposing "that the world is a mighty process for the creation and formation of mind."²⁸ For Malthus the mind and body are created from inert matter simultaneously by God and grow through experience. He continues, "The various impressions and excitements which man receives through life, may be considered as the forming hand of the Creator, acting by general laws, and awakening his sluggish existence, by the animating touches of Divinity, into a capacity of superior enjoyment."²⁹ As with Locke, knowledge is the accumulation of experience through observation. However, Malthus takes this further in that for him, mind and soul are the

²⁴ Bishop William Otter (1768-1840) first made the assertion that the alluded to friend was Daniel Malthus in "Memoir of Robert Malthus." Otter was himself a longtime friend of Malthus. James, 62, has agreed with Bishop Otter's conclusion.

²⁵ Richard Price, *Essay on the Population* (London, 1780).

²⁶ For more on liberalism at Warrington, see chapter one of White.

²⁷ For more on Price, see Henri Laboucheix, *Richard Price: theoricien de la Revolution americaine: le philosophe et le sociologue, le pamphletaire et l'orateur* (Montreal: Didier, 1970) and *Richard Price as Moral Philosopher and Political Theorist* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation & The Taylor Institution, 1982).

²⁸ Malthus, *Essay*, 247. For more on Malthus's theodicy and the central importance of the mind, see Edmund N. Santurri, "Theodicy and Social Policy in Malthus' Thought," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 43, no. 2 (1982): 315-30; John M. Pullen, "Malthus' Theological Ideas and Their Influence on His Principle of Population," *History of Political Economy* 13, no. 1 (1981): 39-54; and Dan L. LeMahieu, "Malthus and the Theology of Scarcity," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 40, no. 3 (1979): 467-74.

²⁹ Malthus, *Essay*, 353-4.

same. The accumulation of knowledge is thus also the accumulation of virtue and the pathway to God.

Malthus's understanding of Locke was heavily indebted to Abraham Tucker's (1705-1774) *The Light of Nature Pursued* (1763-1778) and its Lockean relation of the mind and evil.³⁰ Tucker's religious affiliation has been disputed since his death; based on a suppressed chapter on St. John's Gospel, Theophilus Lindsey claimed him as a Unitarian, but his daughter maintained that he was an orthodox Anglican. Regardless, *The Light of Nature* was an influential work for many in the radical community including Lindsey and William Paley. On the relationship between evil and the mind, Tucker said:

"From the nature of the mind that it was designed for action: from the nature of action that evil is a necessary inducement to excite it; and from the nature of judgment which renders the idea of hurt without actual suffering a motive urging us to avoid it, that a very little quantity of evil may suffice to set the spiritual world in motion."³¹

Tucker argued that evil is necessary to induce action and that action is necessary for the development of the mind. Malthus echoed Tucker saying, "The original sin of man, is the torpor and corruption of the chaotic matter, in which he may be said to be born."³² Through the laws of population, God has used physical evil to awaken man from this torpor. Paraphrasing Locke, Malthus says, "The endeavour to avoid pain, rather than the pursuit of pleasure, is the great stimulus to action in life."³³ He continues, "If Locke's ideas be just, and there is great reason to think that it is, evil seems to be necessary to create exertion; and exertion seems evidently necessary to create mind."³⁴ Man is driven by physical necessity to develop his body and his mind and thus develop his own soul to a more worthy state. Malthus asks how, without the prodding of exertion and intellectual curiosity, it could be hoped that "any individuals could possess the same intellectual energies, as were possessed by a Locke, a Newton, or a Shakespeare, or even by a Socrates, a Plato, an Aristotle, or a Homer."³⁵ Malthus justifies the evils of deprivation, which he sees as inevitable due to population pressure, as necessary to drive man towards exertion and thus knowledge and salvation.³⁶

Malthus also subscribed to the heterodox doctrine of Origen, annihilationism. Malthus asserted that there is no hell but rather that those minds that are "misshapen, those whose minds are not suited to a purer and happier state of existences, should perish, and be condemned to mix again with their original clay. Eternal condemnation of this kind may be

³⁰ Tucker was a wealthy gentleman and published under various pseudonyms. He used the name Edward Search for his magnum opus.

