

Letter from the Editor

The Durable Rev. Malthus

Which of us expects our writings to still be under discussion two hundred years from now? None, I suspect. Thomas Robert Malthus achieved that distinction with his *Essay on the Principle of Population*, published anonymously on June 7, 1798. Regardless of which side they take, critics acknowledge his primacy in the population debate. We are pleased to bring out this commemorative issue in time for the bicentennial of Malthus' seminal paper, with the hope that our publication of this collection of essays will help stimulate a reexamination of the man and his work.

The durable Rev. Malthus keeps cropping up despite repeated attempts by his detractors to put him to rest. As we go to press, the *Detroit News* has just pronounced him as "thoroughly discredited" by the economic advances of the Industrial Revolution. One wonders if the *News* editorial writers have even read the original *Essay*, which is among the most important writings of the first person in the West ever to hold a chair in political economy — economics, in present-day parlance.

Planning for this *festschrift* began over two years ago. We started with a re-reading of the *Essay* itself in the Norton Critical Edition entitled *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, edited by Philip Appleman and published in 1976. This excellent compendium contains not only the original essay, but also the important changes the author made in the edition of 1803, in which he envisioned ways to limit fertility as

an approach to the problems foreseen in 1798.

The Norton edition also presents essays on Malthus the man, on his times, and on the Utopians Godwin and Condorcet, to whom he was responding — as well as a collection of nineteenth and twentieth century commentary on Malthus and his "principle."

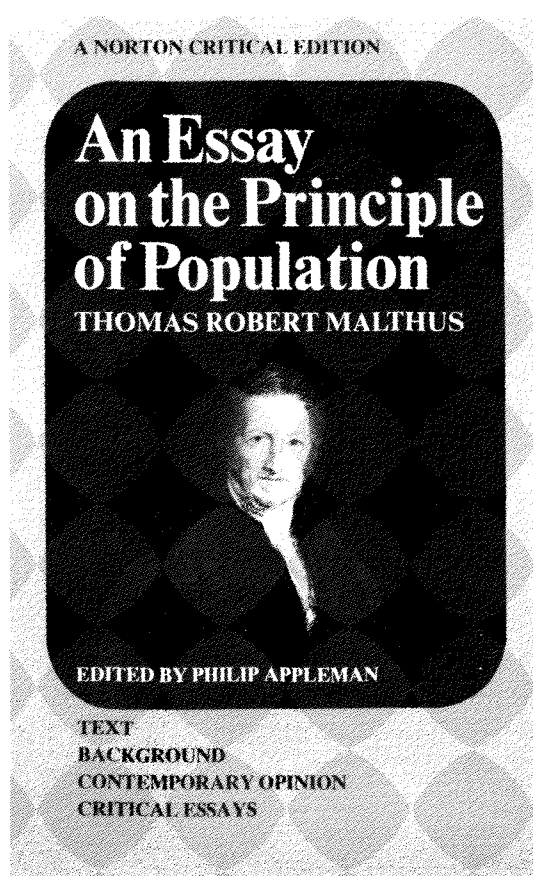
As background we supplied a copy of this book (ISBN 0-393-09202-X) to all who agreed to write for this issue of *The Social Contract*. We recommend it highly to any who wish to look seriously into the population question.

Our project became one of trying to bring the debate forward from the Norton book of 1976 to the present, and of developing a better understanding of the socio-economic climate of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. We wanted to learn where Malthus' ideas had stood the test of time, but also where he was wrong or needed updating. Ideological vindication was not our goal.

In the course of our research we came across *Progress, Poverty and Population: Re-Reading Condorcet, Godwin and Malthus* by John Avery

(Frank Cass, 1997, ISBN 0-7146-4750-0). We also highly recommend this book to those seeking to understand the circumstances of the 1790s, especially the effect of the French Revolution on British thinking, as well as the very interesting lives of Godwin, Condorcet and such associated personalities as Percy Shelley and Mary Shelley (author of *Frankenstein*).

It turns out that Malthus was something of a



polymath. As mentioned above, he held the very first economics chair established in the western world. He had a well-formed idea of limits, the forerunner of the current concept of carrying capacity. He formulated the related economic concept of marginal utility.

He was a pioneering sociologist, one of the first to undertake extensive field studies, all in preparation for subsequent editions of *On Population* — there was a total of six. Through his father he had met Rousseau as a child. He had lively debates with his contemporary, economist David Ricardo, with whom he became a fast friend. He even inspired a biological form of economics in far-off Australia, as author Sheila Newman explains.

Malthus was also a man of the cloth, though he took holy orders chiefly because this was required to become a faculty member at Cambridge, as was bachelorhood. (Times have changed!) He did have a parish appointment, which provided some income, though he left most of the preaching to others as he had a cleft palate and resultant speech defect. (He had this operated on — in the days before anesthesia!) He was by all reports a delightful conversationalist and companion.

We are particularly pleased with the quality of the articles presented here. They cover many of Malthus' attributes mentioned above. We are especially happy that the biological dimension comes in for discussion since we are devotees of Garrett Hardin (University of California at Santa Barbara) and of E. O. Wilson (Harvard), both of whom have been doing so much to highlight the role of biology in human affairs.

