

Malthusian Ideas and Ideals in the British Media of the 1830s and 40s

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Abstract

This paper looks at the role that newspapers played in fostering and disseminating a public conception of Malthus after his death in 1834. Examining references to Malthus in both published books and periodical reviews (The Quarterly, Edinburgh, Westminster and Blackwood's Edinburgh) reveals that Malthus' ideas played only a minor role in the formal academic debate after his death. However this same period saw an increasing public engagement with the political economy of working class life, prominently the debates surrounding the Poor Law reforms. In the changing rhetoric of the popular sphere Malthus and Malthusianism became bywords for the perceived cruelty of politicians and economists and their indifference to the suffering of the poor.

1. Malthus in the nineteenth century and beyond

Along with Adam Smith and David Ricardo, T. R. Malthus completes the trio of classical economic thinkers whose ideas and writings have been most discussed and analysed by historians of economic thought. For Smith and Ricardo this attention can be largely attributed to the significance and staying power of the concepts they introduced to the field of economics (at the time, political economy); the division of labour, the 'invisible' workings of the free market and the gains from trade, just to name a few. The key idea from Malthus' early work; that population growth had an inevitable and immiserating effect on the labouring classes, while controversial both then and today, did not impact the developing field of economics in the same way, and was simply subsumed within the Ricardian framework which succeeded as the dominant paradigm of the time. Malthus stands out for

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I would like to acknowledge the invaluable assistance of my supervisors Mary Morgan and Neil Cummins, and the comments of my fellow students and faculty at the Economic History department, LSE. All mistakes are my own.

his enduring popularity (or rather, notoriety) in spite of the limited impact of his writing on the economic theory of his time, and this incongruity itself has become a long-lived 'fact' about Malthus.

In contrast to Smith and Ricardo, the persistence of interest in Malthus might best be explained not by the long-run relevance of his theories to the field of economics, but instead by the salience of these theories in a wide range of policy debates over the last two centuries. The first of these were the debates surrounding the infamous Poor Law reforms and Corn Laws in the first half of the nineteenth century. While the role Malthus personally played in these debates was limited, and cut short by his death, his name would become inextricably tied to these controversies. Almost a century later, Malthus' name would again be revived by Keynes as part of the debate on the possibility of insufficient demand and its role in economic stagnation (Waterman, 1998). Finally the second half of the twentieth century saw renewed interest in Malthus in the fields of environmental and development economics with population growth and resource use once again becoming salient issues as many countries industrialised at an unprecedented rate. Malthus' continued presence in these and other areas of public discourse has resulted in him being one of the few economists whose name is widely recognisable by a general audience, and one of a select few to have a doctrine attached to their name.

While many scholars have commented on the almost immediate public controversy that the Population Essay created in the early nineteenth century², there little in-depth analysis of the process by which Malthus' ideas gained such public prominence. Huzel (2006) is one of the few to directly address the popularisation of Malthus during his lifetime, saying of Malthus that:

"Few would deny that from his first publication in 1798 to his death in 1834 he shaped the entire discourse on the poor and became the beacon against which all proposals for solving the growing problem of poverty in early industrial society had to be measured... The term 'Malthusian' became embedded in the language of the early nineteenth century and Malthus became one of the most controversial writers of his age." (2006, p. 1)

Huzel identified three avenues for the popularisation of Malthusian ideas before 1834; the writings of Harriet Martineau (a vocal supporter), William Cobbett (a fervent critic), as well as the role of the 'Pauper' or 'Penny Press' more broadly (usually on Cobbett's side of the debate). This paper continues this line of enquiry, but emphasises instead the role of the most widely circulated and read newspapers, rather than the more politicised Pauper Press.

Understanding how and why an unassuming clergyman would become a key figure in the policy debates of his time and of the subsequent centuries is still a relevant question for the history of economics. Increasing attention is being paid to the mechanisms driving the diffusion of economic thought, within and between nations, as well as over time. The

² For example; Bonar, Fay, & Keynes (1935), Waterman (1998), Winch (1996).

spread of economic ideas into the public sphere, including the world of policy making, is one such form of diffusion that requires further study. The two centuries since Malthus, a period that corresponds broadly to the development of economics as we know it today, are replete with examples of economic doctrines that have had enormous influence on policy and therefore the development of modern societies. These dramatic and sometimes violent social changes have been driven by both elite economic and political interests, but also by broader public sentiment and agitation. Understanding the process by which economic ideas are transmitted from the theoretical to the public sphere is therefore crucial, and Malthus is a perfect case study of such a phenomenon.

In attempting to answer these questions this paper will make use of somewhat novel bibliometric techniques in order to reveal the changing place of Malthus within the academic and popular discourse of the nineteenth century³. These methods are in no way intended to displace traditional approaches, but rather help to verify widely accepted facts about the changing nature of economic discourse over time, while raising new questions that might previously have eluded historians of economic thought. However this approach is only really useful when combined with a closer analysis of a chosen subsample of sources. The digitisation of nineteenth century newspapers and periodicals allows for both bibliometric and traditional analysis, and will thus be the approach of this paper.

2. A bibliometric analysis of nineteenth century economic discourse

2.1. The missing Malthus paradox

To get a broad idea of the changing place of Malthus in nineteenth century discourse I make use of the recently developed Google Ngram corpus; the result of an ongoing digitisation project headed by Google, involving dozens of libraries around the world. The final database contains more than 8 million books in eight languages (with over 4.5 million English books), representing 6% of all books published (Lin et al., 2012; Michel et al., 2011). Google Ngram reports the usage frequency of words (including groups of words) in published works over the last five centuries, providing a simple but powerful tool with which to study changing discourse patterns.