³¹ Abraham Tucker, *The Light of Nature Pursued* (Cambridge: Hilliard and Brown, 1831), II: 311-2.

³² Malthus, *Essay*, 354.

³³ *Ibid.*, 359.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 360.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 383.

³⁶ For an extended analysis of Tucker's influence on Malthus, see Anthony Michael C. Waterman, "Malthus as a Theologian: The First Essay and the Relation between Political Economy and Christian Theology," in *Malthus Past and Present*, ed. J. Dupâquier (London: Academic Press, 1983), pp. 195-209.

considered as a species of eternal punishment."³⁷ Rather than suffering eternal torment in hell, malformed souls are annihilated. The editors of the recently rediscovered and published sermons of Malthus have interpreted these sermons as complicating Malthus's annihilationism. Indeed, in Malthus's "Sermon on the text, Job 27.6," he says that those who have lived with conscious integrity will "be able to look back upon this world without remorse and to look forward to the next without terror!"³⁸ The editors take this to imply that those who have not lived with conscious integrity should face the next world with terror, possibly implying the existence of hell. This sermon was first given on November 10, 1794 and again in September of 1797 and November of 1798, so it represents the beliefs of Malthus at the time of the writing and publication of the first edition of *An Essay on the Principles of Population*. However, within the same sermon, Malthus also says that those who have lived with consciousness regarding their eternal felicity can consider the grave "as the gate to immortality."³⁹ The reward of immortality in heaven perhaps implies that the damned are not immortal. The ambiguity in this sermon is clarified by Malthus' statement in *An Essay on the Principle of Population* that annihilation could be viewed as "eternal punishment."⁴⁰ It is the eternal punishment of annihilation that strikes terror into the hearts of the damned. Malthus's clearest statement on annihilationism also comes from *An Essay on Principle of Population*, where he says, "The Supreme Being would appear to us in a very different view, if we were to consider him as pursuing the creatures that had offended him with eternal hate and torture, instead of merely condemning to their original insensibility those beings, that, by the operation of general laws, had not been formed with qualities suited to a purer state of happiness."⁴¹ Annihilationism was considered heretical by the Anglican Church in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, so Malthus's opinions on the subject again mark him as a nonconformist and a radical.

Patricia James' claims that Malthus had matured by 1798 and turned his back on his radical educators is inconsistent with the theodicy that Malthus published as the last two chapters of the first edition of *An Essay on the Principle of Population*. Malthus removed the chapters from the second and subsequent editions "in deference to the opinions of some distinguished persons in our church,"⁴² but this decision likely had more to do with protecting his career than a personal change of opinion. While references to annihilationism and original sin were expunged, Malthus continued to use Lockean epistemology and to discuss the relationship between the mind and evil in subsequent editions.⁴³ David McNally's casting of Malthus as an anti-radical can also be doubted, at least in relation to his religious beliefs. In the next section, I argue that Malthus cannot be considered a political anti-radical either.

³⁷ Malthus, *Essay*, 389-90.

³⁸ Thomas R. Malthus, "Sermon on the Text Job 27.6," in vol. 2 of *T.R. Malthus: The Unpublished Papers in the Collection of Kanto Gakuen University*, ed. John Pullen, & Trevor Hughes Parry (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997-2004), 10-1.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁴⁰ Malthus, *Essay*, 389-90.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² William Otter, "Memoirs of Robert Malthus," in *Principles of Political Economy*, 2nd ed. (London: W. Pickering, 1836), iii.

⁴³ John Pullen has argued that "Malthus did not alter his assessment of either the validity or the importance of his theological views, but that he was persuaded to omit them by other people", Pullen, 48.

