

The Promise of Disaster: Specters of Malthus in Marxist Dreams

Alex McCauley
University of Washington, USA
autopilotoffcrash@gmail.com

Abstract



This article considers Malthus in the context of Marxist criticism and ecology. While these critics see Malthus as a proponent of austerity, this essay reads *the Essay on the Principle of Population* to suggest that Malthus establishes pain, rather than pleasure, as a primary political problem, and that the ecological apocalypse he predicts is mirrored by his concern for an intellectual apocalypse that derives from pain—his own toothache. It considers also the function of the French Revolution, and hunger, in Malthusian thought.

Keywords: Malthus, Marxism, ecology, French Revolution, hunger.

Resumen

Este artículo estudia a Malthus dentro del contexto de la crítica marxista y la ecología. Mientras que los críticos de estas escuelas ven a Malthus como un defensor de la austeridad, este texto analiza el *Ensayo sobre el principio de la población* con el objetivo de sugerir que Malthus establece el dolor, en vez del placer, como un problema político primario, y que el apocalipsis ecológico que predice se refleja en su preocupación por un apocalipsis intelectual que deriva del dolor—su propio dolor de muelas. También se reflexiona la función de la Revolución Francesa y del hambre en el pensamiento malthusiano.

Palabras clave: Malthus, marxismo, ecología, Revolución Francesa, hambre.

The Ghost of Malthus

No one, it seems, wants to be Malthusian. The strangeness of this aversion is that the horrific visions of Thomas Malthus in the *Essay on the Principle of Population* are still the same visions we see today. When disaster comes, it is the destitute, and especially poor women, who will suffer first. When the food runs out, it is the poor who will starve first. When the waters rise, it is the people of the global south, those who bear least responsibility for our ecological crises, who will be drowned while the rich escape, at least temporarily, to higher ground. But Malthus remains the whipping boy of political critique not because he foresaw that the poor would bear the brunt of resource scarcity, but for naturalizing the unequal distribution of both wealth and suffering. In our historical moment, the ghost of Malthus appears as the

animating spirit that defends catastrophic climate change, hatred for the poor, austerity regimes, and systematic racism. Fair enough.

Our narrative of decline and depopulation is different in its focus on the exhaustion and despoliation of the earth, but it still appears as Malthusian in essence. It is standard for works of ecocriticism, and political critiques of climate change, to begin with a catalogue of ecological horrors—melting glaciers, permafrost, and ice shelves; ocean acidification; the loss of arable land due to rising sea levels, higher temperatures, and exhausted water tables; and mass extinction. What is noteworthy about these catalogues of disaster is their predictability, if not in the short term then in the long term. On this issue, Rob Nixon famously argues that we need to turn from spectacular violent events to “engage a different kind of violence, a violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales” (2). Nixon is concerned particularly with the problem of representing that which takes place over an extended period of time. To some degree, and in spite of the vast differences between the two, Malthus makes a similar argument in his *Principle of Population*. When we turn from the distractions of the everyday and regular political functions, we find a general law that finds in the present the seeds of a disaster: population grows geometrically; food production, arithmetically. In this sense, Malthus too is speaking of a kind of slow violence, and the predictability built into his account is what obscures its apocalyptic qualities.

The trouble with Malthus is that many of his errors are obvious, and that the core predictions in his *Essay on the Principle of Population* failed to come to fruition. He is wrong, both empirically and historically. The point is made simply by eco-socialists Ian Angus and Simon Butler who write that “the demographic transition directly contradicts Malthus. He said the birth rate would go up if the poor had enough to eat—in fact it has fallen fastest and farthest in rich countries” (211). Likewise, Anne Hendrixson writes in *Jacobin* that “Malthus’s forecast was inaccurate, failing to anticipate technological innovation or the demographic transition to lower birth rates. But it did influence generations of environmental thinkers” (Hendrixson). Malthus could not have imagined birth control, or advances in agricultural science and production, or the advances that allow food to be transported with speed around the world. Hendrixson’s account is useful and representative. The first consensus surrounding Malthus, that he is simply wrong, gives way to the second consensus, that he still haunts our thinking—or at least haunts the ideologies of our enemies. For well over a hundred years, there has been a sense of frustration that the Reverend Malthus fails to disappear once he is proven wrong. The nineteenth-century anarchist Peter Kropotkin opens *Mutual Aid*, his investigation of cooperation as an evolutionary and political force, with his critique of Darwin and the struggle for existence. He contends that what Darwin introduces as largely a metaphorical concept is taken literally and exclusively as the engine of evolution. Nevertheless, “amidst data disproving the narrow Malthusian conception of struggle, the old Malthusian leaven reappeared” (2-3). Malthus transforms briefly