Before turning to the nineteenth century in particular, it is interesting to note the changing way in which Malthus has been discussed and referenced in the two centuries since his ideas were first published. Figure 1 shows us the frequency of references to Malthus in British publications as a percentage of all words in the Google corpus. Over this

³ An example of similar techniques being used in the field of intellectual history is Ravallion (2011).

period the name 'Malthus' on average made up about 0.0002% of all words published in British books, rising to around 0.0004% by the end of the twentieth century⁴.

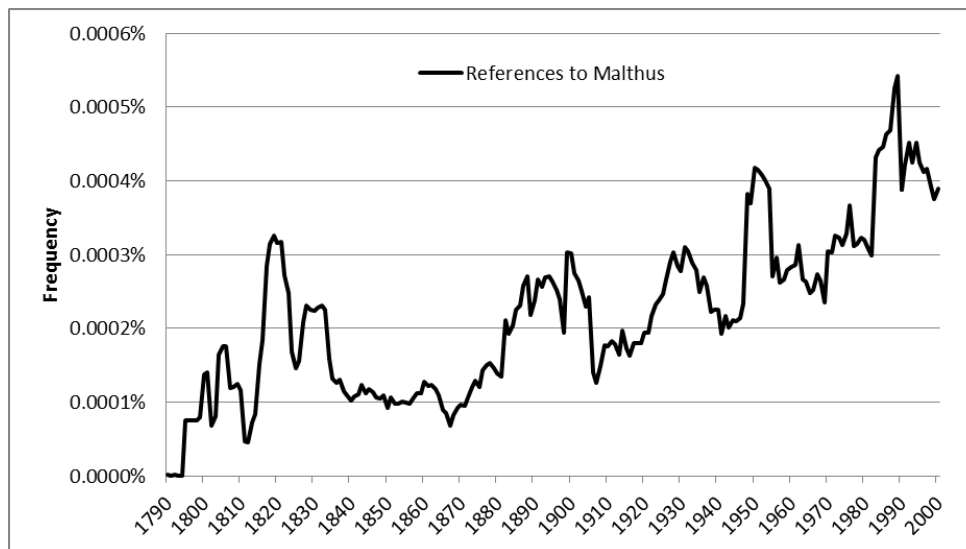


Figure 1: References to Malthus in British books, source: Google Ngram

In many ways the Ngram data fits very well with what we currently know about the dissemination of Malthusian thought over the last two centuries. The overall positive trend in references to Malthus is consistent with the increasing salience of the issue of population and its relationship with poverty and resource use throughout the twentieth century, and the simple fact that Malthus is still a well-known figure among the general public. In 2014 Robert Mayhew published a book on Malthus for a popular audience, in which he quotes Garrett Hardin saying that “if ever someone constructs a carefully documented graph of the public attitude toward population after Malthus, it surely would look like a roller-coaster ride.” Mayhew adding that “Whatever the truth of this assertion, it clearly applies to attitudes towards Malthus himself.” (2014, p. 2) Looking at Figure 1 above it is not hard to see the roller-coaster Hardin predicted.

The Ngram data above does, however, present us with two related anomalies, that do not fit the current narrative on Malthus' place in the nineteenth century. The first is the long plateau in reference frequency which seems to correspond with Malthus' death in 1834 and lasts until around 1880, and the second is the sudden surge in interest from the 1880s onwards. Addressing the second of these anomalies first, it is not the revival of interest in Malthus that is anomalous, but rather that the timing that does not fit with the standard story that it was Keynes who reintroduced Malthus to the economic debate in the 1930s (Waterman, 1998). There are a number of reasons to expect interest in Malthus to increase in the 1880s though, including the controversies surrounding the Malthusian League and the

⁴ For comparison, the common word 'dog' makes up around 0.004% of all words in British books, while 'the' represents around 5% of words

contraception question more broadly, but also growing interest in Darwin's writing on evolution.

Returning now to the extended period of dampened interest in Malthus from the late 1830s onwards. I call this an anomaly because it is hard to reconcile this observation that interest in Malthus (as measured by references in published books at least) could have dropped so suddenly, and remained low for so long, with the fact that Malthus is now known to have been an important figure throughout the century, and was able to return so quickly and easily to public consciousness later in the century. I call this the 'missing Malthus paradox'. It is particularly surprising given that the late 1830s and 1840s saw an increasingly popular engagement with political and economic ideas in Britain, including the rise of Chartism as a labouring class movement fighting the perceived injustices of the economic and political system.

The Google Ngram database by its nature gives us a very broad idea of how the relative importance of certain terms has changed over time, and thus an important insight into the changing nature of public discourse. However in order to investigate the paradox described above, that is, the Malthus missing from public debate, it might be useful to narrow the scope of the analysis in order to determine if the patterns described above are mirrored by the smaller, self-contained debates going on at the level of the public intellectual in nineteenth century Britain.

In order to do this I look at references to Malthus in the four periodicals that played the biggest role in the political economy debates of the nineteenth century; the *Edinburgh Review*, the *Quarterly Review*, the *Westminster Review* and *Blackwood's Edinburgh Review*. Fetter (1965) notes that these reviews had the largest readership and influence of the many periodicals available at the time, adding that "It is doubtful whether any books by economists had as many readers in the first half of the century as did these reviews." (1965, p. 425) The total number of articles mentioning Malthus, or the terms 'Malthusian' or 'Malthusianism' are shown in Figure 2 below.

