

# ROBERT MALTHUS, ROUSSEAUIST

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**ABSTRACT.** *Although the argument of the Essay on population originated in a family disagreement between Malthus and his father Daniel, who idolized Rousseau, and the Essay itself attacks Condorcet and Godwin, both of whom drew on Rousseau's ideas about human perfectibility, Malthus's project can plausibly be seen as an extension of the social theory set out above all in Rousseau's Discourse on the origin of inequality. Malthus was animated by some of Rousseau's characteristic concerns, and he deployed recognizable versions of some of Rousseau's distinctive arguments, in particular relating to the natural sociability and natural condition of humankind, conjectural history, and political economy, especially with respect to the question of balanced growth. His arguments about 'decent pride', furthermore, that were emphasized in later editions of the Essay map neatly onto what has been called 'uninflamed amour-propre' in the Rousseau literature. When we treat the social question as a nineteenth-century question, or when we locate its origins in the post-Revolutionary political controversies of the 1790s, we risk losing sight of the way in which what was being discussed were variations on mid-eighteenth-century themes.*

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## I

The social question is the name that is given to the increasing preoccupation with the condition of the working classes over the course of the nineteenth century, which went hand in hand with anxieties about whether anything like the contemporary social, economic, and political order was sustainable over the long run. Under the capacious umbrella of the social question, one could discuss the mildest proposals for gradual reform, or apocalyptic scenarios of the destruction of the present order of things. On the level of political theory, it asked whether there could be a future for the property-based republican theories of the eighteenth century – including many of the radical arguments of the period of the French Revolution – in a world in which it seemed increasingly implausible to think that the great majority of the population might ever have substantial property of their own. To the extent to which one thought that those property-based republican theories could not cope with the new world that was coming into focus, the general idea, often enough,

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was that it was social and economic forces that were driving the transformation of the nineteenth century, and that politics would have to adjust itself to fit the new realities. What became known as Marxism is perhaps the most familiar example of this line of thinking, with its distinction between the social and economic ‘base’ and the political and ideological ‘superstructure’.<sup>1</sup>

The significance of Gareth Stedman Jones’s 2004 book *An end to poverty?* is that he inserts the politics back into the origins of the social question. On his account, there was an exciting body of modern theory available in the 1790s that political reformers might employ for the purposes of fitting their societies for the world that was being reshaped by commerce and industry. Thinkers like the renegade Englishman Thomas Paine and the radical French aristocrat the marquis de Condorcet had spotted that the new political economy associated with Adam Smith’s 1776 book, *The wealth of nations*, could be supplemented with the eighteenth-century actuarial science that had been developed out of the seventeenth-century mathematics of probability, in order to produce schemes for what we would now call social security. In particular, an emphasis fell on the provision of old age pensions, a significant social reform for a world in which most people fell into deep poverty as soon as they were no longer able to work for their living, and many died shortly afterwards.<sup>2</sup>

On Stedman Jones’s account, the blueprint for a plausible modern social democracy was available from the 1790s, but was swept away by the reactionary backlash that came in the wake of the French Revolution, a backlash in which Robert Malthus played a key role. The significance of Malthus – who explicitly targeted Condorcet in the first, 1798, edition of his *Essay on the principle of population*, alongside the English radical William Godwin, and who inserted passages critical of Paine in subsequent editions<sup>3</sup> – is that, to borrow Larry Frohman’s words, ‘both the sloth of the laboring classes (rather than their industry) and biology’s tyranny over (enlightened) self-interest entered into an unholy alliance that overturned the belief in human perfectibility’ associated with his adversaries.<sup>4</sup> In the hands of Malthus, political economy was well on the way to becoming a truly dismal science.<sup>5</sup> Stedman Jones’s political ambition in his book is to clear a space for the recovery of the radical social democracy of Condorcet and Paine, and to commend them as a model for politics to our own age.

<sup>1</sup> Karl Marx, Preface to *A contribution to the critique of political economy* (1859), in *Marx Engels collected works* (50 vols., London, 1975–2004), xxix, pp. 261ff.

<sup>2</sup> Gareth Stedman Jones, *An end to poverty? A historical debate* (London, 2004), ch. 1, Conclusion.

<sup>3</sup> See iv.6 and iv.9 of, for example, T. R. Malthus, *An essay on the principle of population* (6th edn, London, 1826), II, pp. 318–27, 357–60.

<sup>4</sup> Larry Frohman, review of Stedman Jones, *An end to poverty?*, *H-German, H-Net Reviews* (June 2008), [www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=14641](http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=14641) (accessed 31 Aug. 2017).

<sup>5</sup> But on this label, cf. David M. Levy, *How the dismal science got its name* (Ann Arbor, MI, 2001).

This article calls into question an aspect of the grand narrative with which Stedman Jones is working. Although it is not a straightforward instantiation of the Whig interpretation of history – that is to say, of history as a narrative of progress culminating in the present<sup>6</sup> – since it concerns itself above all with a road not taken, Stedman Jones’s narrative is, like Whig narratives, very much one of – crudely – heroes and villains. Here, I complicate Malthus’s identification as a villain, with particular reference to the shadow of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who had been dead twenty years by the time the *Essay on the principle of population* first appeared, a shadow which hangs over the entire debate between Malthus and those he was criticizing. When we put Rousseau back into the picture, we get a strikingly coherent story about the theoretical origins of the social question, such that to a very considerable extent some of these debates of the early nineteenth century come to look like not much more than a set of variations on a Rousseauist theme, or a teasing-out of ideas that Rousseau had first articulated in, especially, the mid-1750s.