Malthus and the surplus population

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels attacked Malthus as a defender of the social status quo and an enemy of the lower classes. On Malthus' population theory, Engels said,

"The implications of this line of thought are that since it is precisely the poor who are the surplus, nothing should be done for them except to make their dying of starvation as easy as possible, and to convince them that it cannot be helped and that there is no other salvation for their whole class than keeping propagation down to the absolute minimum."⁴⁴

Charles Dickens (1812-1870) placed a similarly callous Malthusian line in the mouth of Ebenezer Scrooge, who said of the poor "I help to support the establishments I have mentioned [workhouses and prisons] - they cost enough; and those who are badly off must go there." When told "Many can't go there; and many would rather die," Scrooge replied, "If they would rather die they had better do it, and decrease the surplus population."⁴⁵ Stripped of its social motivations and presented as a purely economic argument, Malthus' call to abolish the Poor Law does seem to lack compassion. However, when viewed as a part of Malthus' Lockean world view and his religious emphasis on the development of the mind, Malthus' stance on the Poor Law takes on a much more humane quality. The dependence of the lower classes generated by the poor laws stripped the lower classes of their freedom, without offering significant economic protection or natural opportunities for mental development. Drawing on the idea of a Lockean social contract, Malthus said that the poor "perform their part of the contract: but we do not, nay cannot, perform ours: and thus the poor sacrifice the valuable blessing of liberty, and receive nothing that can be called an equivalent in return."⁴⁶ Malthus did not want to abandon the poor to die, nor did he believe there were rigid economic divisions between the classes.

Malthus believed that the intellectual journey of each man towards knowledge, and thus salvation, required both physical and mental liberty. The Parish system of the English Poor Law restricted physical movement preventing both the free flow of labor to its full employment and the individual in his physical liberty. Malthus saw this as an unjust limitation of rights and said, "Any great interference with the affairs of other people, is a species of tyranny."⁴⁷ Malthus appears here to be an earnest advocate of the rights of the poor and a proponent of social reform. Malthus' early text "Crises" provides evidence that he did not want to abandon the poor but rather saw true need in the case of single mothers, the elderly and children:

"But though it is by no means to be wished that any dependent situation should be made so agreeable, as to tempt those who might otherwise support themselves in independence; yet as it is the duty of society to maintain such of its members as are absolutely unable to maintain themselves, it is certainly desirable that the assistance in this case should be given in the way that is most

⁴⁴ Engels, 437.

⁴⁵ Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*, (London: Chapman & Hall, 1843), stave 1.

⁴⁶ Malthus, *Essay*, 99.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 95.

agreeable to the persons who are to receive it. An industrious woman who is left a widow with four or five children that she has hitherto brought up decently, would often gladly accept of a much less sum, than the family would cost in the work-house, and with this assistance added to her own exertions, might in all probability succeed in keeping herself and her children from the contamination of a society that she has surely just reason to dread. And it seems peculiarly hard upon old people, who perhaps have been useful and respectable members of society, and in their day, 'have done the state some service', that as soon as they are past their work, they should be obliged to quit the village where they have always lived, the cottage to which time has attached them, the circle of their friends, their children and their grandchildren, and be forced to spend the evening of their days in noise and unquietness among strangers, and wait their last moments forlorn and separated from all they hold dear."⁴⁸

Though he did not like the Poor Law as it was written, Malthus maintained that it was a duty of the state to "maintain such of its members as are absolutely unable to maintain themselves."⁴⁹ His call to give aid "in the way that is most agreeable to the persons who are to receive it"⁵⁰ serves as a call for reform and for increased use of "outdoor relief," charitable donations that did not require the recipient move into an institution. Malthus abhorred the "indoor relief" which in many parishes required people give up their independence and move into poor houses. This indoor relief degraded the poor by stripping them of their individuality and freedom, and conflicted with Malthus' Lockean ideas of individual liberty. Far from the "shameless sycophant of the ruling classes" as Marx portrayed him,⁵¹ Malthus pled for "a mode of government, by which, the numbers in the extreme region would be lessened, and the numbers in the middle regions increased."⁵² This sounds much more like the equality of the French Revolution than perpetuation of class privilege commonly associated with Malthus.

