Malthusian Themes

Malthus. WILLIAM PETERSEN. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1979. x, 302 pp. $17.50.

Malthus seems to be in fashion again. Last year saw the appearance of two major studies of his life and works, and this spring French social scientists are staging a monster seminar in Paris at which upwards of 150 papers on Malthus and Malthus-related themes will be presented. It is not easy to explain this sudden interest. True, the relevance of Malthus's "principle of population" has never been greater than in the late 20th century, and if he would not have been happy that the problem of population and food supplies is being tackled through birth control rather than by "the preventive check" of delayed marriage, he must nevertheless be resting content in his grave in the knowledge that he put his finger on one of the world's major problems of the 20th and 21st centuries and that opponents who condemned his "impious and atheistical assertion that the Almighty brings more beings into the world than He prepares nourishment for" clearly overestimated the possibilities of divine control.

Thomas Robert Malthus (1766–1834) is best known to posterity for his views on the relationship between trends in population and food supplies, but he also wrote extensively, of course, on many other economic and social problems of his day. Surprisingly, since he was a social scientist of the very highest stature, he has attracted no large-scale, fully researched biography until very recently, when Patricia James's *Population Malthus* (Routledge and Kegan Paul) has filled out our previously sketchy knowledge of his life with an exhaustive study drawing on many hitherto unused letters. William Petersen, an emeritus professor of social demography at Ohio State University, who, as he tells us in his acknowledgments, learned about the parallel work of James while he was at work, has written a very different book, and the two are now splendidly complementary.

Petersen is interested in Malthus's ideas, their relation to contemporary understanding of the problems he was considering, and the evolution of thought in these areas in the century and a half since his death. The biographical and general intellectual setting for Malthus's thought and writing is quickly disposed of, and the body of the book consists of a sequence of chapters examining successively the different social and economic problems that attracted Malthus's attention. The emphasis is on demography, with two chapters only devoted to other areas—one to economics and the other to the Poor Laws and migration. The comparative neglect of economics is to be regretted, since we have been conscious ever since Keynes's memorably readable essay of 1933 and Sraffa's postwar edition of the important Ricardo-Malthus correspondence that Malthus ranked very close to Ricardo and Adam Smith as an economist.

Petersen's plan, indulged most fully in the chapters on population, allows him to follow his nose in wide areas of social history and thought. In the event, the handling of different themes of "the principle of population," "population growth," "mortality," and "fertility" is very variable. All the chapters involve a clear exposition of Malthus's position on the matter in question, integrating this with a wide-ranging discussion that may take any one of several directions. In some areas what interests Petersen is the social and economic background to Malthus's thought, in others it is the contemporary debate, and in yet others the subsequent evolution of ideas and trends receives the lion's share of attention. Thus, the chapter on mortality surveys the explanations offered by present-day historians of the supposed decline in mortality of Malthus's day, passes on to a lightning summary of the English agricultural revolution with a potted history of the growth of world food production from Malthus's to the present day, pauses briefly to look at Malthus's views on the Corn Laws, and ends with a look at the views of Malthus and later writers on the relation between war and population growth. Similarly, the chapter on fertility starts with a review of current work on European marriage patterns, illegitimacy, and family size in Malthus's day and later and moves on to a long section on "neo-Malthusianism" supplemented by reviews of family limitation, fertility rates, and population growth in the United States and France mainly during the 19th century, before ending with a consideration of the relevance of Malthus's theory of fertility for all these developments.

Though this diversity detracts from the homogeneity of the book, it does not seriously diminish its interest or value. Petersen writes with style and conciseness and quotes tellingly. He writes about what interests him, and the book is the better for it. His scorn for the absurdities of the left, while it leaves us in no doubt about his own political position, is amply supported by documentation. The Marxists, at least to judge by the late Ronald Meek's critique, still accept Marx's view, often couched in insulting language, that Malthus's model, even if correct, could have been applicable only to a bourgeois-capitalist society. (Marx took the view that it was not correct, and offered an alternative model.) Each type of society, Marx and his followers argued—primitive, feudal, capitalist, and socialist—called for a distinctive population theory. Petersen deals summarily with Marx's improbable alternative theory for a capitalist society, which, he argues, "cannot be regarded as one of Marx's successful prophecies," and goes on to point out that "Marx himself had nothing to say of what governed the population growth of primitive, feudal or socialist societies." This major failure is particularly interesting in the light of the population policies that some socialist countries are beginning to turn to in the later 20th century.

While thus generally supporting Malthus against assaults from the Marxists, Petersen admits nevertheless that Malthus never succeeded in resolving the conflict between the biological controls on population inherent in the "positive checks" of the first version of the *Essay on the Principle of Population* and the sociocultural controls recommended in the second. Petersen takes the view that, in part at least, this failure to reconcile the two approaches arose out of the breakdown during Malthus's lifetime of "the institutional checks to early and improvident marriage," implying that Malthus's initial invocation of the "positive" check was a reaction to this breakdown. Petersen returns again to this theme, but it is a pity that in this connection he has not made use of recent work by the family reconstitution method, since this would have permitted him to be more precise about this context to an important element in Malthus's mod-

el. Possibly the mean age of English women at first marriage was falling slightly in the late 18th and early 19th centuries in contrast to trends in many Continental countries at the time, but the evidence at present available allows only a very gradual decline, certainly insufficient to justify strong expressions like "the breakdown of institutional checks." There is some evidence that women in areas of domestic industrial employment married earlier than the national average, and domestic industrial workers were certainly becoming proportionately more numerous in Malthus's England. But we know nothing as yet of the trends in nuptiality and fertility of other occupational groups that were also increasing in relative importance, like farm laborers and factory workers, and, given the very slight downward trend in mean age of women's first marriage, it would clearly be unwise at the moment to accept Petersen's "breakdown" of institutional controls as fundamental to Malthus's thinking. Inevitably, Petersen can produce little evidence of the "breakdown," certainly none of a statistical nature, and he may therefore run the risk here of putting an unjustified gloss on Malthus's thought processes between 1798 and 1803.