Immediately it is clear that this data shows a very clear resemblance to the frequency of references in the Google Ngram corpus, that is, a high number of references in the early part of the century, followed by a lull in the middle decades and then somewhat of a revival in the latter part of the century. There is still some variation between the periodicals; *Blackwood's Edinburgh Review* (highly critical of Malthus) has a higher number of articles in the early part of the century, while in the latter half it is primarily the *Westminster Review* (which although critical, was more likely to engage with Malthusian theory) that continues to publish a large number of articles referencing Malthus.

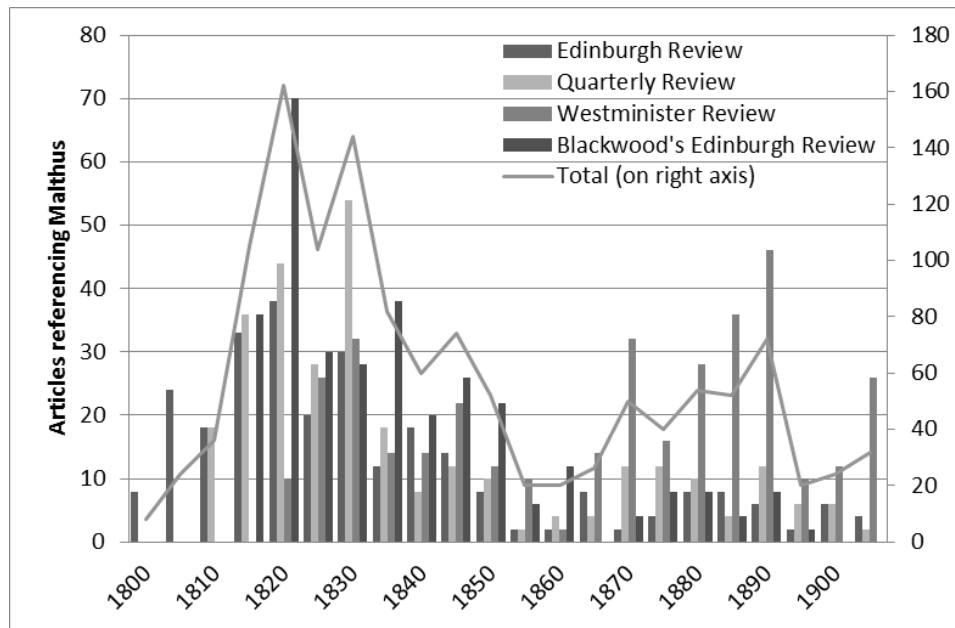


Figure 2: References to Malthus in the Edinburgh Review, Quarterly Review, Westminster Review and Blackwood's Edinburgh Review, source: ProQuest British Periodicals Collection

Returning to the paradox of Malthus' disappearance from public discourse, the four main periodicals show a strikingly similar pattern; after 1834 there is a significant drop in articles referencing Malthus, from a total of 144 articles in the first half of the 1830s to 82 in the second half. Blackwood's is the only one of the reviews in which the number of articles increases in this period, although the number drops off in the 1840s. Checkland (1949) provides a fascinating account of the marginalisation, in many ways deliberate, of Malthus from the political economy debate of the 1820s and 30s which goes some way in explaining this rapid decline. The often vigorous debates of the Political Economy Club of which Malthus was a member played out mostly in private, and any commentary that was written for various periodicals was, by tradition, anonymous, confusing the boundaries between the various 'sides' in the conflict and thus leaving the public with the impression that there was no disagreement and that political economy represented a single doctrine⁵. Checkland points to the role that both Mill (more passively) and McCulloch (more actively) played in ensuring that Ricardo's position would prevail, especially after his death, and become the official doctrine of the New Political Economy⁶. Malthus' participation in the club therefore limited his ability to contribute to the public debate while alive, and almost guaranteed his legacy would be ignored in favour of the dominant Ricardian paradigm.

⁵ "It was never required of Ricardo or Malthus or their several supporters that they should set forth their views in such a form as to earn the layman's support. The very intimacy and restraint of the exchange between Ricardo, Malthus, Say and others deprived contemporaries of a sense of what was at stake. The debate was closed and the winner decisively declared before -the public really knew what was going on." (Checkland, 1949, p. 41)

⁶ Keynes claims that "Ricardo conquered England as completely as the Holy Inquisition conquered Spain." (1936, p. 32)

The above analysis of both published books and periodicals in nineteenth century Britain confirms that the period after his death in 1834 saw a sudden and almost total disappearance of Malthus from the wider academic debate on political economy. Considering what we know about the role that Malthusian ideas played in the various debates of the nineteenth century however, we can surmise that Malthus and his ideas must have survived at another level of discourse; the popular sphere of newspapers, pamphlets and other outlets for public discontent.

2.2. The role of newspapers in the mid-nineteenth century

The digitisation of a large number of British newspapers and periodicals allows us to undertake a similar kind of analysis to determine the changing importance of Malthus and his ideas in the popular discourse of the nineteenth century. The 19th Century British Newspaper archive consists of more than two million digitised pages from 48 British newspapers between 1800 and 1900, with full runs wherever possible, and the choice of which publications are included based on representativeness in terms of geography and readership, with preference given to more influential newspapers based on editorial status (Shaw, 2007).

The benefits of this novel approach to understanding the Victorian age have become apparent to a growing number of scholars of the period. Colella (2013), for example, combines a quantitative analysis of Victorian periodicals with a 'deeper' reading of a chosen sample of articles to explore the changing attitudes of the public towards the world of business in the periodical press from 1850 to 1880. Borrowing from Deirdre McCloskey, Colella argues that "Digital archives of Victorian periodicals are the locus where "habits of the lip" translated into print can be observed most efficiently." (2013, p. 318), her investigation finding that public attitudes towards 'men of business', 'business life' and 'business habits' were broadly positive, supporting McCloskey's claims about the growing legitimacy of the 'bourgeois' business class (2010).