from a specter haunting ecological and demographic thought to a biological agent who contaminates the bake while at the same time giving it substance. Without Malthus, we would all be stuck eating flatbread. That Malthus fails to disappear once proven wrong is part of his mystery, and many accounts agree that where Malthus is most wrong is also where he is most powerful. Andreas Malm, in *Fossil Capitalism*, notes that while the rise of fossil fuels is what ruined the prophecies of Malthus, his ideas—along with those of David Ricardo—are what defined the energy paradigm of fossil capitalism: “Coal resolved a crisis of overpopulation” (23). Jason Moore takes after Malm in *Capitalism in the Web of Life*, lamenting that the separation of capitalism from ecology and politics from nature “has allowed for all manner of neo-Malthusian tendencies—as in the ‘fossil capitalism’ argument—to creep into left ecology. They are neo-Malthusian because they reproduce Malthus’s original error, which was less about population than it was about taking the dynamics of nature out of history. In this scheme, limits are external—rather than co-produced” (43). Part of the problem here is that Malthus does not disappear when his name is turned into an insult. Taxonomy, as it turns out, is a weak substitute for critique. Whether or not it is fair, Moore’s critique of Malm is clear, and echoes that of Kropotkin—the specter of Malthus returns even when cast out; the demon is exorcised, roams around looking for a home, and returns in even greater strength than before.

This essay takes up Malthus not so much among his inheritors as among his detractors—Marxists, communists, anarchists, and suggests that what many of these critiques fail at is actually reading Malthus. In failing to read him, they repeat his errors. The ghost of the reverend hovers over their books, summoned here and there as a spectral presence. No one wants to be Malthusian, but in many respects we already are—and in the wrong ways. Responses to ecological crises, inequality, and scarcity often contain a level of optimism about human reason: what we are dealing with are material, factual problems—real problems with real answers that can be obtained through careful research and thought. That a crisis is empirically demonstrable, and inevitable, is the first step on the road to mitigation. The earth has limits and these limits will finally act as the obstacle that brings an end to capitalism. Like Malthus, we insist on the certainty of catastrophes that unfold over a long period of time. Marxists are tempted to find an end of capitalism either in predictable decline or rapid expansion and, rejecting Malthusian panic over population, repeat the flaws of his logic in other domains. But there is no Malthusian end to capitalism, and to insist otherwise is to misunderstand the nature of Malthus’s thinking. The principle of population is not that demography leads to catastrophic collapse, it is that natural law uses catastrophe to maintain balance. Crises arise as part of the regular state of affairs, rather than in opposition to them. Misery persists throughout. Nevertheless, Malthus offers a useful example for finding an end to capitalism outside of slow, predictable decline. Political salvation does not arrive on a wave of ecological disaster, but resides in the potential of a monstrous collective.

Toothaches and Sadists

For critics of capitalism, there are commonplace reasons for looking optimistically at climate change and impending ecological disasters. The first is that any reasonable solution to climate change, by necessity, is a correction to the disasters and injustices of capitalism. Our ecological problems will be solved, if at all, by a political transformation. In “Greening Malthus,” Anne Hendrixson comments that “Rather than seeking to reduce population size, we must struggle to go beyond capitalism. It is unconscionable to call for a decrease in birth rates rather than an end to an economic system based on the maldistribution of wealth between the Global North and the Global South, to leave undisturbed the fossil-fuel industry that powers unsustainable growth while finger-wagging at women in impoverished countries” (Hendrixson). Finding ecological solutions in political transformation is not confined to debates of population, demography, and scarcity. For instance, Ashley Dawson writes in *Extinction: A Radical History*, “we must transform the root conditions of the climate crisis: the unsustainable capitalist system that is driving the sixth extinction” (94). While these and other accounts are fully aware of the scale of the problem, they point to a future in which ecological disaster looms so large that it necessitates political transformation. Climate solutions and political solutions coincide. Against these hopes are the historical examples raised by Amitav Ghosh in *The Great Derangement*. He muses, in regards to imperial history, “the fact that some of the key technologies of the carbon economy were first adopted in England, the world’s leading colonial power, *may actually have retarded the onset of the climate crisis*” (110). Similarly, in considering China’s one-child policy, he notes that “Draconian and repressive as this policy undoubtedly was, from the reversed perspective of the Anthropocene it may one day be claimed as a mitigatory measure of great significance” (113). The disturbing possibility presented here is that models of successful intervention in climate change were the accidental effects of repressive governments. The fabled end of capitalism does not guarantee the end of tyranny, or fascism, or inequality.