The *Essay on population* is often presented in the scholarly literature as an argument against the followers of Rousseau. ‘The following Essay owes its origin to a conversation with a friend’ is how the Preface to the 1798 edition begins, and that friend was identified as Malthus’s father Daniel by William Otter in his posthumous memoir that was printed as part of the second edition of the son’s *Principles of political economy*.<sup>7</sup> Daniel Malthus was one of the most enthusiastic British Rousseauists. Indeed, after David Hume managed to bring Rousseau to England in 1766 – and exactly a week after Rousseau had sat for his famous portrait by Allan Ramsay<sup>8</sup> – the pair visited Daniel Malthus’s house in Surrey in early March, when young Robert was only a baby.<sup>9</sup> (John Maynard Keynes was the first to call Hume and Rousseau his ‘fairy godmothers’, and the label has stuck.<sup>10</sup>) Daniel was disappointed that he could not induce Rousseau to stay the night, but he remained loyal, later visiting him during his sojourn in Derbyshire and corresponding with him following his return from England to France, when he was supplying him with books to fuel a growing interest in botany.<sup>11</sup>

Although Bishop Otter’s testimony was recorded over three decades after the event it describes, it is usually considered reliable, perhaps on account of his personal acquaintance with the family: his daughter Sophia married Robert’s

<sup>6</sup> On which, see Herbert Butterfield, *The Whig interpretation of history* (London, 1931), or, more entertainingly, W. C. Sellar and R. J. Yeatman, *1066 and all that* (London, 1930).

<sup>7</sup> [T. R. Malthus], *An essay on the principle of population* (1st edn, London, 1798), p. i; Malthus, *Principles of political economy* (2nd edn, London, 1836), pp. xxxviii–xxxix.

<sup>8</sup> Allan Ramsay, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (1766), oil on canvas, NG 820, Scottish National Portrait Gallery, Edinburgh.

<sup>9</sup> See Raymond Trousson and Frédéric S. Eigeldinger, eds., *Jean-Jacques Rousseau au jour le jour* (Paris, 1998), pp. 299–300.

<sup>10</sup> J. M. Keynes, *Essays in biography* (new edn, London, 1951), p. 84.

<sup>11</sup> R. A. Leigh, ed., *Correspondance complète de Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (Geneva, 1965–98), #6013 (6 Aug. 1767), #6156 (14 Dec. 1767), #6184 (Jan. 1768), and #6218 (24 Jan. 1768).

son Henry. But even if we discount it somewhat, the next most plausible candidate to be cast in the role of Robert's conversational sparring partner is probably his cousin Jane Dalton. Alison Bashford and Joyce E. Chaplin have recently written that, 'since the famous conversation that sparked the *Essay* would take place at Albury, Surrey, where Dalton lived, it is possible that she was a participant'. She had lived in Paris before the Revolution, was (in Bashford and Chaplin's words) 'as familiar as anyone in the household with French intellectual trends', and was also (in Patricia James's words) 'devoted to Rousseau'.<sup>12</sup> And if the *Essay* originated in a disagreement that Robert Malthus had with at least one member of his family, that work also presented itself as an argument with the marquis de Condorcet and with William Godwin, who, as Donald Winch has remarked, can both 'be described as *Rousseauistes*', each attributing 'the evils of the human condition to corrupt political and economic institutions' and building on 'Rousseau's idea of man's capacity to perfect himself'.<sup>13</sup>

Rather than seeing the *Essay* as Malthus against the Rousseauists, or employing other familiar frameworks, such as Reaction *versus* the Revolution, or pessimism *versus* optimism, or dystopia *versus* Enlightenment, or perhaps the slightly less familiar one of casting the issue in terms of Mr Forester *versus* Mr Fax (two characters from Thomas Love Peacock's 1817 novel *Melincourt* whose ideas remind the reader of Malthus and Rousseau respectively),<sup>14</sup> this article presents Malthus's arguments as part of what we might call a family quarrel among some of Rousseau's theoretical descendants, and tries to bring into view the plausibly Rousseauist aspect of what he was doing.<sup>15</sup> So it is worth beginning by underscoring just how unobvious it is that Malthus is any kind of Rousseauist. The crudest version of the Malthusian argument is well known: that population tends to rise geometrically, while food production tends only to rise arithmetically, so that, with the passage of time, starvation and misery are unavoidable.<sup>16</sup> Put like that, it looks as if Malthus is the antithesis of Rousseau, who was worried – as were various other contemporary observers<sup>17</sup> – about the social and political

<sup>12</sup> Alison Bashford and Joyce E. Chaplin, *The new worlds of Thomas Robert Malthus: rereading the principle of population* (Princeton, NJ, 2016), p. 56; Patricia James, *Population Malthus: his life and times* (London, 1979), p. 78.

<sup>13</sup> Donald Winch, Carlyle Lecture #5, 'Malthus, Godwin, and Condorcet: inequality and post-economic society' (7 Nov. 1995), p. 10. Available through the St Andrews Institute of Intellectual History Donald Winch Archive: <http://arts.st-andrews.ac.uk/intellectualhistory/islandora/object/intellectual-history%3A36> (accessed 31 Aug. 2017).

<sup>14</sup> Thomas Love Peacock, *Melincourt* (3 vols., London, 1817), on which, see Robert J. Mayhew, *Malthus: the life and legacies of an untimely prophet* (Cambridge, MA, 2014), pp. 97–8.

<sup>15</sup> It is also, bracketing Godwin, who is a theorist of a post-economic condition, a debate among Smithians, but this theme is better treated in the literature, so I focus here on Rousseau.

<sup>16</sup> [Malthus], *Essay on population* (1798), p. 14.

