

Malthus: The Life and Legacies of an Untimely Prophet

By Robert J. Mayhew

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Thomas Robert Malthus's *An Essay on the Principle of Population* was an immediate *succès de scandale* when it appeared in 1798. Arguing that nature is niggardly and that societies, both human and animal, tend to overstep the limits of natural resources in "perpetual oscillation between happiness and misery," he found himself attacked on all sides--by Romantic poets, utopian thinkers, and the religious establishment. Though Malthus has never disappeared, he has been perpetually misunderstood. This book is at once a major reassessment of Malthus's ideas and an intellectual history of the origins of modern debates about demography, resources, and the environment.

Against the ferment of Enlightenment ideals about the perfectibility of mankind and the grim realities of life in the eighteenth century, Robert Mayhew explains the genesis of the *Essay* and Malthus's preoccupation with birth and death rates. He traces Malthus's collision course with the Lake poets, his important revisions to the *Essay*, and composition of his other great work, *Principles of Political Economy*. Mayhew suggests we see the author in his later writings as an environmental economist for his persistent concern with natural resources, land, and the conditions of their use. Mayhew then pursues Malthus's many afterlives in the Victorian world and beyond.

Today, the Malthusian dilemma makes itself felt once again, as demography and climate change come together on the same environmental agenda. By opening a new door onto Malthus's arguments and their transmission to the present day, Robert Mayhew gives historical depth to our current planetary concerns.

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Editorial Review

Review
Robert J. Mayhew explains complex economic ideas with clarity and shows that even though Malthus and his *Essay* are still remarkably well-known, his work is often an (unread) reference point. Mayhew underscores how Malthus's ideas are perpetually modern, and remarkably so. (Alison Bashford, author of *Global Population: History, Geopolitics, and Life on Earth*)

A stylish, well-written, exuberant, and cleverly conceived book. *Malthus* is a thoughtful and skillful achievement. (Donald Winch, author of *Wealth and Life: Essays on the Intellectual History of Political Economy in Britain*)

Though critics saw Malthus as contemptuous of the poor and entrenched in his beliefs, **Mayhew** reveals him as a humane observer and insightful commentator, preoccupied with poverty and intent on reviewing his own earlier utterances, including his contentious 1803 claim that the poor deserved no place at life's table. By his death in 1834, Malthus was an authoritative voice on population and economy, but his reputation--and notoriety--lived on in new versions of Malthusianism, including some, such as the advocacy of artificial contraception, he would never have endorsed. Indeed, Malthus was adopted as a bogeyman in post-1950s U.S. debates about 'overpopulation,' environment and security. Mayhew pushes beyond the stereotypes of Malthus to recover the historical reality...This is a compelling read. (David Arnold *BBC History Magazine* 2014-06-01)

It is the wide range of techniques [the book] interweaves to recreate the unique fabric of Malthus' intellectual life--including comparative biography, comparative literature and the study of contemporary journals--that make this a singularly rich portrait…[**Mayhew**] is surely right that an attention to the complexities of Malthus' ideas and legacies will better equip us to deal with our present environmental challenges than will simplistic, self-edifying binaries. (Niall O'Flaherty *Times Higher Education* 2014-05-22)

[A] fine book…**Mayhew** describes the continuously contested legacy of what it meant to be a Malthusian, to commend or condemn Malthusianism in the two centuries after the *Essay* [*on the Principle of Population*] was published. But his book is also inevitably about us--as we too are obliged to think about our numbers, about nature and its resources, and about policies for living in a finite world. (Steven Shapin *London Review of Books* 2014-05-22)

Mayhew treats his subject sympathetically, but the book admirably exposes the complete Malthus, warts and all. Nor is any quarter spared for critics, from the Romantics to Freud, all of whom twist Malthus to suit their agenda…Mayhew's signal contribution is to remind us that the population debate has been contentious for much of the period since Malthus's original *Essay* of 1798. The book also helps us to understand the dangers of both pro- and anti-Malthusianism. (Eric Kaufmann *Literary Review* 2014-06-01)

In our era of global warming, mass urbanization, nuclear contamination, rampant pollution, deforestation, strip mining, and fracking, Malthus's very attention to the dangers of unchecked population growth can seem nothing less than prescient…Malthusian thought has found itself applied to dizzyingly opposite policies and politics. You'll find it ingrained in worldviews ranging in label from radical to reactionary. **Mayhew**'s book, then, compels us not only to reread Malthus and consider the background and the arguable moderation of his reasoning but also to consider, more broadly, the complicated and fickle ways by which ideas, once they

enter the public domain, become fodder for politically charged disputes. (Sandra J. Peart *Chronicle of Higher Education* 2014-06-09)

In his admirably rounded *Malthus: The Life and Legacies of an Untimely Prophet* **Mayhew** draws our attention to the actual writings of this pioneer of demography and political economy, and to his historical context, especially the revolutionary enthusiasm which Malthus was concerned to dampen…Though Malthus did not go so far as to interpret our planet as an ecosystem with limited supplies of clean air and water, Mayhew makes a convincing claim for him as a founder of what is now called environmental economics...[For] Mayhew, it is the questions Malthus asked which are still important. (Jonathan Benthall *Times Literary Supplement* 2014-06-13)

Loathed by Karl Marx and admired by Charles Darwin, Enlightenment scholar Thomas Malthus still polarizes, notes historian **Robert Mayhew**. The flashpoint was Malthus's 1798 *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, which posits that although humans are prodigal, nature and resources are limited. Mayhew traces that theory through revolutionary and reactionary traditions, arguing that it remains pertinent in an era of economic downturn and shrinking resources, with predictions of 10 billion humans by 2050. (Barbara Kiser *Nature* 2014-07-31)

Robert Mayhew helpfully dusts off Malthus and recounts his influence up to the present day, explaining why, with his one big idea, he became such an influential figure in European and North American intellectual history…Mayhew tries to rescue Malthus' reputation by saying that many of his readers used him without really understanding him. (Alister Chapman *Books & Culture* 2015-01-01)

Robert Mayhew's account of the intellectual life and legacy of Thomas Malthus (1766–1834) is a fascinating, erudite and readable interdisciplinary?indeed, multidisciplinary?intellectual history… Mayhew is very good not just at contextualizing Malthus but in breaking down the binary divide separating Malthus and his enemies?in the process, teasing out from Malthus's work (and how we have understood him) so much that is of value then and now. (Matthew Hughes *English Historical Review* 2015-10-01)

About the Author
Robert J. Mayhew is Professor of Historical Geography and Intellectual History at the University of Bristol.

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