The critics of pleasure and priests of austerity are found not only among the reactionaries and sycophants of capital, but in the papers of conservationists and at the assemblies of political radicals. Either the rich are profligate playboys wasting money on luxuries and perverted pleasures, letting the poor starve and drown on an earth that the rich have destroyed, or it is the poor who are to be blamed for their lack of self-control, not merely in the bedroom but at the bar and grocery store, buying oysters and shoes and houses they cannot afford. In the realm of politics, pleasure and desire are always under suspicion. Timothy Morton writes in *The Ecological Thought* against the attraction of austerity for environmentalism: “Beyond the disturbing racism of the ‘population debate,’ what bothers me is that the language of limits edits questions of pleasure and enjoyment out of the ecological pleasures. Marx’s criticism of capitalism wasn’t so much that it’s overrun with evil pleasures [...] but that it is nowhere near enjoyable enough” (37). Here we might

think of the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, and Marx's peculiar fantasy of money going out drinking and dancing on our behalf. But Morton also suggests that material limits entail limits to pleasure. There is an argument to be made, and it is a familiar one, that Malthus too is suspicious of pleasure. In this scheme of things, pleasure is the basis of inequality through a long progression from the imperatives of sex, desire, and reproduction to the passion between the sexes, to the imbalance between resources and population. Pleasure appears as the basis of pain and inequality.

But this seems to me to be a fundamental misreading of Malthus, who wrote his essay on population in response to the denial of the body that he found in the political theories of William Godwin. Towards the end of his *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, Godwin proposes abolishing marriage in order to end both a malicious form of property and "the most odious of all monopolies" (453). Considering objections to this abolition, Godwin compares sex to eating and drinking, activities performed "not from the love of pleasure, but because eating and drinking are essential to our healthful existence. Reasonable men then will propagate their species, not because a certain sensible pleasure is annexed to this action, but because it is right the species should be propagated" (454). For Malthus, however, marriage stands in not for property but for the pleasures of sex. Godwin makes the human too intellectual, a disembodied spirit rather than a body animated by corporeal desires and drives. Malthus comments that, "To strip sensual pleasures of all their adjuncts, in order to prove their inferiority, is to deprive a magnet of some of its most essential causes of attraction, and then to say that it is weak and inefficient" (148). Godwin's error, for Malthus, is that he underestimates the power of pleasure and desire, and that his utopian world is only possible if the pleasures of the flesh are either tightly regulated or entirely eliminated. Malthus comments that he has "very frequently taken up a book and almost as frequently gone to sleep over it, but when I pass an evening with a gay party, or a pretty woman, I feel alive, and in spirits, and truly enjoy my existence" (166). Malthus's point is not simply that reasonable readers abandon intellectual pursuits for enjoyment, but that they are right to do so. Pleasure is the fly in the ointment for Godwin, who believes in the perfectibility of humanity and the possibility of social equality—if only we'd give up on pleasure and be reasonable! Conversely, pain is the true obstruction in political theory for Malthus, who believes that neither perfection nor equality are possible. When Malthus is the whipping boy, so is pleasure.