<sup>17</sup> For extensive description of eighteenth-century French views on population, see Joseph J. Spengler, *French predecessors of Malthus: a study in eighteenth-century wage and population theory* (Durham, NC, 1942).

consequences of the crisis of rural depopulation in the France of his time, and who held that, ‘All other things equal, the Government under which the Citizens, without resort to external means, without naturalizations, without colonies, populate and multiply most is without fail the best.’<sup>18</sup>

Was Malthus thinking about Rousseau? He is certainly not mentioned in the text of the first edition of the *Essay on the principle of population*. It is not at all eccentric, however, to speculate that Malthus was familiar with Rousseau’s theoretical argument. Consider: Godwin’s *Enquiry concerning political justice*, against which he was writing, explicitly discusses some of Rousseau’s positions,<sup>19</sup> and his father, who took a keen interest in his education, was well known for his devotion to Rousseau. We know Robert was an adult living at home – with access, one can surmise, to Daniel’s books<sup>20</sup> – at the time the *Essay* was conceived in familial disagreement. And given Daniel’s enthusiasm, the temptation must have been strong to confront his sympathies for the ‘progressive’ or perfectibilist Enlightenment arguments of Condorcet and Godwin with more pessimistic strands of argument that could be spun out of the most authoritative source Robert had to hand – the works of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Nor should it be puzzling that Rousseau’s influence might go unacknowledged in Malthus’s text: an appropriation of Rousseau formed a part of the broader discourse of English Jacobinism, and it would have been awkward to cite him favourably in what was obviously an anti-Jacobin tract.<sup>21</sup> But what was it, then, that Rousseau had argued that might be relevant to what Robert Malthus had to say?

The *Discourse on the origin of inequality* is probably best known today for Rousseau’s account of the state of nature, an account which has long been associated, and only somewhat misleadingly, with the phrase, ‘the noble savage’ (though the phrase itself is not Rousseau’s, but Charles Dickens’s),<sup>22</sup> and which has persistently been understood as offering a radical alternative to Thomas Hobbes’s depiction of the natural state of humankind in the famous thirteenth chapter of his *Leviathan*.<sup>23</sup> Denis Diderot crisply articulated this view in his article for the *Encyclopédie* on ‘Hobbism’.

The philosophy of Monsieur Rousseau of Geneva is almost the inverse of that of Hobbes. The one thinks man naturally good, and the other thinks him wicked.

<sup>18</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, ‘The social contract’, III.9, in *The social contract and other later political writings*, ed. Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge, 1997), p. 105.

<sup>19</sup> William Godwin, *An enquiry concerning political justice* (2 vols., London, 1793), I, pp. 146–9, 159–61, II, pp. 436–8, 503–7. See also I, p. 360, where Godwin calls Rousseau ‘the most benevolent of all these philosophers’.

<sup>20</sup> His copy of *Emile*, for example, is now in the library of Jesus College, Cambridge. See <http://collan-newton.lib.cam.ac.uk/vwebv/holdingsInfo?bibId=740439> (accessed 31 Aug. 2017).

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, Gregory Dart, *Rousseau, Robespierre and English romanticism* (Cambridge, 1999).

<sup>22</sup> Charles Dickens, ‘The noble savage’, *Household Words* (11 June 1853), pp. 337–9, discussed in Levy, *How the dismal science got its name*, pp. 168–9.

<sup>23</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Christopher Brooke (London, 2017), ch. 13, pp. 100–5.

For the philosopher of Geneva the state of nature is a state of peace; for the philosopher of Malmesbury it is a state of war. If you follow Hobbes, you are convinced that laws and the formation of society have made men better, while if you follow Monsieur Rousseau, you believe instead that they have depraved him.<sup>24</sup>

Considered this way, then, Malthus seems to fall squarely on the Hobbesian side of the divide. The Malthusian image was dire, write Bashford and Chaplin, ‘meant to dampen any reader’s enthusiasm over the potential nobility of savagery or the lingering hope of finding a paradise among America’s original inhabitants’.<sup>25</sup> And yet, if we query the way the Hobbes–Rousseau opposition is constructed like this, a different perspective emerges in which Malthus seems to be taking the side of both Hobbes and Rousseau, against their very numerous critics.

If we scratch away at the oppositions Diderot constructs, for example, they can be made to appear overdrawn. It is true that Hobbes asserts, and that Rousseau denies, that the state of nature is a state of war. But the difference obtains in virtue of the ways in which they define the relevant keyword. For Hobbes ‘WARRE, consisteth ... in a tract of time, wherein the Will to contend by Battell is sufficiently known’, and so even if there is no actual fighting in a state of nature, a state of war obtains.<sup>26</sup> For Rousseau, by contrast, war is ‘not a relationship between one man and another, but a relationship between one State and another’, and so a state of nature cannot be a state of war, even if there is fighting all the time.<sup>27</sup> Hobbes may very well have envisaged more violence in a pure state of nature than Rousseau did, but Rousseau’s state of nature was certainly not free of violence, as his fragment on ‘The state of war’ makes clear when he considers how ‘there may be fights and murders, but never or very rarely extended enmities and wars’.<sup>28</sup>

Diderot was looking to sharpen the differences between Hobbes and Rousseau, but to other eighteenth-century eyes, they looked like partners in crime – specifically, the crime of denying the natural sociability of humankind. Both were explicit about this, Hobbes when he notoriously asserted that life in the state of nature was ‘solitary’, as well as ‘poore, nasty, brutish and short’,<sup>29</sup> and Rousseau when he claimed that he could derive all the rules of natural right ‘from the cooperation and from the combination our mind is capable of making’ between the two principles of pity and the kind of self-love he called *amour de soi-même*, ‘without it being necessary to introduce into it that of sociability’.<sup>30</sup> With natural sociability and its

<sup>24</sup> Denis Diderot, ‘Hobbisme’, article for the *Encyclopédie*, VIII (Paris, 1765), trans. in Diderot, *Political writings*, ed. John Hope Mason and Robert Wokler (Cambridge, 1992), p. 27.

<sup>25</sup> Bashford and Chaplin, *New worlds*, p. 128.

<sup>26</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 102.

<sup>27</sup> Rousseau, *The social contract*, 1.4, p. 46.

<sup>28</sup> Rousseau, ‘The state of war’, in *ibid.*, p. 166.

<sup>29</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 103.

<sup>30</sup> Rousseau, *Discourse on the origin and foundations of inequality among men*, in *The discourses and other early political writings*, ed. Gourevitch, p. 127. See also Richard Tuck, ‘Rousseau and

attendant notions such as natural law and natural rights doing less work in explaining how human communities could operate on a large scale and in a lasting manner in this Hobbist and Rousseauist optic, the artificial elements of human affairs – such as politics – correspondingly had to do more of the heavy lifting.