This paper takes the relatively simple approach of tallying the total number of newspaper articles referencing Malthus, either directly by name or through the terms 'Malthusian' and 'Malthusianism' in the British Library digitised corpus. In total 3,696 articles in the archive mentioned either 'Malthus', 'Malthusian' or 'Malthusianism', with results shown in Figure 3 below⁷. In contrast there are only 14 articles making reference to the term 'Ricardian' and only one to 'Ricardianism' in the entire archive⁸. Finally, the line in

⁷ It should be noted that articles that refer to both the name Malthus as well as the terms 'Malthusian' or 'Malthusianism' will figure in more than one category. Interestingly though, of the 1,377 articles that contained the word 'Malthusian' only 165 also contained the name Malthus. This leaves 1,212 newspaper articles that used the term 'Malthusian' without referring to the man himself.

⁸ Being a relatively common name, a comparison with the number of articles mentioning Ricardo is not meaningful.

Figure 3 shows the proportion of articles that makes reference to the terms 'Malthusian' and 'Malthusianism' as a percentage of the total number of articles referencing Malthus.

A few things are interesting about the above results. The first is the sharp increase in references to Malthus in the early part of the nineteenth century, indicating that as a public figure and intellectual, Malthus very quickly became a recognisable actor of the public debate in Britain. The second thing to note is that the term 'Malthusian' seems to have emerged surprisingly early, with references appearing in the first part of the 1820s and rapidly increasing from there. The rate of increase in the number of references to the term 'Malthusian' is in fact more rapid than for the name Malthus, overtaking the latter in terms of total references by the late 1830s. However when taken as a whole both sets of references in general follow the pattern observed in the Google Ngram corpus and the principal literary reviews; with an increased level of interest around the 1830/40s and 1870/80s.

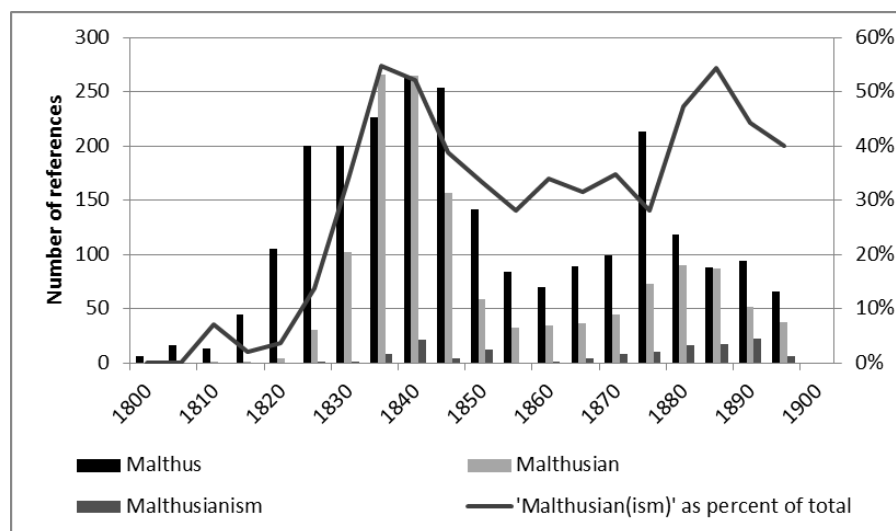


Figure 3: References to Malthus, 'Malthusian' and 'Malthusianism' in 19th century British newspapers, source: Gale Cengage/British Library

Despite this apparently similar pattern in number of references, there is an important difference in the way Malthus is invoked in the newspaper corpus that might help explain the 'paradox' described earlier. In the Google Ngram corpus as well as for the four principal periodical reviews of the time, discussion of Malthus peaks before his death in 1834, and declines rapidly in the second half of the decade. For the Ngram data there is a drop of around 50% in word frequency over the course of two or three years, while the total number of articles mentioning Malthus in the four reviews goes from 144 in the first half of the 1830s to just 82 in the second half.

Malthus' death in 1834 does not seem to have the same effect on his chance of making an appearance in the newspapers of the time. References to Malthus actually increase in the second half of the 1830s, peaking in the first half of the 1840s and remaining high for the rest of that decade. Interestingly, a large part of the increase in the late 1830s is due to the enormous increase in the number of references to the term 'Malthusian', which peaks as a proportion of all references during these years. There is the same lull in interest

in the middle part of the century that we observed previously (before a later resurgence), but it does not take effect until the 1850s.

Looking at the number of articles that include the words 'Malthusian' or 'Malthusianism' as a percentage of all the articles (the grey line in Figure 3) gives us an idea of the changing way Malthus figured in popular discourse throughout the century. Periods in which total references to Malthus are highest also correspond to the periods with the highest proportion of references to the term 'Malthusian' as compared with the name 'Malthus', peaking at just over half of all references. This suggests that at times when the public is more concerned with issues that are linked to Malthusianism, for example the poor relief debates of the 1830s or the controversial discussion of contraception in the 1870s, the way Malthus and his ideas are used within these debates changes.

One interpretation of the higher proportion of references to 'Malthusian' doctrine or theory, as opposed to direct references to Malthus himself, is that at certain times the public discourse invokes the simpler, and thus more useful (or rather, useable) arguments that a doctrine represents, rather than engaging with the nuances of economic theory. When public debate intensifies around issues of population, for example during the debates on poor relief and contraception, it would be expected that various economic ideas would be simplified and even reinterpreted for ease of argument and persuasion. Using bibliometric analysis allows us to identify the timing of this phenomenon in the patterns of newspaper references to Malthus and Malthusianism in the nineteenth century.