Malthus's sermons further undermine any idea of his association with class privilege. In his "Sermon on the text of Matthew 7.12," which Malthus gave on at least nine occasions from 1789 to 1800, he says,

"Let it be considered that how wide soever the distance may appear which birth, fortune or station may have made between one person & another; however different & unequal the lots assigned; yet that these distinctions are merely accidental, that the whole race of mankind are of one stock, the workmanship of the same hands, formed with the same immortal souls, impressed with the same divine image, & alike related to God, the equal father of

⁴⁸ Malthus, "Crises," as cited in James, 53.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Karl Marx, *Theories of Surplus-Value*, (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1968), vol. 2, p. 120.

⁵² Malthus, *Essay*, 368-9.

all: and that as all men are by nature thus equal, they are alike subject to every moral obligation, & have all an equal right to the same equitable treatment."⁵³

That class difference is “accidental” and that all men are “by nature thus equal” were extremely liberal, egalitarian statements to hear from a British parson during the French Revolution. Rather than agreeing with Burke, Malthus seems much closer to Thomas Paine (1737-1809), who, citing Mosaic law in the *Rights of Man* (1791), says, “The equality of man, so far from being a modern doctrine, is the oldest upon record.”⁵⁴ Recognizing the fluctuations of fortune Malthus said, “Such is the fluctuation of human affairs, so many surprising revolutions often happen, that it is very possible that tomorrow’s Sun may find him eating the bread of affliction who has hitherto fared sumptuously every day.”⁵⁵ Although class boundaries were still rigid in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the economic realities of industrialization and increasing financial speculation could reduce members of the gentry and upper classes to penury. An employee of the East India Company, Malthus was also witness to the economic success that could propel middle class merchants and bureaucrats into the upper echelons of society.

Locke also provided the foundation for Malthus’ economic theory, though here Malthus challenged his predecessor on several issues. Both men held that money could be used both as a means of commensuration and as a claim on goods. They also agreed that capital needed to generate economic activity rather than being wasted through hoarding.⁵⁶ However, Malthus did not agree with Locke that money could be a measure of national wealth, nor with Paley that wealth could be measured in people. Rather, Malthus held that national wealth could only be measured in provisions. While the production of luxury goods produces monetary wealth through international trade, it actually hurts the laboring class. Though they benefit from honest work in creating luxury goods, “the advantage to the poor will be but temporary, as the price of provisions must necessarily rise in proportion to the prices of labour.”⁵⁷ The laborer contributes his time to production without generating any provisions thus fatiguing himself without helping to increase the stock of food. Thus, Malthus claims, “The increase of wealth of late years, has had no tendency to increase the happiness of the labouring poor.”⁵⁸ Again, the standard historiography’s condemnations of Malthus as an advocate for the land-owning classes are problematized since he seems genuinely concerned with improving the conditions of the poor as much as possible.

⁵³ Malthus, “Sermon,” II: 6.

⁵⁴ Thomas Paine, *Rights of Man: Answer to Mr. Burke’s Attack on the French Revolution* (London: J. S. Jordan, 1791), 50.

⁵⁵ Malthus, “Sermon,” II: 6.

⁵⁶ For Locke’s clearest statement on unused wealth, see John Locke, “Of Property,” in *An Essay Concerning the True Original, Extent, and End of Civil Government*, (London: Awsham Churchill, 1690), paragraph 37. For Malthus’ views on unused wealth see Malthus, *Essay*, 282-96.

⁵⁷ Malthus, *Essay* 302.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 321.