## II

Malthus, then, follows in this tradition of Hobbist Rousseauism. Rousseau made sceptical remarks about the men he called the ‘jurisconsults’,<sup>31</sup> and when Malthus took aim at William Godwin and Tom Paine, his charge was that they were allowing natural sociability to do more work in their political thinking than he was willing to allow. As Malthus wrote about Godwin in the first edition of the *Essay on population*, the ‘great error under which Mr Godwin labours throughout his whole work is the attributing almost all the vices and misery that are seen in civil society to human institutions’, with ‘[p]olitical regulations and the established administration of property’ the ‘fruitful sources of all evil’.<sup>32</sup> And for Paine, following in the natural law tradition of John Locke that looked back to Psalms 115:16,<sup>33</sup> God had given the earth to all men in common, and the point of his social security scheme was that those who had usurped this common inheritance of mankind by enclosing the land should pay compensation to those who had been deprived of their birthright, so that they were not thereby disadvantaged.<sup>34</sup> Malthus was himself a sceptic with regard to how much political reform could reasonably be thought to achieve – the passage about Godwin above continues with its claim that human institutions are ‘mere feathers that float on the surface, in comparison with those deeper seated causes of impurity that corrupt the springs and render turbid the whole stream of human life’, after all<sup>35</sup> – but there was much more to political management than seeking to correct the distortions to natural society that bad politics had introduced; and it was naïve to think that the progress of human perfectibility over time would work to make the problems of politics less intractable.

There are at least four further respects in which the argument of the first edition of the *Essay on population* has a distinctively Rousseauist aspect, with particular reference to the argument of the *Discourse on inequality*. One – which I shall merely note here, rather than discuss in any detail, as it is extensively

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Hobbes: the Hobbesianism of Rousseau’, in Helena Rosenblatt and Paul Schweigert, eds., *Thinking with Rousseau: from Machiavelli to Schmitt* (Cambridge, 2017), pp. 29–36.

<sup>31</sup> For the ‘jurisconsults’, see Rousseau, ‘The state of war’, p. 162.

<sup>32</sup> [Malthus], *Essay on population* (1798), pp. 176–7.

<sup>33</sup> ‘The heaven, even the heavens, are the Lord’s: but the earth hath he given to the children of men.’

<sup>34</sup> For example, Thomas Paine, *Agrarian justice* (Paris, 1797), p. 29.

<sup>35</sup> [Malthus], *Essay on population* (1798), p. 177.

treated in the scholarly literature – is the way in which both writers have been plausibly interpreted as offering heterodox theodicies, explaining the prevalence of evil in the world not with respect to an original depravity in humankind, but rather in terms of the unintended consequences of a certain pattern of human development.<sup>36</sup>

The second is to note that in decisive contrast to Adam Smith and his followers, who emphasized the power of the natural urge to better their condition, Malthus agreed with Rousseau that the natural state of the savage human being was one of torpor from which they had to be roused, he thought, by ‘the cravings of hunger or the pinchings of cold’.<sup>37</sup> This idea that the stimulus to activity was extrinsic also relates to their shared thought that demographic pressures were critical in the story of human development, illustrated by Malthus’s remark that ‘Had population and food increased in the same ratio, it is probable that man might never have emerged from the savage state’, or Rousseau’s claim that ‘[i]n proportion as Mankind spread, difficulties multiplied together with men’.<sup>38</sup> The third and the fourth parallels require more extended discussion.

The third kind of parallel concerns the kind of conjectural reasoning they deployed. Rousseau and Malthus each provided at the heart of their polemic a model to illustrate how the happiest state of human society would become miserable. Intriguingly, both writers might plausibly be thought to be starting with something that they find in Archbishop Fénelon’s *Telemachus*.<sup>39</sup> Rousseau considered that human beings were happiest at an early stage of social development, in various respects like the one Fénelon describes in *Bétique*, where there is only a simple (largely gendered) division of labour, and no foreign commerce,<sup>40</sup> and he explained how the distinctive kind of self-love he called *amour-propre* would develop in such a way so as to poison their happiness, creating the conditions for the conflict between the rich and the poor and other varieties of social inequality and domination.

*Bétique* is not, however, the only attractive sketch of social relations that Fénelon provided, and towards the end of *Telemachus* we are presented with a vision of the agrarian society that is created after Mentor (the goddess Minerva in disguise) reforms corrupt Salente (a city in the heel of the Italian boot), by resettling much of the urban population in the countryside and refocusing economic life on agricultural production. Such a society was strongly

<sup>36</sup> See, for example, Frederick Neuhouser, *Rousseau’s theodicy of self-love: evil, rationality, and the drive for recognition* (Oxford, 2008); and A. M. C. Waterman, *Revolution, economics and religion: Christian political economy, 1798–1833* (Cambridge, 1991).

<sup>37</sup> [Malthus], *Essay on population* (1798), p. 357; Rousseau, *Discourse on inequality*, pp. 142–3.

<sup>38</sup> [Malthus], *Essay on population* (1798), p. 364; Rousseau, *Discourse on inequality*, p. 162.

<sup>39</sup> For Rousseau’s admiration for Fénelon, see Bernadin de Saint-Pierre, *La vie et les ouvrages de Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, ed. Maurice Souriau (Paris, 1907), p. 108. Malthus is known to have acquired a number of Fénelon’s books in the 1790s: see Waterman, *Revolution, economics and religion*, p. 26.

<sup>40</sup> François de Fénelon, *Telemachus*, ed. Patrick Riley (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 109–14; Rousseau, *Discourse on inequality*, p. 167.



reminiscent of the utopian thought experiment Malthus asked us to engage in as part of his refutation of Godwin in chapter 10 of the *Essay*, in which '[u]nwholesome trades and manufactories do not exist', '[c]rowds no longer collect together in great and pestilent cities for purposes of court intrigue, of commerce, and vicious gratifications', '[s]imple, healthy, and rational amusements take place of drinking, gaming, and debauchery', and the 'greater part of the happy inhabitants of this terrestrial paradise live in hamlets and farmhouses scattered over the face of the country'.<sup>41</sup> Both Fénelon and Malthus agreed that such a society would have a high rate of population growth; but whereas Fénelon imagined further land being brought under cultivation to accommodate such growth, Malthus asked us to consider what happens when the population doubled every twenty-five years, and there was no more 'fresh land to turn up' – with the necessary shift to a more vegetable diet under pressure of population also resulting in insufficient quantities of manure for the soil. Godwin's virtuous utopia, in short, would turn to hell.