This analysis therefore suggests a possible reason for the persistence of Malthusianism as a well-known economic doctrine (meaning public, rather than academic, recognition), which survives as a recognisable trope in public discourse even today. The apparent correlation of total references to Malthus with the proportion of references to Malthusian ideas and Malthusianism more broadly, seems to indicate that as the intensity of the popular debate increases, the public find the simplified, recognisable concept of Malthusianism more relevant and useful, and thus paradoxically engage less with Malthus himself. As population and resource debates intensified in the twentieth century, with a greater awareness of environmental constraints in the developed world and high fertility in the still developing nations, the presence of Malthus in popular discourse only increased. The simple argument of Malthus' population essay lends itself particularly well to this process, in no small part because of his choice to present it as the simple mathematical relationship between population growth and agricultural productivity.

A second explanation for the rise of Malthusian references in public discourse is that the popular meaning of the term, and even what was meant by the name 'Malthus', was constantly shifting throughout the nineteenth century in response to the various debates that raged around the topics of poverty, fertility and population. A quantitative approach as taken above can't disentangle the different ways that Malthus was being invoked in the popular media of the time. The following section therefore looks at a subsample of the British Library newspaper archive, concentrating on the period 1830-50 which is clearly a pivotal moment for understanding the role Malthusian ideas played in the various debates

of that period. As we have seen it is in these crucial two decades that Malthus is posthumously spurned by the political economy debate while simultaneously absorbed into the popular debate going on in newspapers, pamphlets and public meetings.

3. Malthus in popular discourse of the 1830s and 40s

3.1. The Malthusian adjective

The nineteenth century witnessed the unprecedented development of what we would now think of as the public sphere in Britain, both through an exponential increase in the quantity and range of media available to the public, as well as this public's increased ability (through higher literacy⁹ and lower prices) and willingness to engage with these new media. This expansion of the public sphere can be seen as a virtuous cycle between growing access to and demand for knowledge and increased engagement in political and social issues, the latter reinforcing the former. While the discussions of philosophers and statesmen had previously taken place behind closed doors, the emergence of a public sphere would inevitably blur the boundaries of the political and even private spheres, with transgression between them characterising the development of a new public discourse. It is this phenomenon that might help explain the transformation of Malthus from unknown essayist to public figure (as political economist) to figure of public loathing (as the 'cruel parson', for example).

Looking at British newspapers in the period around Malthus' death in Figure 3, we observed that references to the term 'Malthusian' peaked at around the time that the total number of articles peaked in the 1830s and 40s. This suggests an important shift in the use of Malthus and his ideas at these times of heightened debate; the adjective 'Malthusian' is obviously used to modify the words that follow for rhetorical purposes. Unsurprisingly upon a closer reading of the 1830-50 sample of newspaper articles it becomes clear that this Malthusian adjective serves a distinctly political purpose (rather than showing a genuine engagement with economic theory), although over the course of this period a more neutral meaning also emerges.

The most obvious way in which the term 'Malthusian' is used in the newspaper of the mid-nineteenth century is in its application to the group of political economists (and more widely, public intellectuals) who the public saw as responsible for a new kind of cruel, rational economics. The adjective is liberally used to describe Malthusian theorists, philosophers, fanatics, dogma and jargon. This use is frequent enough to suggest that the average newspaper reader not only knew who Malthus was, but had well-formed beliefs

⁹ While 'signature literacy' remained lower at around 50% for the first half of the nineteenth century, there is evidence to suggest that the ability to read was much more common (Reay, 1991).

about what was meant by such turns of phrase as “the deceased doctrine of some Malthusian bigot”.

As described, the 1830s and 40s saw a heightened level of political and social agitation, including the Poor Law and Corn Law debates, and the rise of Chartism, all taking place against a backdrop of growing resentment among the labouring classes. This period also saw a blurring of the professional boundaries between economists and politicians. Members of parliament were engaging more frequently with the ideas of political economy, and many economists were active in parliament, including Ricardo and Mill. Fetter (1975) notes that of the 108 members of the Political Economy Club, 52 were also members of parliament. In fact it was the Reform Parliament of 1833-35 that included the greatest number of economists, with a total of 32. It is therefore unsurprising that the Malthusian epithet was also applied liberally to the politicians of the day, and their projects. The newspaper articles of the time were filled with references to ‘Malthusian Whigs’ and the ‘Malthusian government’. Some politicians were more often targeted because of their association with Malthus, especially the ‘Malthusian Brougham’¹⁰. The Poor Law reform debate attracted particular vitriol, described variously as “the Malthusian project of treating poverty as a crime” (1834a), the “Malthusian scheme of robbing labour” (1840), “the Malthusian bill to grind the faces of the poor” (1834), “the damnable, infernal, detestable, despotic Malthusian Poor Law Amendment Act” (1837), and poetically, “the black fang’d imp of Malthus” (1840). The Corn Laws, described as “atrociously Malthusian”, attract similar criticism, although not to the same degree.

The politicisation of the term ‘Malthusian’ over the course of the nineteenth century is no great surprise given the controversy that followed the publication of the *Essay on Population*. This analysis of popular discourse has, however, allowed us to locate the exact source and timing of this phenomenon. It is not during Malthus’ lifetime that we see the rise of the term ‘Malthusian’, despite the many debates in which Malthus found himself embroiled, but rather afterwards in the two decades of political and social unrest after Malthus’ death. It is more than likely that his death allowed for such a rapid and effortless appropriation of the term ‘Malthusian’ by the various political interest groups of the time. Though Malthus rarely engaged with the wider public debate while alive, and would have thus been unlikely to respond to such an appropriation anyhow, his death, much like Ricardo’s, both simplified and solidified the public’s perception of what was a complex and nuanced economic philosophy, into an easily digested and manipulated doctrine, that of Malthusianism.