At the risk of slighting any of the high-caliber essays, we call your attention in particular to the article by William Paddock. Dr. Paddock's paper on the difference between tropical and temperate zone agriculture will be an eye-opener to many of us urbanites who no longer have much contact with the land or the production of food and fiber.

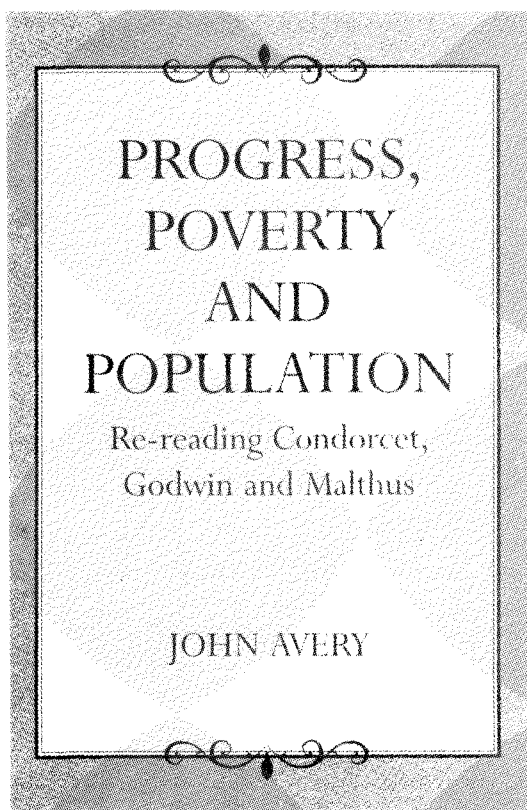
Our collection appears just as attention is coming in the lay press to the phenomenon of prolonged, voluntary, sub-replacement fertility in many of the developed countries. This development might seem to turn the Malthusian analysis on its head, but on closer inspection, his quadripartite concept of positive and preventive checks, and of misery and vice (which several of our authors explain) proves to be surprisingly applicable to the present. This new aspect of the population topic will be the subject of a future issue of *The Social Contract*.

We hope you will enjoy this collection of essays. We plan to publish it in soft cover book format under the title "Malthus Revisited" (ISBN 1-881780-21-X). This should update in a more durable format the Norton collection. We also hope this book will further the debate on the role of population in the

generation — and solution — of human problems.

We hereby proclaim the Malthus Bicentennial Year, to run from June 7, 1998 through the same date in 1999. This bicentennial concept can provide a good "hook" for a conference or symposium on population, resources, international migration and/or national unity — all related issues. Perhaps you would like to host one?

JOHN H. TANTON
Editor and Publisher



Malthus Revisited

Sustainability and the denial of limits

by John Cairns, Jr.

Abstract

In the bicentennial year of Malthus' seminal paper, human society is still debating whether the evidence of biophysical limits on population growth (which applies to other species) also applies to *Homo sapiens*. In terms of evolutionary or geological time, 200 years is a trivial span to test such a hypothesis. Human ingenuity and technology appear to invalidate Malthus' hypothesis, although the present living conditions of at least 2 billion people support Malthus' idea. However, the emerging debate on sustainable development or sustainable use of the planet has again raised questions about whether infinite growth in any species can occur on a finite planet. No other habitable planets are known and, even if they are discovered, shipping 95 million people annually to another location might exhaust Earth's resources more quickly than sustaining the population here. As many others have noted, human society is engaged in a global experiment with no "control" planet. Unlike changing from an airplane that may be in poor condition, humans do not have the option of catching another planet. This paper analyzes some of the issues raised by Malthus in a sustainability context.

What Hasn't Changed in the Last 200 Years?

(1) Human society still views complex, interactive systems in terms of special interest components (i.e., those of obvious interest

personally or to an applicable group). The failure in this view is not realizing that affecting the components affects the system, and the system affects the components and, ultimately, human society.

(2) Human society looks for single connections rather than patterns. Those who look at patterns are disregarded because the short-term uncertainty is usually higher than for simple, even limited, multiple connections.

(3) Human society rarely acknowledges the programmatic futility of single-interest, lobby- (i.e., money-) dominated politics.

(4) A touching but dangerous belief is that problems caused by technology can be solved by more

technology, rather than by changes in societal behavior.

What Has Changed in the Last 200 Years?

(1) The power of individuals, especially terrorists, to place the social order in disequilibrium has vastly increased and is becoming worse.

(2) Ecological capital (e.g., old growth forests, etc.) has decreased dramatically. The per capita decrease is even more dramatic due to increased numbers of humans.

(3) Economic and, arguably, ecological disparities for individuals have markedly increased, thus providing disincentives for the average human to work for the common good.

(4) Natural systems are highly manipulated parts of industrial society. As Holmberg and Robert (draft) state: "The industrial society can be said to be a highly manipulated part of the natural ecosystem, but its dependence on, and influence on, the natural ecosystems are determined by the same basic laws of nature that are in operation in nature itself."

A wrongdoer is often a man who has left something undone, not always someone who has done something.

— Marcus Aurelius

All man's troubles arise from the fact that we do not know what we are and do not agree on what we want to be.

— Vercors (Jean Bruller)

You Shall Know Them (1953)

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