



Robert J. Mayhew. *Malthus: The Life and Legacies of an Untimely Prophet.* Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014. 304 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-72871-4.



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A Less Dismal Malthus

For better and worse, it is impossible to avoid the legacies of Thomas Robert Malthus's *Essay Concerning the Principle of Population*. Published in 1798, when he was just thirty-two years old, the *Essay* has long since passed into that select group of books that are invoked or paraphrased far more often than they are read, and whose ideas have infiltrated so widely and deeply that they are part of the conscious or unconscious fabric of modern thought. Robert Mayhew's *Malthus* is a brilliant exploration of the weaving of this fabric, tracing the myriad strands from Malthus's boyhood education through the *Essay* and down to the present.

Malthus is not a biography: Malthus's birth occurs only on page 53, and he dies roughly halfway through the book on page 128, with many of the pages in between devoted to other figures. Details that biographers might dwell upon, such as his marriage and three children, or his cleft palate and resulting speech impediment, receive only the briefest mention, and the last three decades of his life—from the second edition of the *Essay* in 1803 to his death in 1834—almost vanish under the waves of re-

actions unleashed by his early work. Mayhew offers the suggestive insight that Malthus was perhaps Malthus's ambivalent position in the social hierarchies of the late eighteenth century that allowed him this twofold vision (p. 53)—that is, the ability to see himself as both inside and outside the ruling class. But Mayhew declines to explain the *Essay* biographically. Instead, he focuses on the ideas that Malthus absorbed, upended, reworked and set loose upon the world in the tumultuous decades following the French Revolution, ideas which have traveled like pinballs ever since, seemingly gaining strength from the force of collisions with critics and proponents alike.

Mayhew's scope is prodigious and his touch is deft. With a keen sense of detail, he treats proto-statistical radical social reformers who inspired the *Essay* (Richard Price, Condorcet, William Godwin); romantics who reacted against it in poetry and plays (William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Robert Southey, the Shelleys, Lord Byron); Victorian-era radicals who rejected it in prose of all kinds (William Cobbett, Thomas Carlyle, John Ruskin, Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Pierre-

Joseph Proudhon, Henry George); biologists who found in it inspiration for evolutionary theory (Charles Darwin, Alfred Russel Wallace); and social critics-cum-scientists who turned evolutionary theory back onto society (Herbert Spencer, Peter Kropotkin, Thomas Henry Huxley). Mayhew also devotes a chapter to nineteenth-century political economists whose engagement with Malthus had more to do with his other writings (David Ricardo, John Stuart Mill, Alfred Marshall), and other prominent writers—Laurence Sterne, Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, George Bernard Shaw, H. G. Wells—appear more briefly along the way. All of this—the first six chapters—only gets us through the nineteenth century, moreover, when Malthus's ideas were constantly and explicitly discussed and debated, derided and defended in all quarters of the intellectual life of Britain.... [B]y the turn of the twentieth century he was being attacked in Russia, defended in the United States, and having public health leagues named after him in Brazil (p. 154).

Things get more complicated and somewhat less satisfying in the last three chapters, which trace Malthus's ideas from 1900 to the present. The narrative remains crisp and engaging, but the argument becomes somewhat diffuse. One problem is that the resurgence of Malthusian thinking in the twentieth century was rather disconnected from the actual words he wrote. The new Malthusians (for reasons he never really explains, Mayhew eschews the term neo-Malthusian) borrowed Malthus's name and apocalyptic connotations, but they drew their political and intellectual energies from other sources: eugenics, population biology, the Cold War, and environmentalism. Another problem is that, as Mayhew concedes, strong and direct connections can be drawn between [Malthus's] work and some of the most abhorrent moments in twentieth-century history (p. 181).

Perhaps the first problem mitigates the second if your concern is Malthus's legacies, which is the case for Mayhew. He contends that despite all the attention it has received, the *Essay* has never been properly understood for what it really is. In its own age and since, it has been misprisoned as conservative due to the antirevolutionary ambitions with which it was penned in 1798, but in fact the *Essay* reveals the mind of a man who had been educated in ways scornful of any simplistic binary between conservatism and radicalism (p. 74). It is not, he insists, merely a work of economics or demography; in truth, it is so much more besides, taking in as it does geography, history, environmental studies, and theology among other interests to construct an extraordinarily ambitious enlightened, clerical, bourgeois rebuttal

of radicalism, an inconvenient truth with which to diffuse the tensions of 1798 (p. 74).

Mayhew does not offer a close reading of the *Essay*, however. Instead, he notes that life expectancy in Great Britain was just forty-two years in 1751, and that the latest demographic science supports Malthus's intuition that declining age-at-marriage was accelerating population growth in his day. Above all, Mayhew summons facts from Malthus's biography and unpublished archival sources: that he was universally regarded as a kind, amiable and witty man; that his rejection of the Enlightenment's prophets of paradise stemmed from sympathetic first-hand observations of rural squalor; that he sought out empirical evidence of actual economic conditions to test his ideas; and that he modified his views over time. All of these serve to mitigate, for Mayhew, those moments in Malthus's published writings—such as the infamous passage about Nature's mighty feast in the 1803 edition of the *Essay*—where he does in fact look like the cold-hearted apologist for inequality that Marx and Henry George, among many others, accused him of being. Taken in the round, Mayhew insists, Malthus was a rational Christian and an enlightened optimist (p. 74). If his ideas had any posthumous nefarious influence—say for example in British colonial India—they should be seen to emanate from the general cultural circumstances of Victorian intellectual life ... not the specific efforts of Malthus himself (p. 174).

This is a fine line to tread, and Mayhew manages it well. He recognizes that Malthus's claims about population growth and food production in the *Essay* do not amount to a theory that can be proved right or wrong, and that taking them that way—as most have done—is a mistake. He instead observes that, even if the Malthusian analysis is wrong, it is having a great impact on world affairs and actions at present (p. 226), which is unquestionably true. He also asserts that Malthus, alone among classical political economists, stressed the importance of environmental limits—a claim which is more questionable but nonetheless worth making. Here one wonders, however, if Mayhew should have tied his book less tightly to the *Essay*. He might instead have chosen to emphasize the more obscure writings that caught the attention of John Maynard Keynes in his own biographical sketch of Malthus, published in 1933: the 1800 pamphlet entitled *An Investigation of the Cause of the Present High Price of Provisions* and, above all, Malthus's correspondence with Ricardo. In these writings, the principle of population was secondary to the issue of effective demand: that is, whether (poor) people

have the means to purchase food and other necessities in a market-dominated society. For Keynes, this insight was Malthus's lost legacy, a victim of Ricardo's ascendancy in economics as it emerged from political economy. For Mayhew, whose treatment of it is strong but buried in the middle of the book, it could have provided a more powerful way of underscoring Malthus's contemporary

relevance than the somewhat strained attempt to dub him the father of environmental economics. Nonetheless, *Malthus* is a major accomplishment, injecting rich context and important insights into debates where both are sorely needed.

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