Malthus the radical Whig

David McNally has claimed that Malthus represented the main-line Whig response to radicalism. McNally proposed that the vicious rhetoric of Burke, his focus on the evils of leveling, and his call for counter-revolution proved insufficient to convince the radicals or the larger public of the shortcomings of the French Revolution and social reform in general. Malthus' epistemology "better resonated with the discursive tradition of radicalism itself"⁵⁹ and was more convincing of the impossibility of reform and the counter-productivity of the poor laws. Despite McNally's claims, Malthus's early writings show little evidence of countering radical opinions on politics or religion. Malthus was himself a member of the opposition, Foxite Whigs who supported the ideas of the French Revolution (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1. "The Hopes of the Party, prior to July 14th," James Gillray⁶⁰



McNally's dichotomy between Whigs and radicals is faulty, because many of the radicals were followers of the Whig opposition leader Charles James Fox. Fox had argued for the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts in 1790, but was defeated by the coalition of Edmund Burke and William Pitt. Fox also appealed to the dissenters in that he was a republican. Fox's association with the dissenters was a commonplace in political cartoons of the time. In the noted satirical cartoonist James Gillray's "A Birmingham Toast," (Fig. 2): Fox sits at the middle of a table with Sheridan, Joseph Priestley, and Sir Cecil Wray to his left and Horne Tooke and Theophilus Lindsey to his right. Priestley makes the toast calling for "The [King's] Head, here!" to which Fox responds, "My soul and body both, upon this toast." Another of Gillray's cartoons, "The Hopes of the Party" shows Fox as the executioner for a mad George III. Sheridan holds the King's head and Horne Tooke his legs while the materialist Priestley tells the King not to worry about his soul or an afterlife because they

⁵⁹ McNally, 427.

⁶⁰ James Gillray, "The Hopes of the Party, prior to July 14th," (London: S.W. Fores, 1791).

don't exist.⁶¹ While these cartoons are obviously exaggerations, Fox and his followers did see George III as a tyrant and advocated republicanism. For the Foxites, both the American and French revolutions represented extensions of the Glorious Revolution and models for England in promoting a more egalitarian form of government with greater freedom of religion.

Fig. 2. "A Birmingham Toast", James Gillray⁶²



Richard Price, the Aikins, Joseph Johnson, and the rest of the Unitarian dissenting community presented a remarkably united and vocal source of support for both the American and French revolutions. In 1789, Richard Price published his sermon "A Discourse on the Love of our Country" calling for social reforms in England based on the changes in France. Edmund Burke's scathing reply, *Reflections on the Revolution in France, and on the Proceedings in Certain Societies in London Relative to that Event* (1790), along with his slanderous attacks on Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797), William Godwin (1756-1836), and many other members of the group, show the ferocity of the British debate over the significance of the Revolution in France. Thomas Paine, Mary Wollstonecraft and James Mackintosh (1765-1832) were amongst the many that joined the pamphlet campaign against Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. However, Paine was eventually forced to flee to France after Joseph Johnson published his *Rights of Man* in 1791. Joseph Priestley, a former tutor at Warrington and a leading chemist of the day, was a protégé of Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790) and fled to Pennsylvania when his house in Birmingham was burned by a Tory mob in the Birmingham Riots of 1791 due to his support for the French Revolution. Malthus'

⁶¹ There has been a considerable amount of work done on cartoons in eighteenth-century Britain. For a diachronic history of British political cartoons, see Michael Wynn Jones, *The Cartoon History of Britain* (New York: Tom Stacey, 1971). On the eighteenth century more specifically, see Diana Donald, *The Age of Caricature: Satirical Prints in the Reign of George III* (New Haven: Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, 1996). On James Gillray see Draper Hill, ed., *Fashionable Contrasts: Caricatures by James Gillray* (Aylesbury: Hennessey & Ingalls, 1966). Joseph Priestley's caricatures have also been studied in Martin Fitzpatrick, "Priestley Caricatured," in *Motion toward Perfection: The Achievement of Joseph Priestley*, eds. A. Truman Schwartz and John G. McEvoy (Boston: Skinner House Books, 1990), pp. 161-218; and Marjorie Gapp, "Priestley's Nose: Caricatures from the Derek A. Davenport and Margaret A. Aydelotte Collections," in *Joseph Priestley: Radical Thinker*, ed. Mary Ellen Bowden and Lisa Rosner (Philadelphia: Chemical Heritage Foundation, 2005), pp. 17-29.