The mighty law of self-preservation expels all the softer and more exalted emotions of the soul. The temptations to evil are too strong for human nature to resist. The corn is plucked before it is ripe, or secreted in unfair proportions, and the whole black train of vices that belong to falsehood are immediately generated.<sup>42</sup>

The emphases of their arguments were a bit different – Malthus laid the stress on biological factors more than Rousseau, Rousseau emphasized psychological and social factors more than Malthus. A. M. C. Waterman's analysis of their arguments operates with a contrast between Rousseau's 'moral evil' and Malthus's 'natural evil', where the former is derivative from human choice;<sup>43</sup> though we might reflect that the voluntaristic elements of the narrative of the second part of the *Discourse on inequality* are not especially pronounced. The rhetoric of the famous opening passage, where Rousseau described the very first enclosure of land, suggests an alternative pathway for the history of the species, had a particular decision gone the other way. But Rousseau's point in what follows was to show that the invention of property was but one moment in a much longer developmental sequence, such that by the time the enclosure of agricultural land begins, it was already overdetermined.

The fourth kind of parallel concerns political economy, with both Rousseau and Malthus developing arguments about how in modern commercial society economic distress in the countryside fed through to the world of impoverished, insecure, and unemployed labour in the towns.<sup>44</sup> Montesquieu had

<sup>41</sup> [Malthus], *Essay on population* (1798), pp. 181–2. Cf. Fénelon, *Telemachus*, esp. pp. 165–8. The great discontinuity concerns marriage, which is an integral part of Fénelon's utopia, but not – in a concession to Godwin – of Malthus's.

<sup>42</sup> [Malthus], *Essay on population* (1798), p. 190.

<sup>43</sup> Waterman, *Revolution, economics and religion*, for example pp. 63–4.

<sup>44</sup> The exposition of Rousseau that follows is indebted to the work of the late István Hont, shaped in general by the argument of his 2009 Carlyle Lectures, posthumously published as

argued that the kind of large inegalitarian regime he described in his theory of monarchy, built around unequal property holdings and an economy oriented towards the luxury sector – with ever-changing fashions stimulating high levels of consumer demand – could be a stable, prosperous modern regime, providing civil liberty and the rule of law to its subjects.<sup>45</sup> Rousseau argued in the *Discourse on inequality* that such a regime could not possibly be stabilized, but was bound ultimately to collapse. A modern monarchy's military defence was provided by a standing army, and standing armies were expensive to maintain, leading to the imposition of heavy taxation on the bulk of the population, the agricultural class. This in turn generated two different but equally catastrophic scenarios. In Note IX, on luxury, the 'scorned farmer ... abandons his fields to go look in the Cities for the bread he should be taking from them', only to join the throng of 'Citizens turned beggars or thieves and destined someday to end their misery on the wheel or a dunghill', and the 'weak and depopulated' state 'end[s] up by being the prey of the poor Nations that succumb to the fatal temptation to invade them'.<sup>46</sup> In the alternative scenario, outlined in the closing passage of the *Discourse*, high taxes prompted 'the discouraged Cultivator to leave his field even in Peacetime, and abandon his plow to gird on the sword', but the army would turn out to be not 'the defenders of the Fatherland' but rather a vehicle for the Caesarist ambitions of 'their Country's oppressor'.<sup>47</sup>

Turning to Malthus, we repeatedly find the themes of Rousseau's presentation redeployed. These themes are not unique to Rousseau, of course. The concern with rural depopulation, especially but not only in France, was shared far more broadly, and given its most eloquent poetic expression in Oliver Goldsmith's 1770 poem, *The deserted village*. In a 1753 work by C.-J. Herbert – so nearly contemporary with the *Discourse on inequality* – we find a broadly similar contrast of the agricultural and manufacturing sectors, in which the wealth produced by the latter is 'subject to the vicissitudes of war and changing times and to the caprices of fashion, and therefore are not durable, as is agriculture'.<sup>48</sup> In light of Malthus's general preference for agricul-

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Michael Sonenscher and Béla Kapossy, eds., *Politics in commercial society: Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Adam Smith* (Cambridge, MA, 2015), and in particular by a 2011 paper, 'Luxury and the route to revolution in Rousseau's *Second discourse*'. That paper remains unpublished, but Hont can be viewed presenting its argument in March 2012 in Lausanne at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=iOniStEY02c](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iOniStEY02c) (accessed 31 Aug. 2017).

<sup>45</sup> For a view of Montesquieu along these lines, see, especially, Michael Sonenscher, *Before the deluge: public debt, inequality, and the intellectual origins of the French Revolution* (Princeton, NJ, 2007), ch. 2.

<sup>46</sup> Rousseau, *Discourse on inequality*, p. 202.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 184–5.

<sup>48</sup> These are Spengler's words in *French predecessors of Malthus*, p. 67, describing C.-J. Herbert, *Essai sur la police générale des grains, sur leurs prix & sur les effets de l'agriculture* (Berlin, 1755), for example pp. 1–2, 310, 359–61.

ture, it is sometimes remarked that he can sound quite a lot like a Physiocrat.<sup>49</sup> But the most detailed investigation of the question of whether Malthus was familiar with the works of the Physiocrats – beyond the second-hand acquaintance he had through Adam Smith’s discussions in *The wealth of nations* – has failed to turn up any evidence relating to the period relevant to the composition of the first edition of the *Essay*.<sup>50</sup> The echoes of Rousseau, however, are quite pronounced.