Pleasure functions as a drive at the core of politics, and pain as a limit. When Godwin considers moral and physical causes, it is primarily in order to negate their influence. He writes in the *Enquiry*: "'Indigestion,' we are told, 'perhaps a fit of the tooth-ache, renders a man incapable of strong thinking and spirited exertion'" (33). Godwin intends this as a joke—the toothache is forgotten when good news arrives. The toothache is useful, however, inasmuch as it leads to the question of whether reason, cognition, or politics offer the capacity to overcome material conditions or produce solutions to ecological problems. "I happen," writes Malthus, "to have a very

bad fit of the toothache at the time I am writing this” (152). While he sometimes forgets about the pain while writing, the pain remains in spite of his forgetfulness, until it threatens to destroy his ability to form vivid arguments. The mind may have the power of distraction, but not of overcoming pain. The disagreement over toothaches illuminates a disagreement both over the influence of climate on the mind and the ability to scale up from particular examples. Godwin continues that “In reality, the atmosphere, instead of considerably affecting the mass of mankind, affects in an eminent degree only a small part of that mass. The majority are either above or below it; are either too gross to feel strongly these minute variations, or too busy to be at leisure to attend to them” (34). For Godwin, toothaches and weather patterns are examples of the same thing—common phenomena that, in their common occurrence, are easily overcome by the mind. For Malthus, the ability to overcome aches and pains do not “tend to prove that activity of mind will enable a man to disregard a high fever, the smallpox, or the plague” (151). Pain might be ignored, but only certain types, and only for so long. The mind is only so efficacious, it has natural limits, and there are particular pathologies that it cannot overcome.

The relationship that Malthus establishes between body and mind parallels the one he establishes between the resources of a nation and its politics. The mind’s inability to overcome the body mirrors the failure of the state to overcome scarcity, exhaustion, or natural decline. This can be seen, for instance, in his note that “Famine seems to be the last, the most dreadful resource of nature” (118). Famine arrives as a natural event, a testament to the continuing power of the species to propagate itself. Ian Angus and Simon Butler argue that the force of Malthus stems not from his catalog of facts and details, but that “his most important contribution to capitalist ideology [...] was to replace a moral argument against social change with a natural law argument, that human problems are caused by biology, by the laws of nature” (209). The secret of Malthus is one not so much of invention as substitution, and his natural laws are what allow, for instance, the British Empire to look past the millions of hungry dead in India during the nineteenth century. This connection is direct: from 1805 until 1834, Malthus was a professor of political economy at the East India College at Haileybury, where servants of the East India Company trained before their departure (Flew 14.) Malthus died three years before Victoria took the throne, but he appears in Mike Davis’s *Late Victorian Holocausts* in the context of imperial India. Lord Lytton, Viceroy of India late in the century, insisted during famine that there be no interference with the market or the price of wheat, and threw the most expensive dinner party in history, in honor of Victoria, while thousands of Indians were starving to death. Davis writes, “Lytton, to be fair, probably believed that he was in any case balancing budgets against lives that were already doomed or devalued of any civilized humane quality. The grim doctrines of Thomas Malthus [...] still held great sway over the white rajahs” (32). Upamanyu Mukherjee, in *Natural Disasters and Victorian Empire*, similarly summons Malthus in reference to the famines in India. What emerges from the Victorian famine debates is the idea “that governments should not respond with any welfarist measures to ease the distress

of the famine-struck population, since this would be an *unnatural* interference against the *natural* laws of the market. If we recall for a moment Kipling's Malthusian representation of famine as a manifestation of nature's law against human excesses, we may note the conflation of market and nature in Victorian ideology" (32). Godwin's solution to the atmosphere is to negate it—the weather has no bearing on the political. While Malthus may not have imagined ecological apocalypse, it is in his work that political disaster becomes natural disaster—a limit that cannot be overcome.

In the disastrous famines described by Davis and Mukherjee, what's good for the market is good for British merchants, who, if they do not profit directly from the dead, profit from allowing them to die. These works bring to bear an oddity of Malthus's argument. For Malthus, the human animal is basically sluggish, unmotivated to move or work or act except from the incentives of hunger or pleasure. The ideology of Malthus is not opposed to interference, only to certain types and from certain sources. His ideology may conflate market and nature, but it nevertheless puts them totally at odds with each other. What is good for the market is bad for the merchants—the market must be left to its own rhythms while the merchants, as individuals, need the interference of hunger or pleasure in order to work.