⁶² James Gillray, "A Birmingham Toast," (London: S. W. Fores, 1791).

Warrington Academy tutor, Gilbert Wakefield, was jailed and eventually died in prison after he published a text with Johnson in 1798 supporting the French Revolution.⁶³ An alliance between Malthus and Burke would represent a sharp turn against the politics of Daniel Malthus and the Unitarian community in which Robert was educated. Malthus' views on the French Revolution may thus serve as a litmus test for his political views and his social stance between the radical Unitarian dissenters and the conservative Whig followers of Burke.

David McNally quotes from *An Essay on the Principle of Population* to show that Malthus saw the French Revolution as a "fermentation of disgusting passions, of fear, cruelty, revenge, ambition, madness and folly."⁶⁴ However, Malthus does not refer specifically to the French Revolution here but rather to the Reign of Terror from 1793-1794. The distinction is that almost everyone, from Pitt and Burke to Fox and Priestley, abhorred this period when so many were sent to the guillotine. It is thus unclear from this quote what Malthus' views on the larger Revolution were. Malthus does refer specifically to the French Revolution on page two of the *Essay* saying, "Like a blazing comet, [it] seems destined either to inspire with fresh life and vigour, or to scorch up and destroy the shrinking inhabitants of the Earth."⁶⁵ However, this is also an ambivalent description. The text of the 1798 *Essay* is ultimately inconclusive in gauging Malthus' view of the French Revolution. However, we can get a better idea of Malthus's opinions on politics and the revolution from his earlier essay, "Crises." In this essay Malthus says,

"It appears to me that nothing can save the Constitution but the revival of the true Whig principles in a body of the community sufficiently numerous and powerful to snatch the object of contention from the opposing factions. In the Portland party, it is in vain to look for a revival, fettered with blue ribbands, secretaryships, and military commands: freedom of action may be as soon expected from prisoners in chains."⁶⁶

William Empson said that Malthus's "first object was, as a friend of freedom, to protest against Mr. Pitt's administration."⁶⁷ Patricia James noted that "The Duke of Portland, with Burke and Sheridan, had joined Pitt, leaving Fox and Grey to lead the true Whigs in opposition to the war and the repression and high taxation which resulted from it."⁶⁸ Robert Southey (1774-1843) placed Malthus amongst the Whigs opposing the war, deeming him unfit for the editorial board of the *Quarterly Review*, in part because he was a "peacemonger."⁶⁹ At the time that he was writing *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, Malthus was likely a follower of Charles James Fox, not a mainline whig opponent of the radicals.

⁶³ Graver, "Wakefield, Gilbert (1756–1801)," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, online ed., ed. Lawrence Goldman. Oxford: OUP. <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/28418>

⁶⁴ McNally, 435.

⁶⁵ Malthus, *Essay*, 2.

⁶⁶ Malthus, "Crises," as cited in James, 50.

⁶⁷ Originally from [William Empson], *Edinburgh Review* 44 (Jan. 1837), 479. Quoted in James, *Population Malthus*, 50.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ On Malthus' pacifism, see Orlo Williams, *Lamb's Friend the Census-Taker: Life and Letters of John Rickman* (London: University of Michigan Library, 1912), 148.

The Godwin-Malthus debate

In *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, Malthus is in part responding to William Godwin's *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*. Godwin in turn wrote *Of Population: An Enquiry Concerning the Power of Increase in the Numbers of Mankind: being an answer to Mr. Malthus's Essay on that Subject* in 1820. The relationship between these two famous authors is often portrayed as being increasingly antagonistic.⁷⁰ If the young Robert Malthus was not a protégé of Edmund Burke or even an orthodox Anglican but rather a liberal, reform-minded Whig, how did he get into such prolonged and heated debates with William Godwin, Samuel Coleridge, and Robert Southey?