Consider, for example, the argument Malthus prosecutes against Adam Smith about English economic development towards the end of the 1798 *Essay*. Stedman Jones deploys this passage to illustrate a contrast. Smith was an ‘an unqualified supporter of high wages’, he writes, but here Malthus ‘chided him for confusing “the happiness of nations” with “the happiness and comfort of the lower orders of society which is the most numerous class in every nation”’.<sup>51</sup> But Malthus’s criticism here is not that the welfare of the labouring poor is being prioritized by Smith more than it ought to be, but rather the reverse. What Malthus was asking was whether Smith ‘has not stopped to take notice of those instances, where the wealth of a society may increase (according to his definition of wealth) without having any tendency to increase the comforts of the labouring part of it’.<sup>52</sup> If ‘a nation, for a course of years, was to add what it saved from its yearly revenue, to its manufacturing capital solely’,<sup>53</sup> then, although wages would rise with the demand for labour, so too would the price of food, such that working-class living standards would remain the same.<sup>54</sup> With the demand for labour rising in the manufacturing sector, there would also be a migration from countryside to town, an ‘exchange of professions’ which would be ‘very unfavourable in respect of health, one essential ingredient of happiness, besides the greater uncertainty of manufacturing labour, arising from the capricious taste of man, the accidents of war, and other causes’.<sup>55</sup> The details of the argument were not the same, to be sure – the imbalance in Rousseau’s two-sector economy was due to increases in taxation, in Malthus’s to a skewed pattern of growth – but the process set in motion, of migration from the countryside to the town leading to the diminished happiness of the urban population working precariously in an economy marked by fashionable luxury and war, was very much in the tradition of Rousseau’s argument about the trajectory of the modern state in the *Discourse on inequality*.

<sup>49</sup> See, in particular, Bernard Semmel, ‘Malthus: “Physiocracy” and the commercial system’, *Economic History Review*, new series, 17 (1965), pp. 522–35.

<sup>50</sup> See Samuel Hollander, *The economics of Thomas Robert Malthus* (Toronto, ON, 1997), pp. 403–6.

<sup>51</sup> Stedman Jones, *An end to poverty?*, p. 70.

<sup>52</sup> [Malthus], *Essay on population* (1798), pp. 303–4.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 307.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 309.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 309–10.

How, then, might the living standards of the labouring classes rise? The first edition of the *Essay on population* was not optimistic. Balanced growth across both manufacturing and agricultural sectors could raise them over the medium term. But that could not be a longer-term solution if in the end they would be pegged back by rising population, and the pressures this would place on both wages and food. Neither did Condorcet's social security scheme offer a satisfactory alternative, for if 'a class of people which maintains itself entirely by industry is necessary to every state', then the 'labour necessary to procure subsistence for an extended population will not be performed without the goad of necessity'. But social security threatened to reduce this 'spur to industry', Malthus alleged.

If an inquisition were to be established, to examine the claims of each individual, and to determine whether he had, or had not, exerted himself to the utmost, and to grant or refuse assistance accordingly, this would be little else than a repetition upon a larger scale of the English poor laws, and would be completely destructive of the true principles of liberty and equality.<sup>56</sup>

Malthus may not have been a republican in anything like the manner of Rousseau, but as a Foxite Whig he was willing to make arguments about 'the true principles of liberty and equality', which were (and are) the quintessential republican political values.

The *Essay on the principle of population* was very substantially rewritten for the second edition of 1803, when Malthus lifted the veil of anonymity and put his own name on the title page. In one significant respect, that second edition was less Rousseauist than the first. 'Let us therefore begin by setting aside all the facts, for they do not affect the question', Rousseau had declared at the start of the *Discourse on inequality*,<sup>57</sup> but for Malthus's second edition, there was much less by way of conjectural reasoning, and a lot more empirical data. Yet in this and subsequent editions Malthus was willing to offer a more positive vision of the future, exploring what the alternative checks to population might be, besides misery and vice – where 'misery' chiefly meant starvation and disease, and 'vice' included '[p]romiscuous intercourse, unnatural passions, violations of the marriage bed, and improper arts to conceal the consequences of irregular connexions'<sup>58</sup> – and the 'prudential restraint' that he theorized had a conspicuously Rousseauist dimension.

The most plausible long-term answer to reining in the growth of population lay in delaying marriage. The ideal was what he called 'moral restraint', or celibacy before (delayed) marriage.<sup>59</sup> But – as if following Rousseau's insistence on

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 149–50; see Winch, Carlyle Lecture #5, pp. 18–19.

<sup>57</sup> Rousseau, *Discourse on inequality*, p. 132.

<sup>58</sup> Malthus, *An essay on the principle of population* (2nd edn, London, 1803), p. 11.

<sup>59</sup> Malthus refused to countenance the use of contraceptive technologies, on which see David M. Levy, 'Malthusianism or Christianity: the invisibility of successful radicalism', *Historical Reflections / Réflexions Historiques*, 25 (1999), pp. 61–93. Those who came after

‘taking men as they are’<sup>60</sup> – Malthus recognized this to be an implausible aspiration; and he certainly did not share Godwin’s view (or indeed that of his wife Mary Wollstonecraft) that a healthy future was one in which people had a lot less sex than they typically had in the eighteenth century, and that a diminishing human interest in sex was part and parcel of the ongoing process of social development.<sup>61</sup> Malthus had ridiculed this belief in the first edition of the *Essay*, remarking that although he ‘cannot properly contradict’ a writer who told him that ‘he thinks man will ultimately become an ostrich’, that writer would do better in persuading ‘any reasonable person’ if he could at least show ‘that the necks of mankind have been gradually elongating, that the lips have grown harder and more prominent, that the legs and feet are daily altering their shape, and that the hair is beginning to change into stubs of feathers’.<sup>62</sup> But if moral restraint might prove to be implausible, ‘prudential restraint’ – or delayed marriage in the absence of pre-marital celibacy – was not nearly so chimerical.