But while Malthusian ideology may conflate markets with nature, it does not similarly conflate nature with the political, particularly the politics of empire. As these histories demonstrate, famine occurs not when markets are left to themselves, but when markets are both protected and distorted by empire. There may be plenty in India, but it is spirited away to Europe by trains and ships while those who grow the crops starve to death. Famine is an issue of distribution rather than quantity, and distribution is a function of institutions, the formal and informal laws that regulate and protect property. This is not a Malthusian point of view. He writes, "though human institutions appear to be the obvious and obtrusive causes of much mischief to mankind, yet in reality they are light and superficial, they are mere feathers that float on the surface" (133). Here again he is writing in opposition to Godwin, who locates the ills and evils of society in political institutions and property rights. Malthus finds this view to be far too optimistic—if Godwin is right, then all evil might be purged from the earth by purging or reforming the institutions. But for Malthus, divergent political regimes still encounter the same material limits—both in the soil and in demographics. Civil liberty, he says in the context of North America, may contribute to the happiness of the population, but "even civil liberty, all powerful as it is, will not create fresh land" (197). The mistake, as he sees it, is to attribute the wealth of a nation to its political structure rather than to the fertility of the land. If civil liberty cannot produce fertile land, political incompetence and corruption also fail to limit the natural fecundity of a given territory and, more specifically, the fecundity of the conquered. "No settlement," he writes, "could well have been worse managed than those of Spain in Mexico, Peru, and Quito [...]. Yet under all these difficulties, the colonies made a quick progress in population" (104). The problem

that emerges is that political liberty, what we might call democracy, is divorced from material and ecological conditions. Liberty might be good for the people, but this is separate from its utility, at least its utility in regards to the productions of the earth.

Malthus brings up bodily pain and pleasure in order to show that such examples cannot scale infinitely. The mind is obstructed by the material limit of the body in the way that the political is hemmed in by the material limits of the earth. But by placing these two accounts side by side, the sadistic core of both Malthusian ideology and capitalism becomes clear. This is not in the primary sense of the sadist who takes pleasure from the pain of others, although Rousseau was well aware of this phenomenon in the realm of commerce, writing in his *Discourse on Inequality* that “The rich, for their part, had hardly learned the pleasure of dominating before they disdained all other pleasures” (120). Malthus seems to take no pleasure in imagining the hunger and illness of the destitute, and seems to have no libidinal investments in naturalizing inequality. But he does reflect the ideologies of Sade’s libertines in his inability to find a positive social function in pleasure. While his own pain might be scaled into the hunger and destitution of the masses, pleasure on a wide scale leads to demographic disaster. Political economy turns pleasure into a scarce commodity that is, or at least should be, a commodity restricted to the wealthy. Sade’s libertines similarly defend their abuses of the poor by insisting, as the Comte de Bressac does in *Justine*, that “Nature does not place in our hands the means to disrupt her economy” (62). This is the strange outcome of Malthusian thought. He places the drive to pleasure at the core of his thinking in order to demonstrate its inefficacy. Enjoy what you want, have your little pleasures, but in doing so you do nothing to threaten the inequality built into the balance of nature and political economy.

The Baboon and the Revolution

Political institutions fail to revitalize the earth, but this does not mean that what is dead or exhausted remains that way. There may be no reason to preserve the earth from its natural decay, but this derives from Malthus’ insistence that the earth will revitalize itself. Exhaustion is not the beginning of unending stasis, but part of a cycle of death and regrowth. The power of the earth cannot be checked, and natural disasters—he speaks of volcanoes and earthquakes—do little to stop the growth of a population. This is in many ways a vitalist account of the earth. While it is easy to think of vitalism as an ecstatic affirmation of life, it is just as easily incorporated into the Sadist libertine’s defense of murder and cruelty. The Comte de Bressac, considering the murder of his aunt, argues that “Whatever we destroy replenishes its powers, renews its energy, but no act of destruction weakens it, none works contrary to it” (61). The affirmation of life turns into indifference to death. What is of use here in Malthus, however, is attending to the moments when his vitalism drifts from the earth into politics. Malthus opens his *Essay* with reference to his contemporaries, who feel that the earth is passing through a momentous