This rhetorical act of categorising all economic theory and policy as cruel and Malthusian became a particularly useful weapon against any public figure who could be deemed a ‘follower’ or ‘disciple’ of Malthus after his death. While political figures like Henry Brougham were frequently the target of this kind of rhetoric in the popular press, it

¹⁰ That is, Henry Brougham, Lord Chancellor from 1830 to 1834, one of the founders of the *Edinburgh Review* and the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge.

could be argued that framing their policies as 'Malthusian' did not necessarily increase public anger against what were already extremely unpopular governments, but rather, simply provided a useful short-hand for this anger. For other public figures who engaged with the more popular level of debate on poverty and fertility, the 'Malthusian' epithet was used with calculated efficiency to discredit their work and restrict debate. It is more than likely that *The Economist* was referring to public opinion of Malthus when they said:

"A "political economist," when viewed through certain spectacles, is the type of a cold, callous, calculating, selfish, labour-grinding wretch, without heart or bowels, and insensible to all other considerations but those of profit and loss."
("Political," 1843)

The treatment of social writer and campaigner Harriet Martineau is a prime example of this anti-Malthusian campaign. At the level of popular discourse in which Martineau's most vicious critics acted, notably the pauper and unstamped press, this kind of pre-emptive attack was particularly effective. The editors for these publications knew that their large readership, a direct result of lower prices, would not necessarily want or be able to read the actual writings of Martineau and other commentators in the more expensive and less accessible newspapers and reviews. Caricaturising such figures as the misguided and evil disciples of a hated economist (who conveniently could no longer respond to criticism) was thus an effective strategy, and had a lasting impact on the British public's opinions of politicians, economists and public intellectuals more widely. Ironically the greatest vitriol was reserved for those public figures who, like Brougham and Martineau, argued that the labouring classes would be best served by understanding and engaging with economic theory themselves, instead of leaving it to the economists and politicians.

3.2. The Malthusian and the Anti-Malthusian

The use of the 'Malthusian' adjective to create straw-men of the economists, politicians and policies of the day is however only one aspect of the changing place of Malthus in the popular discourse. A reading of the newspapers of the time suggests a second, still highly politically loaded but less antagonistic use of the term that is strongly linked to the discussion of fertility and poverty of the day, especially at the time of the Poor Law debates. This period thus sees the development of the new rhetorical figures, the 'Malthusian' and the 'Anti-Malthusian'; archetypes that spoke to popular concerns that the New Political Economy posed a threat to the integrity of private life itself.

In order to understand the public response to the debates on poor relief in the 1830s, it is essential to remember that the controversial reform of the Elizabethan Poor Laws that had prevailed for centuries represented to many ordinary people the first real imposition of economic theory and order on private decision making, in this case marriage and fertility choices. The issue of providing for the needy had always previously been discussed in moral and religious terms; as long as it was believed that poverty was natural or inevitable,

i.e. the result of bad luck or circumstance rather than bad behaviour, then it was natural that the poor should have the right to relief.

The relatively new but rapidly expanding field of political economy provided new ways of thinking about social responsibility, both on the part of the labouring, and wealthy (capitalist and landed) classes. Where previously poverty was considered a problem of natural class distinction, and therefore the responsibility of society as a whole, new economic theory, and Malthusian theory in particular¹¹ put the emphasis instead on the individual and their choices. If the poor knowingly choose to bring children into a world whose wealth is already divided between the rich and the poor, then they must be considered somewhat responsible for the persistence of poverty. The emphasis on individual decisions thus marks the turning point between a social order in which it is considered the moral responsibility of all to care for the poor, and one in which it is the moral (and now economic) responsibility of the poor to ensure they do not produce more poor people.

It is in this context of a vocal public rejection of the new economic paradigm through which all human behaviour could be examined and directed, that the figure of the Malthusian (and with him, the Anti-Malthusian) came to play a role in the popular media. Unlike the Malthusian epithet described above, the Malthusian as a character is not necessarily a supporter of Malthus and his controversial theory of population, and is in fact not supposed to be real at all. The use of 'Malthusian' as a pejorative was intended to destroy through caricature; emphasising the perceived traits of real people and ideas in order to create a straw man against which the labouring classes could direct their hatred of all economics. The Malthusian here is a different kind of rhetorical figure, representing an ideal that cannot exist; the ridiculous and unreal notion of *homo economicus*, or Economic Man himself. This distinction is a subtle but important one; the black-and-white nature of caricature allows us to hate something or someone without concern for subtlety, while an ideal cannot be hated, but those who believe in it can be ridiculed for their naivety.

¹¹ Gareth Stedman Jones (1983, p. 105) notes that "The incorporation of Malthusian propositions into the emerging discipline of political economy, at least by some of its best-known practitioners, also explains, more than any other single factor, the anathema in which political economy was held by the great majority of the radical movement."