Human beings needed to practise a certain kind of (non-moral, non-Christian) virtue if they were to be able to flourish in the future, but just how they were to do that on Malthus’s account that was not always entirely clear. One mechanism, however, lay in the cultivation of what he called ‘decent pride’ – something he thought in particular was missing amongst the Irish poor.<sup>63</sup>

In an attempt to better the condition of the lower classes of society, our object should be to raise this standard as high as possible, by cultivating a spirit of independence, a decent pride, and taste for cleanliness and comfort among the poor. These habits would be best inculcated by a system of general education and, when strongly fixed, would be the most powerful means of preventing their marrying with the prospect of being obliged to forfeit such advantages; and would consequently raise them nearer to the middle classes of society.<sup>64</sup>

In the third edition of 1806, a line about ‘the effect of a good government in increasing the prudential habits and personal respectability of the lower

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Malthus – such as Francis Place or John Stuart Mill – who endorsed artificial methods of birth control are usually labelled ‘neo-Malthusians’. (Condorcet had earlier hinted somewhat obliquely that artificial contraception would turn out to be the answer to the population question.) Jeremy Bentham’s response to reading Malthus was to recommend a lot more homosexual sex, so that individuals could enjoy the pleasures of sex (utility) without risking overpopulation (disutility), though he did not publish this opinion during his lifetime. (‘Vice, then, is the thing to be encouraged: Moral Restraint the thing to be discouraged.’) See Bentham, *Of sexual irregularities, and other writings on sexual morality*, ed. Philip Schofield, Catherine Pease-Watkin, and Michael Quinn (Oxford, 2014), pp. 79–83.

<sup>60</sup> Rousseau, *The social contract*, p. 41.

<sup>61</sup> On which see Winch, Carlyle Lecture #5, p. 11.

<sup>62</sup> [Malthus], *Essay on population* (1798), p. 10.

<sup>63</sup> Malthus, *Essay on population* (1803), p. 546.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 557.

classes of society' was added, with the qualification that 'certainly this effect will always be incomplete without a good system of education'.<sup>65</sup> In Niall O'Flaherty's gloss, decent pride was 'the elevated sense of self-worth that came with enjoying comfortable economic circumstances, arising in large part, we may assume, from a feeling of being esteemed by one's neighbours'.<sup>66</sup>

A 'system of general education' obviously echoed the proposals for public education in Book v of *The wealth of nations*, and, as O'Flaherty has written, an education that helped to inculcate 'habits of sobriety, industry, independence, and prudence' (Malthus's words) would 'nurture those attitudes and values that raised the standard of living below which the labourer would be unwilling to sink for the sake of having a family' (O'Flaherty's).<sup>67</sup> The concern with a certain cultural minimum also calls to mind Smith's remark about how 'a creditable day-labourer would be ashamed to appear in public without a linen shirt, the want of which would be supposed to denote that disgraceful degree of poverty which, it is presumed, nobody can well fall into without extreme bad conduct'.<sup>68</sup> So there was something obviously Smithian about this line of reasoning.

We should not, however, lose sight of its Rousseauist resonances. It is easy to miss these, insofar as the very phrase 'decent pride' was earlier deployed specifically as part of one of Edmund Burke's attacks on Rousseau. In *A letter to a member of the National Assembly* in 1791, he had written that '[w]hen the fence from the gallantry of preceptors is broken down, and your families are no longer protected by decent pride and salutary domestic prejudice, there is but one step to a frightful corruption'. The National Assembly, Burke charged, was keen that 'the females of the first families in France may become an easy prey to dancing-masters, fiddlers, pattern-drawers, friseurs, and valets-de-chambre'.

By a law they have made these people their equals. By adopting the sentiments of Rousseau they have made them your rivals. In this manner these great legislators complete their plan of levelling, and establish their rights of men on a sure foundation. I am certain that the writings of Rousseau lead directly to this kind of shameful evil.<sup>69</sup>

### III

Burke's entertaining anathemas, however, ought not obscure our view of how an argument about prudential restraint and decent pride is entirely consonant

<sup>65</sup> Malthus, *An essay on the principle of population* (3rd edn, London, 1806), II, p. 423.

<sup>66</sup> Niall O'Flaherty, 'Malthus and the "end of poverty"', in Robert J. Mayhew, ed., *New perspectives on Malthus* (Cambridge, 2016), p. 87.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 90–1.

<sup>68</sup> Adam Smith, *An inquiry into the nature and causes of the wealth of nations*, ed. R. H. Campbell and A. S. Skinner (Oxford, 1975), V.ii.k, II, p. 870.

<sup>69</sup> Edmund Burke, *A letter from Mr Burke to a member of the National Assembly* (2nd edn, London, 1791), pp. 40–1.

with the central thrust of Rousseau's argument. In the absence of a robust natural sociability, Rousseau contended, self-interest was a sufficiently powerful force that it was implausible to think that it could be transcended, such that a real altruism – or Malthusian 'moral restraint' – might take its place. Rather, the general good had to be constructed on the foundations of individual good, and individuals shaped in such a way that their pursuit of what was good for them would realize a genuinely common good, by contributing to the reproduction of the conditions that allowed for the maintenance of freedom and equality under the rule of law. What that meant, often enough, was that citizens had to learn how to restrain the immediate inclinations of self-love, such that both they and their fellow citizens would benefit in consequence. Malthusian prudential restraint has just this structure, and his 'decent pride' maps very neatly onto what Nicholas Dent has called 'uninflamed *amour-propre*' in Rousseau, or the healthy variety of self-love which characterizes a society where the rivalries between people find expression as a virtuous spiral of emulation that consolidates mutual recognition, and works continually to raise the level of the threshold for decent pride, rather than as a vicious circle of jealous competition. Public education, furthermore, is an entirely appropriate Rousseauist tool to employ for this purpose.