period and look, as an example, towards “that tremendous phenomenon in the political horizon, the French revolution, which, like a blazing comet, seems destined either to inspire with fresh life and vigour, or to scorch up and destroy the shrinking inhabitants of the earth” (67). There is a sense of exaggeration and bombast here, designed to position Malthus between two groups: advocates for the present order of things, and speculative philosophers, each of which fails to properly examine the problem at hand. And, from one point of view, the rest of the first chapter is devoted to demonstrating that, rather than living in momentous times, Malthus and his contemporaries live within another natural cycle of population growth followed by inevitable decline, which will be followed again by population growth. Nevertheless, Malthus raises the possibility here of a political event that results in massive and uncertain ecological change, a political event that can alter material limits. The revolution offers apocalyptic fire, on the one hand, and the breath of life on the other. The mask that is as light as a feather may still need to be removed to bring new life to the earth.

While Malthus tries to distance himself from advocates of the present order, his critics have placed him squarely among them. Jason Moore writes, “Marx did not like to write about scarcity. Malthus ruined the question for him” (92). Perhaps so, but Marx did read Malthus, including his *Principles of Political Economy*, and at least enjoyed writing new attacks on the reverend. In the *Grundrisse*, he describes Malthus as a baboon who, in developing a theory of value, “senses the contradictions, but falls flat when he himself tries to develop them” (353). In the first volume of *Capital*, his direct critiques of Malthus are primarily located in the footnotes. These critiques are multiple, and echo what he writes elsewhere in the *Grundrisse*. The essay on population is, in his judgment, “a schoolboyish, superficial plagiarism [...] declaimed in the manner of a sermon, but not containing a single original proposition of Malthus himself” (766fn). The reverend is after all a theologian whose work is a series of excerpts from James Steuart, Robert Wallace, and Joseph Townsend, among others. But Marx, like the Marxists, also accuses Malthus of disguising history as nature. Marx writes, “It was of course far more convenient, and much more in conformity of the ruling classes, whom Malthus idolized like a true priest, to explain this ‘over-population’ by the eternal laws of nature, rather than the merely historical laws of the nature of capitalist production” (666fn). In this formulation, Marx’s baboon is above all a flunky, who can do nothing except defend and explain the present order by repeating the ideologies he is given.

In Marx’s view, Malthus recognizes an important problem of political economy but fails to understand either its cause or its solution. This major disagreement masks what the two shared in both method and materialism. Marx complains that Malthus has no sources for his arguments, and this is repeated by Thomas Piketty in his introduction to *Capital in the Twenty-first Century*. But in doing so, Piketty lumps the two together in their methodologies and use of statistics, saying, “Malthus, Ricardo, Marx, and many others had been talking about inequalities for decades without citing any sources whatsoever” (16). Sources

primarily means, for Piketty, tables of numbers. He describes Marx's use of statistics as impressionistic, failing to draw connections between the numbers and his conclusions. If the story here is of initial failure, and of a slow progression towards empiricism, there is little that is interesting about the account. We might rather ask how numbers fit in with the broader concerns of both Marx and Malthus and, particularly, to their forms of materialism. Marx's commitment to materialism does not entail simple insistence that matter is matter and there is nothing beyond it. Malthus sees an occult homology between the body and the earth. "The resurrection of a spiritual body from a natural body," he writes, "does not appear in itself a more wonderful instance of power than the germination of a blade of wheat from the grain, or of an oak from an acorn" (158). For Marx and Malthus, materialism is not the promise that everything can be discovered, but that the more one stares at matter, the more it looks like spirit. The longer that Marx insists on the material, the more occult and mysterious it becomes. Malthus may be a theologian, but his theology is of the earth rather than heaven, and of life rather than the afterlife. Godwin dreams of eternal life, and Malthus sees this as an error—the goal is new life rather than eternal life.