In another area, also fundamental to Malthus's model, Petersen is particularly interesting in exploring the dichotomy between Malthus's acceptance of North America's capacity to double its population every 25 years and his warning that such a rate of growth in Europe must inevitably outstrip the rate of growth of resources. In the North America of Malthus's day there was abundant land and a virtual absence of primogeniture; it was because Europe lacked these conditions, Malthus argued, that its population growth must be more constrained. Petersen is right to draw our attention to the fact that Malthus never really reconciled his acceptance of the viability of these rates in one continent with their unviability in another. It is surely correct to emphasize the key place of American population in Malthus's theoretical structure, though in picking upon North America Malthus was merely looking for a verifiable example of something like a maximum human population growth rate in order to show what could be possible without checks, positive or preventive, in a European context. Exactly the same didactic method is employed, as Petersen shows, by the Princeton demographers today: they use Hutterite fertility as a gauge of maximum human fertility against which fertility rates in other societies may be assessed. It is a pity that Petersen went to press just too soon to take advantage of Ansley Coale's revelation in *Population Studies* for July 1979 of Malthus's quite brilliant statistical analysis of the United States population in support of his assertion that that population was increasing at a rate that would double it within 25 years.

While Petersen, like Patricia James, succeeds in ample measure in revealing the wisdom, subtlety, and humanity of Malthus's thought in a wide area and in bringing out its contradictions and obscurities, he is possibly less successful in sketching in the immediate economic and social background to Malthus's thought. There is a whole world here of history, much of it currently under revision, which it would perhaps be unreasonable to expect a demographer to take in his stride; but the pages on English agricultural history, for example, fail to do justice by a long way to the present state of knowledge in this field, and in a book of such high intellectual standards elsewhere Petersen should not have relied on Trevelyan's *English Social History* of 1942 for his source. The sections on the demography of England in Malthus's day, too, would have been the better for more awareness of the important progress that is currently being made on this subject. Work by the modern techniques of family reconstitution and aggregation is at last freeing us from dependence on the unreliable Rickman "Parish Register Abstracts." Similarly, fuller reference to Razzell's work might have persuaded Petersen to revise his views on the contribution of the practice of inoculation to the decline of mortality from smallpox.

These are quibbles, however, and detract hardly at all from the pleasure and instruction given by a book that is always thoughtful and stimulating. Malthus had a remarkable gift for hitting the nail on the head with a telling phrase or analogy; Petersen's objectivity and precision of style reflect this quality admirably.

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Environmental Issues: The Soviet View

The Biosphere and Politics. G. KHOZIN. Translated from the Russian edition (Moscow, 1976). Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1979 (U.S. distributor, Imported Publications, Chicago). 230 pp. Paper, $4.

Grigori Khozin's *The Biosphere and Politics* is another in a series of studies focusing on society and the environment that have been translated from the Russian into English and published by Progress Publishers. Like its predecessors (K. Ananichev's *Environment: International Aspects*, I. Laptev's *The Planet of Reason; Society and the Environment: a Soviet View*, and *Man, Society and the Environment*, edited by the well-known Soviet geographer I. P. Gerasimov), the book is intended to acquaint the reader with the official Soviet line on the current global environmental crisis, who is to blame, and which social system is capable of solving it.

The book begins by discussing the relationship between the environment (or the "biosphere," in Soviet scientist Vladimir Vernadsky's terminology) and society in the modern world. Whereas in previous periods of history nature was the silent repairer of mankind's pollution and destruction of surroundings, in today's heavily populated technocratic world humans must become nature's caretakers and maintain ecological balance. In the next chapter, the ecological crisis is presented as sharpening the ideological struggle between capitalism and socialism, since socialism alone, because of its public ownership of the means of production and comprehensive planning, enables society to husband natural resources for the benefit of the people. Under capitalism (chapter 3) the private drive for profit has produced and will continue to produce irresolvable contradictions between nature and production, resulting in the squandering of natural resources on the few. In chapter 4, the arms race is described as a terrible threat to nature, encouraged by the arms merchants of capitalism and braked only by the peaceful forces of socialism (the U.S.S.R.).

Chapter 5 is perhaps the most interesting in the book. Half of it is devoted to a review of international efforts to solve environmental problems and half to a presentation of the Soviet view of what is perceived as the new U.S. drive to dominate the world through "technological diplomacy." As the Soviet Union reached nuclear parity with the United States, the United States sought to maintain its dominant world position by promoting American scientific and technological know-how as "the most adequate means of building up a rational future, in which environmental prob-