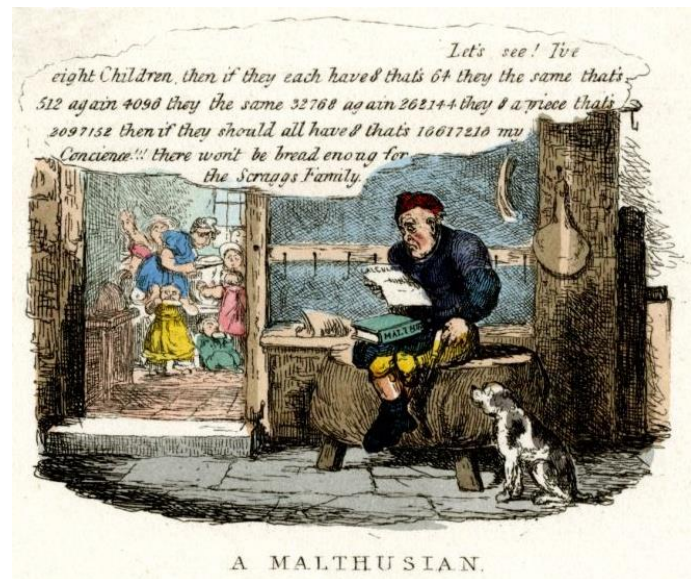


Figure 4: 'A Malthusian', detail from Robert Seymour (1829) *The March of Intellect*, source: British Library

The above image of a 'Malthusian' forms part of a larger satirical print, representing a quintessential example of the 'March of Intellect' genre that became extremely popular in the 1820s and 30s. Maidment (2013), who has extensively documented the history of visual comedic culture in the mid-nineteenth century, describes *The March of Intellect* as:

"a convenient shorthand for a whole range of social and cultural shifts in the first half of the nineteenth century, centrally concerned with evolving technology, the growth of mass literacy and widening access to print culture, through which class structure, as much as the economic order, was being redefined by education, invention and social aspiration." (2013, p. 177)

Much of the comedic value of the genre comes from the incongruity of the poorer classes engaging in scientific or philosophical discourse, despite the very real and mundane problems facing them daily. This particular vignette has a similar subject; the Malthusian in question is a humble butcher who, ignoring the reality of family life in the background, pours over a copy of 'Malthus' and a sheet of calculations, musing:

"Let's see! I've eight Children, then if they each have 8 that's 64 they the same that's 512 again 4096 they the same 32768 again 262144 they 8 a piece that's 2097152 then if they should all have 8 that's 16617210 [sic] my Conscience!!! there wont be bread enough for the Scraggs Family".

This image isn't suggesting that Malthusian ideas (meaning the cruel and inhumane 'Malthusianism' derided in the popular media) were in any way accepted by the labouring classes. The incongruity comes from the fact that although fertility was increasingly seen as an economic issue, and widely discussed as the cause of poverty, no butcher ever truly sat down to calculate how many children (or grandchildren) they could afford to support. The imposition of economic theory on private life is the real target of the satire; the poor are blamed for failing to make rational, economic choices about their fertility, when the very possibility of choice in such matters was unrealistic.

We can clearly see the emergence of this new rhetoric in the newspapers of the 1830s and 40s, in which paradoxically both the term 'Malthusian' and 'Anti-Malthusian' come to signify the same stubborn refusal on the part of the labouring classes to modify their reproductive behaviour in the face of economic argument. These labels are employed almost triumphantly in short articles, often reprinted in various newspapers, about large families who are (unintentionally) defying the laws of economics. For example:

"ANTI-MALTHUSIAN – The following remarkable inscription is engraved on a tombstone in Conway churchyard Carnarvonshire:- "Here lieth the body of Nicholas Brooks, of Conway, who was the *forty-first* child of William Brooks, esq., by Alice his wife, and father of twenty-seven children; who died March 20, A.D. 1637."

While some of the article describe uniquely large families as above, many simply relate to the birth of triplets, quadruplets and even quintuplets (few of whom survive). The title isn't reserved for humans either, as evidenced by a number of articles about Anti-Malthusian pigs, foxes, cats¹²... What is interesting is that these articles are most prominent in the 1830s and 40s, and the term 'Anti-Malthusian' almost disappears after 1850. The rise and fall of the 'Anti-Malthusian' thus suggests a novel rhetorical use for Malthus (as distinct from the purely antagonistic use described earlier), rooted in a very particular time and place, responding to the perceived encroachment of economic theory on what was previously the private sphere.

Again there was a particular strong reaction against the teaching of economic theory through the various useful knowledge societies and popularisers of economics, which was seen as not only imposing the theories of political economy, but actively displacing the old social order which was seen (perhaps through rose-tinted glasses) as guaranteeing protection for the poor and weak, both through traditional family and social structures. In a letter to the editor active Chartist Samuel Kydd writes:

"There was, however, a cold selfishness and haughty "doctrinaire" philosophy distilled through the alembic of the useful knowledge teachers, which the more intelligent of our working men detested, and the less informed neither knew nor wanted to know. The Malthusianism of Brougham had but little in common with the warm heart of a generous parent. The mechanic loved his children and hated Malthus." ("Condition of the People," 1849)

3.3. The imaginary Malthus

The final 'use' of Malthus as a rhetorical device in popular media that shall be explored here is the creation of a new, imaginary Malthus, linked with but still identifiably

¹² "Anti-Malthusian Pig - Mr. John Swannell, of Castle-Thorpe, Bucks, has a sow which has had 112 little grunners within three years, and all in six litters." ("Agriculture," 1838)

"Hursley Fox Hounds - The first meeting for the season, of this pack, was held on Thursday last, for cub hunting, as a preliminary. Foxes are said to be abundant, the Mrs. Reynards having been rather anti-Malthusian." ("Morpeth Meeting," 1846)

different from the two strategies described above. As was shown, the Malthusian adjective was employed to caricaturise the 'followers' of Malthus, ascribing to them the worst traits of the cruel and calculating political economist. Likewise the subversive use of the Malthusian and Anti-Malthusian characters relies on the absurdity of 'Malthusian' ideals taken to an extreme. The imaginary Malthus however represents the return of Malthus himself to public discourse, in a ghostly and even monstrous form.