Malthus seems, at times, a bore—committed to dry analysis of numbers, and seeing in them one certain, looming, and horrifying future. In terms of method, however, he continually brings to attention the difficulties of arriving at certainty, the many pitfalls of reason, and the difficulties of extrapolating general laws from specific examples. From this point of view, his ambivalence regarding the French Revolution reflects a basic ambivalence about the value of the political sphere. But when critics have noted the connection between Malthus and the French Revolution, they see only the Malthus that is interested in general laws. Marx was quick to situate Malthus's ideology in the time of the French Revolution, and suggests in *Capital* that the parson's theory of population offers a palliative for conservative political interests. This is part of a scholarly tradition. For instance, in *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, Piketty's historical overview of theories of distribution, scarcity, and inequality begins with Malthus in the time of revolution. He says of Malthus, "It is no exaggeration to say that his whole account was overdetermined by his fear of revolution in France. Whenever one speaks about the distribution of wealth, politics is never very far behind" (5). In *Stuffed and Starved*, Raj Patel writes a very long footnote on Malthus, noting that his greatest achievement was one missed by his contemporaries, and it was to invent "a science, soon after the French Revolution had shown what hungry and poor people were capable of doing to the rich, around the reproductive lives of the poor. He made it possible to bind together food, sex, and death in ways that erase the roots of poverty in politics and history and root it firmly in the untamed and fecund flesh of the destitute" (329). Malthus and his ideology appears, in these accounts, as the excrescence of the time of revolution. Seeing the hungry overthrow the well-fed, he imagines a future in which the hungry finally starve to death in great numbers. Perhaps so. But while such an

account may establish what Malthus feared, it does little to establish what he saw as the mechanism of the revolution's efficacy.

Part of the answer might be the sheer numbers—the swarm-like quality of the poor. In *Multitude*, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri move from the reverend's horror to his disgust, saying that “Liberal economic theories of population control, ever since the time when Reverend Malthus tested them in his Anglican parish, have always detested the poor's disgusting proclivity to reproduce” (166). Like Patel, Hardt, and Negri locate Malthus's fear in the bodies and proliferation of the destitute. Here the issue is proliferation rather than pleasure, not the drive that perpetuates sex but the population that results from it. But what Malthus expresses in the *Essay on the Principle of Population* about the revolution is something significantly different. The events in France appear in a chapter on the ‘perfectibility of man,’ in which Malthus compares humans to plants, and introduces the figure of the florist, who breeds without knowing exactly what he will achieve, and risks the symmetry of the plant in trying to breed for certain qualities. This is also what he sees when he looks across the channel: “the forcing manure used to bring about the French Revolution, and to give a greater freedom and energy to the human mind, has burst the calyx of humanity, the restraining bonds of all society; and, however large the separate petals have grown, however strongly, or even beautifully, a few of them have been marked, the whole is at present a loose, deformed, disjointed mass, without union, symmetry, or harmony of colouring” (171). The monstrosity of the revolution is not merely that it lacks intelligible form, but that it is a quality pushed to an extreme, an unbalanced agent in the realm of politics. Malthus's point is not one about preserving the balance of nature. Instead, it is to create a disjunction between nature and the political: an experiment with flowers does little, but a human experiment risks mass misery before it might be corrected.

Malthus is not a revolutionary. But his fears do attest to the power of the revolution, in its monstrosity, to disjoin the political from its material constraints. Žižek writes in *Iraq: The Borrowed Kettle*, and everywhere else, that a true political act “changes the co-ordinates of the situation, and renders the unthinkable thinkable” (39). Whatever his fears of the French Revolution, Malthus sees it in this sense as a true political act, something that attests to the possibilities of politics outside of the state. Malthus is clear that the revolution, rather than restricting inquiry, frees the mind and removes perceived limits—and this is what makes it threatening. He finds possibility in the realm of politics, not in the regular and regulating life of institutions, but in their overthrow.

Conclusion

Considered as a sadist, Malthus is a fatalist who looks at political abuses, imperial cruelties, and mass suffering, and sees only nature. In this scheme, his thinking does not stop with demography, but can be scaled outwards from the human to the nonhuman. Just as there is little reason to feed a lazy surplus