Where Malthus's perspective departed strikingly from Rousseau's concerned his view about the appropriate size of agricultural holdings. Even if the English model was not perfect, he thought there were political dangers with tinkering with it. What was wanted, he argued in the *Principles of political economy*, were medium-sized farms, which generated sufficient profit such that farmers had access to sufficient capital for investing in improving the land. Too many seriously rich landlords, and their spending on 'menial servants' and 'territorial influence' would check 'effectual demand'. Too many small proprietors, and 'all great improvements on the land, all great enterprizes in commerce and manufactures, and most of the wonders described by Adam Smith, as resulting from the division of labour, would be at an end'.<sup>70</sup> But although this began as an economic worry – and one that pulled in a broadly anti-Rousseauist direction, for Rousseau always defended small-scale agriculture – Malthus then presented his political anxiety, which takes us right back onto the terrain of the *Discourse on inequality* again, about how economic dynamics would come to threaten the stability of the political regime. The 'fearful experiment' of 'a great sub-division of property' was now underway in France, he wrote, where the 'law of succession' required the equal division of property 'among all the children without distinction of age or sex'.<sup>71</sup> The worry was that 'the country, at the end of a century, will be quite as remarkable for its extraordinary poverty and distress, as for its unusual equality of property',<sup>72</sup> and that 'in this state of things, with little or

<sup>70</sup> Malthus, *Principles of political economy*, pp. 375–6.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 376–7.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 377.

none of the natural influence of property to check at once the power of the crown and the violence of the people, it is not possible to conceive that such a mixed government as France has now established can be maintained'.<sup>73</sup> Agricultural small-holdings might provide a stable foundation for a small republic, but not for one established on a national scale. For both Rousseau and Malthus, then, the danger continued to be that economic distress originating in the countryside would lead to dictatorship. In Malthus's words, 'the state of property above described would be the very soil for a military despotism',<sup>74</sup> and his advice to the English was that with these concerns in mind they would do better not to abolish the law of primogeniture.<sup>75</sup>

My own view is that Malthus was a careful reader of Rousseau's *Discourse on inequality*, and that the fruit of that reading shows in the distinctive lines of his thinking outlined above. The evidence I have presented, however, is more suggestive than it is 'gray, meticulous, and patiently documentary'.<sup>76</sup> Indeed, it is the kind of argument that invites the old objection to 'influence studies',<sup>77</sup> recently satirized as one of 'All Possible Humanities Dissertations Considered as Single Tweets', that '[t]his famous thing closely resembles, and therefore responds to, that slightly earlier, less famous thing'.<sup>78</sup> Perhaps Rousseau was not nearly as significant as has been insinuated here, and that Malthus was drawing on and responding to a much broader range of texts, from the French Physiocrats to the English Whigs. Perhaps so. But even if I am wrong about the role that reading and reflecting on the *Discourse on inequality* played in the fashioning of core Malthusian arguments, both in 1798 and subsequently, the argument presented here usefully reminds us that the *Essay on population* is broadly continuous with an important family of eighteenth-century arguments. When we treat the social question as a nineteenth-century question, or even when we locate its origins in the post-Revolutionary political controversies of the 1790s, we lose sight of the way in which what was being discussed were recognizable variations on mid-eighteenth-century themes. The older argument was one about the practical difficulties, perhaps even impossibility, of maintaining constitutional government and the rule of law in the context of the social – including demographic – pathologies generated by unbalanced growth across the rural and urban sectors; and, as we have seen,

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., p. 378.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., pp. 381–2.

<sup>76</sup> Michel Foucault, 'Nietzsche, genealogy, history', in Foucault, *Language, counter-memory, practice: selected essays and interviews*, ed. D. F. Bouchard (Ithaca, NY, 1977), p. 139.

<sup>77</sup> See, for example, Quentin Skinner, 'The limits of historical explanations', *Philosophy*, 41 (1966), pp. 199–215; Quentin Skinner, 'Meaning and understanding in the history of ideas', *History and Theory*, 8 (1969), pp. 3–53.

<sup>78</sup> Stephen Burt, 'All possible humanities dissertations considered as single tweets', *The New Yorker*, 10 June 2015, [www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/all-possible-humanities-dissertations-considered-as-single-tweets](http://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/all-possible-humanities-dissertations-considered-as-single-tweets) (accessed 31 Aug. 2017).



its major elements show up in various places across Malthus's major published works.

Keith Tribe has recently observed that although the British political economists of the early nineteenth century such as Malthus, James Mill, and David Ricardo presented themselves as 'the heirs of Adam Smith', they had in fact merely 'used some of his economic categories to construct a restricted model of economic relationships which entirely wrote out of the plot any sense that an economic order presupposes a moral order, and hence requires or presupposes a plausible account of human sociability'. This was a fateful development, insofar as 'their work was seized on by a young Karl Marx and rewritten as a critique of contemporary society that, for a variety of contingent reasons, survived into the late twentieth century as the core of an economic critique of modernity'.<sup>79</sup> But on the account presented here, Malthus's anthropology owed far more to an Enlightenment science of society than it did to the distinctive nineteenth-century caricature of *homo economicus*;<sup>80</sup> and it was David Ricardo who signalled his own distance from that eighteenth-century tradition when he reviewed Malthus's gloomy forecast of French political development in the nineteenth century and wrote in the margins of his copy of the *Principles* that 'I cannot participate with Mr. Malthus in his fears for the duration of a free Government, under such a system.'<sup>81</sup>

<sup>79</sup> Keith Tribe, *The economy of the word* (Oxford, 2015), pp. 42–3.

<sup>80</sup> See, for example, John Stuart Mill, 'On the definition of political economy; and on the method of investigation proper to it' (1836), which appears in his *Essays on some unsettled questions of political economy* (1844), reprinted in Mill, *Essays on economics and society*, ed. J. M. Robson, 1 (Toronto, ON, 1967), p. 321. Those documents that arise out of Malthus's teaching – for example the so-called Inverarity MSS held at Cambridge (Marshall c. 35) or even the *Principles of political economy* – also support an 'eighteenth-century' interpretation.

<sup>81</sup> David Ricardo, 'Notes on Malthus's *Principles of political economy*', in Piero Sraffa, ed., *The works and correspondence of David Ricardo*, 11 (Cambridge, 1951), p. 387.