Gail Bederman (2008) has shown that Malthus used the first edition of *An Essay on the Principle of Population* to satirize the sexual mores of Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin. Godwin advocated the absolute reliance on reason in guiding human behavior and believed that man could overcome his animal instincts and his faith. His idea of Pantisocracy was a society where citizens could reason and shared property and communal, as opposed to familial, love. The advocates of Pantisocracy assumed as a central premise that man can at least approach perfection through the constant development and application of reason. Malthus, drawing on his Lockean heritage, argued that man could not be perfected and that the abandonment of private property and marriage would only exacerbate man's misery. The removal of familial structures would accelerate the increase of population and the attempted removal of private property and the related motivating force of personal interest would leave each person without purpose. It was this idea of Pantisocracy that sparked the initial debate between Malthus and Godwin and the later debates with Coleridge and Southey.⁷¹

The Godwin-Malthus debate was not a continuation of the debates between the conservative Burke and the radicals but rather a debate over marriage and property. Godwin, Coleridge, and Southey had not been educated at Warrington or any of the other dissenting academies and were subsequently less committed to Lockean philosophies than Malthus.⁷² Malthus' liberal brand of dissent, which he had learned from Gilbert Wakefield, the Aikins, and the curriculum of Joseph Priestley, was increasingly challenged by the Pantisocracy of Coleridge, Southey, and Godwin in their burgeoning Romantic literature. At the same time, the commercialism and empiricism of the eighteenth-century dissenters was being challenged by Utopian societal reforms.

Conclusion

Tim Fulford, David McNally, and William Petersen have characterized Thomas Robert Malthus as a successor to Edmund Burke and his work a response to and critique of radicalism. This portrayal fits with the broader historiography of Malthus, which has, since

⁷⁰ Malthus biographer William Petersen studied what he saw as an increasingly "vituperative debate" between the two men in "The Malthus-Godwin Debate, Then and Now," *Demography* 8, no. (1971): 13-26.

⁷¹ White, 131.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 128-9.

Engels and Marx, viewed him as a social and economic conservative. However, this idea of a conservative, anti-radical Malthus relies on a simplification of the political landscape in the closing decades of the eighteenth century, and it misses key points in the biography of Malthus, his writings, and the Lockean assumptions that govern much of his writing. Malthus's formative influences, from his father through his tutors to his friends and even his publisher, were religious dissenters. These dissenters were either followers of, or at least popularly associated with Whig leader Charles James Fox. Based on Malthus's views on the French Revolution and the Pitt administration, it is reasonable to think that he would have considered himself a Foxite Whig and thus a political ally of his dissenter friends. Malthus was no more conservative religiously than he was politically. His views on hell and original sin were heterodox if not heretical, and he expunged the last two chapters of the original version of *An Essay on the Principle of Population* from all subsequent editions at the urging of figures within the Anglican Church. The Lockean philosophy that lay at the core of Malthus's education at Warrington and Jesus College remained an integral part of his political, economic, and religious philosophies as evidenced in the many editions of *An Essay on the Principle of Population* and his later writings. It is this Lockean idea of private property and the family as the motivating forces for man's struggle towards redemption, rather than any association with Burke, that drew the ire of William Godwin, Samuel Coleridge and the rest of the Pantisocrists. In short, the evidence of close examination of the first edition of *An Essay on the Principle of Population* as well as his recently published *Sermons* demonstrates that Malthus' Lockean and radical education pervades his work and situates him as opposed and not the heir to Edmund Burke. By situating Malthus away from the conservative associations with Burke and any anti-revolutionary status quo in eighteenth-century Britain, we revitalize a reading of *An Essay on the Principles of Population* as the work of a liberal Thomas Robert Malthus.