population bound for death anyway, there is little reason to conserve a species on the brink of extinction if it is bound to go extinct eventually. It is at this point that his demographic arguments might coincide with millenarian prophecies of a new heaven and a new earth. An earth bound for destruction, one that will be replaced with a new earth, does not need to be preserved. But if we are in a Malthusian moment, it is because we are faced with both horrific certainty and frightening uncertainty—apocalypse on the one hand, and revolution on the other. The trouble is, this is still a Malthusian crisis—slow, predictable, visions of collapse matched with ecstatic, sadistic affirmations of life eternal. The priests of ecology, recognizing the clear and present dangers, have offered up both reason and certainty. They have promised everything—if only we will give up our profits and our pleasures! But as Žižek might say, the problem is not that there are no reasons to put an end to capitalism, it is that there are too many. The problem is not that there are no reasons to solve our ecological crises, but that there are too many. Dipesh Chakrabarty writes, “the crisis of climate change is here with us and may exist as part of this planet for much longer than capitalism” (212). And the same might apply to democracy—there are no guarantees that democracy will outlive the effects of climate change, or that the spread of democracy will slow the unraveling of the earth’s systems. A more powerful collective might curtail the endless pursuit of profit, or it might not. The multitude might decide to protect the commons against the ravages of private property, or it might not. While the historical connection between capitalism and ecological devastation is clear, this does not guarantee that the solution to the one is a solution to the other. But it is these political uncertainties, rather than the catastrophic certainties, that must be grasped. No political solution will, in our lifetimes, stop the floodwaters. This is not to repeat ecological fatalism, but to insist that inequality and cruelty are to be rejected without the certainty of solutions to climate change. Capitalism continues to absorb crisis after crisis, and shows a marked proclivity for both perpetuating and surviving slow violence. Malthus was wrong about the nature of the crisis, but what he intuited still holds: scarcity and deprivation are, in and of themselves, not threats to political economy, but what allow it to function. While Malthus was unable to find political potential for change in pleasure, he does find it in a different kind of embodiment. He knew, when he saw it, a true political event, and he knew that it did not derive from the pursuit of certainty but began in the gut. The ghost of Malthus will not depart until the hungry rise up again and eat, and eat, and eat.

Submission received 5 September 2017
March 2018

Revised version accepted 15

Works Cited

Angus, Ian and Simon Butler. *Too Many People?: Population, Immigration, and the Environmental Crisis*. Haymarket Books, 2011.

- Chakrabarty, Dipesh. "The Climate of History: Four Theses." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 35, no. 2, 2009, pp. 197-222.
- Dawson, Ashley. *Extinction: A Radical History*. OR Books, 2016.
- Davis, Mike. *Late Victorian Holocausts: El Nino Famines and the Making of the Third World*. Verso, 2001.
- Flew, Anthony. "Introduction." *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, Thomas Malthus, Penguin, 1985, pp. 7-56.
- Ghosh, Amitav. *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*. University of Chicago Press, 2016.
- Godwin, William. *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice. Political and Philosophical Writings of William Godwin*, edited by Mark Philip, William Pickering, 1993.
- Hardt, Michael and Antonio Negri. *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*. Penguin, 2004.
- Hendrixson, Anne. "Greening Malthus." *Jacobin Magazine*, 7 Jan. 2015.
- Kropotkin, Peter. *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution*. 1902. Dover, 2006.
- Malm, Andreas. *Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam Power and the Roots of Global Warming*. Verso, 2016.
- Malthus, Thomas. *An Essay on the Principle of Population*. 1798. Penguin, 1985. Print.
- Marx, Karl. *Capital Volume 1: A Critique of Political Economy*. Translated by Ben Fowkes, Penguin, 1990.
- Marx, Karl. *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*. Translated by Martin Nicolaus, Penguin, 1993.
- Moore, Jason. *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital*. Verso, 2015.
- Morton, Timothy. *The Ecological Thought*. Harvard University Press, 2010.
- Mukherjee, Upamanyu Pablo. *Natural Disasters and Victorian Empire: Famines, Fevers and Literary Cultures of South Asia*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.
- Nixon, Rob. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Harvard University Press, 2011.
- Patel, Raj. *Stuffed and Starved: The Hidden Battle for the World Food System*. Melville House, 2008.
- Piketty, Thomas. *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*. Translated by Arthur Goldhammer, Belknap, 2014.
- Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *A Discourse on Inequality*. Translated by Maurice Cranston, Penguin, 1984.
- Zizek, Slavoj. *Iraq: The Borrowed Kettle*. Verso, 2004.