This imaginary Malthus is exemplified by the satirical creation 'Marcus' and his 'Book of Murder', which became a veritable 'viral' phenomenon of its time. Sometime in late 1838 a pamphlet was reported to be circulating, authored by a mysterious 'Marcus' on the benefits of infant euthanasia as a means of limiting population. Clearly written in the style of Swift's *Modest Proposal*, the pamphlet created a sensation, and was being widely discussed in the newspapers by early 1839. An ostensibly genuine article appeared in the *Northern Liberator* in March, 1839, detailing a private demonstration given by the already infamous Marcus in "that celebrated room where the sage Malthus had so often demonstrated to admiring audiences" (1839) in Cambridge. After proving the truth of Malthus' theory of population, Marcus demonstrates the use of odourless gas for the purposes of killing a small child to the wonder and delight of the onlookers. The article is accompanied by the image below (Figure 5).

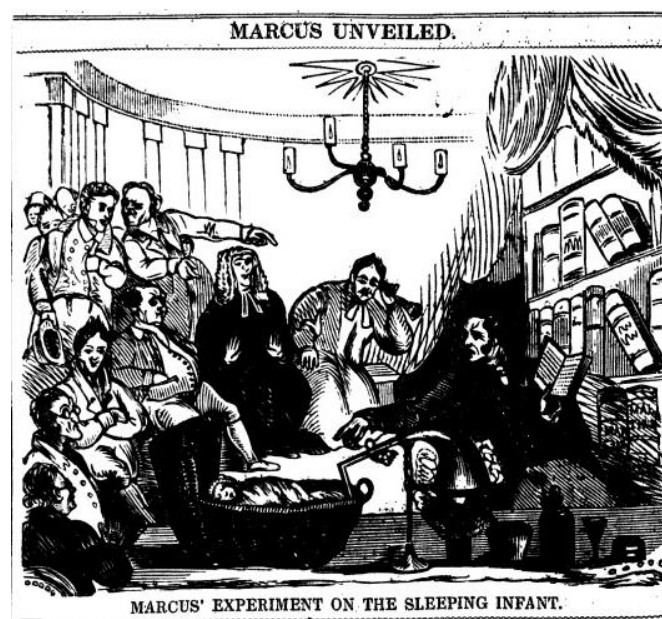


Figure 5: *Marcus Unveiled*, *Northern Liberator* 2nd March, 1839

There is no doubt that the author of the original pamphlet intended for an explicit parallel to be drawn between Marcus and Malthus, even in the choice of name which would have evoked memories of the Poor Law debates of the early 1830s. 'Marcus unveiled' is in some sense Malthus unveiled; killing the poor (and specifically their children) was not such an unbelievable outcome of the Malthusian doctrine, after all the old Political Economy had

allowed the poor to starve for centuries, why shouldn't the New Political Economy make the process more efficient?

This intentional association between the real and imaginary Malthus certainly played a role in the confused public response to the Marcus pamphlet, with many apparently convinced of the reality of the murderous proposal and experiment, the newspapers of 1839 filled with horrified responses. At a meeting of Chartists reported in the newspapers in early 1839 (before the publication of the above article) at least one delegate apparently believed the rumours:

"Oh! These philosophers would write about the Corn Laws as if they were practical farmers. Let the land be subdivided as it ought to be, and, instead of employing the labourer in artificial manufactures, let him partly till the land and indulge in healthy pursuits, and then they would hear no more of the ghost of Malthus or the damnable Marcus. - (Loud cheers.)" ("The Delegates in London," 1839)

This anger was further fuelled by the rumour that the author of the pamphlet was in fact one of the Poor Law commissioners themselves. McDonagh (2003) notes that "By early 1839, the infamy of 'Marcus' was so well known that 'Anti-Marcus' had become a name adopted by opponents of the New Poor Law." (2003, p. 108)

If the popular response to the Marcus pamphlet was confused, it was certainly partly intentional, resulting in the blurring of the Malthus/Marcus identity. For those who believed in the authenticity of the pamphlet, Marcus must simply have seemed to be one of the vile Malthusian disciples the newspapers mentioned so often. However even for those aware of the satire, the outrage surrounding Marcus only reinforced opinion of the dead Malthus. McDonagh writes that "while some readers clearly did hold the pamphlets to be in 'grim earnest', as Carlyle claimed them to be... other readers colluded with their fictional status in much more knowing ways, engaging with 'Marcus' as political satire, and appropriating his deadly tales to other, subversive ends." (2003, p. 100) The most effective outcome of this confusion was to keep Malthus' name alive in the popular debate while simultaneously attaching to this name the horror of Marcus' proposal, ensuring that "the ghost of Malthus and the damnable Marcus" would remain connected in the public mind.

4. Conclusion

Analysis of the changing use of Malthusian ideas in the popular and political discourse of 1830s and 40s Britain provides us with one plausible explanation of the missing Malthus paradox, that is, the apparent disappearance of Malthus from the formal economic debate of this period. The paradox is resolved when we realise that it was exactly during the years after Malthus's death that Malthusian ideas, which had lost relevance in the academic sphere, would become useful in the rhetoric of the popular sphere in response to the debates of the time. This rhetoric included the appropriation of the term 'Malthusian' to denote

everything cruel and inhumane about the New Political Economy, the subversive use of the term 'Anti-Malthusian' as a protest against the interference of economics in the private sphere, and the creation of a monstrous Marcus/Malthus hybrid that embodied the fears of the poorer classes in the face of radical economic and political change.

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