

Examination of the Malthusian roots of Mill and Sumner: How Ricardo and Darwin had
Important Influences

PPEL 320

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5/9/13

Malthus's observation that human populations could easily increase at a geometric rate—given enough resources, while increases in food production progress at a more constant rate, led to an assortment of economic and social implications; some pessimistic and some optimistic. The argument weighed heavily on the more egalitarian theories regarding wages and rent, and Malthus became a formidable critic (as well as correspondent) of the Ricardians, among which was James Mill, the father of John Stuart Mill. Decades later Mill Jr. endeavored to finish the work of Ricardo while considering the scientific findings of Malthus. At the same time Malthus's doctrine had an influence on the development of Darwin's theory of evolution. The combined influence of Malthus's social predictions and the apparent 'solution' Darwin's theory offered for potentially unlimited (human) population growth led to Sumner's social Darwinist approach to sociological progress. *The purpose of this essay is twofold; first, to identify where Mill and Sumner's theories differ regarding what best serves human welfare into the future. Secondly, to determine how the influences of Malthus, Ricardo and Darwin impacted Mill and Sumners' beliefs about how the Malthusian dilemma was to be solved*

Thesis: Sumner and Mill focused the development of their theories in two separate directions, despite their shared Malthusian roots, for two distinct reasons. First, because of the extra importance Mill put on Ricardo's influence and the role that both competition and customs played in his account of human welfare. Second, because of Sumner's particularly rational and practical view of the 'science of society' and the profound influence Darwin had on him and the American culture where he developed his theories.

Although they shared a desire to contribute to human betterment, they disagree about how this may be accomplished. Mill struggles to satisfy the theories of both Malthus and Ricardo, while Sumner views a unique version of social Darwinism as the logical theory of how to apply Malthusian doctrine to a sociological progression.

The Malthusian dilemma:

If the unchecked human growth rate is geometric—the rate itself increases over time, then it follows from Malthus's first postulate that food must exist in enough quantity to keep the added population living and to continue its growth. However, the increase in food produce follows an arithmetic rate of growth—the rate is continuous over time where the number e represents the constant proportionality between the growth rates. Therefore, humans will find subsistence to become increasingly difficult as more of the population is competing for the same diminishing increases in land produce. The economic implications on profits and wages led political economists to hypothesize a future in which economic growth would approach its limit worldwide; meaning the deferment granted by technological innovation and foreign investment will no longer be viable (Malthus 8-11).

In Malthus's famous '*Essay*' he analyses the demographic and sociological evidence of the time but also describes the likely social consequences of his observations. These consequences included misery and vice, and later *moral restraint*. Misery is caused by the positive checks on population growth which amounts to the increased mortality rate of the poor due to disease, starvation and war. Vice is caused by the preventative checks on population, due to the practical yet undesirable decision to put off raising a family owing to financial reasons. This outlook on checks to growth is consistent with that of Sumner (Malthus 9-13).

The 'Dismal Science'

Both Mill and Sumner were driven to alleviate the necessary consequences of the Malthusian dilemma, but while Sumner stuck to operating within the Malthusian "dismal science," Mill sought to develop an account that would undercut that foundation. Under classical political economy, and under the twin principles of Malthus's theory of population and Ricardo's decreasing productivity of land, Mill does not think that there are endless possibilities for growth. Ricardo and Mill both thought the end of growth was coming, and the wages of the working class would be driven down, because population growth would exceed the growth of capital. This led to Mill's account of the inevitable 'stationary state' and his support of competition as a way to stem population growth, develop economically and socially, and prevent the population from losing mental facility. The stationary state represents a point that Malthusian law predicts must occur; when the population overtakes the subsistence needed to support it. It is in this theoretical future state that both Mill and Sumner make claims that stand in stark contrast to one another (Notes on Malthus, Ricardo, Mill & Sumner).

Mill and Ricardo

Mill's view of the stationary state developed out of his understanding of Ricardian economics. The increased population in the future, according to Ricardo, implies increased demand for agricultural produce. Without the improvement of industrial capabilities the demand for agricultural produce must be supplied at an increased cost of production. This is accomplished through cultivation of less productive land. In this way the cost of producing for a given laborer's subsistence increases, and, unless he allows himself to be put in worse condition, the profit to the capitalist must also decrease. Wages come nearer to subsistence levels, due to the increased population, as anyone who is capable of work would be willing to undersell their labor out of fear of prolonged unemployment. (Mill, Principles 83-90, 125-133)

Neither Mill nor Sumner deny that food is necessary for human survival, however Mill isn't convinced that human society is unable to contain their reproductive impulses. Furthermore, while accommodating some credence in the Malthusian doctrine, Mill is more

optimistic about the co-evolution of social understanding with the increase of population pressure. He distinguishes between human nature and “human character” and believes that the latter can be greatly improved upon by the institution of “national education.” (Jensen 497-504)

Reformed Capitalism

Mill believed that universal education would be eventuated by the development of new behavioral tendencies among the lower classes and three main changes in the social condition. Firstly, he thought that women would acquire an “industrial and social independence” equivalent to that of men. Secondly, he argues that academic achievement and sophistication of men and women would lead to a substantial decrease in the problem of overpopulation. Thirdly, and in direct opposition to Sumner, he believed that the need for competition would wane as the increase of practical knowledge was disseminated into the working class and as workers were enabled to start producer and consumer cooperatives. (Jensen 505)

Mill considered his conception of reformed capitalism to be the best way to maintain productivity and competition alongside the massive population pressure predicted by Malthus, although his view of competition differed from Sumner. In the stationary state of the future, Mill thought competition over resources and survival would be counter-productive, if it carried on like the capitalism at the time did, because as profits decreased, reinvestment would wane, and economic growth would stop. Instead, the more educated populous of reformed capitalism would find an outlet in social competition with its emphasis on economic redistribution and individual merit and talent (Mill 117-125).

Mill was optimistic in his support of the idea of worker cooperatives; which he believed would reward those who innovated and worked hard while avoiding the problem of entrepreneurs reducing reinvestment in light of disappearing profits. His Ricardian side influenced his belief that elimination of private ownership by an entrepreneur would not affect the long-run price equilibrium; while his Malthusian side saw the inherent benefit of some competition, as a means to motivate the private regulation of child-bearing. The ability to raise and nurture children, he thought, is best regulated through a families ability to financially support the offspring, and this ability cannot be guaranteed by the government (Mill 128-138).

Corn Laws and Rents

The subject of rents was particularly important to both Malthus and Ricardo because in their time, rents and wages had an important impact on the public discussion regarding the Corn Laws. It was during the course of these debates that Malthus and Ricardo developed similar theories of rent that differed in their conclusion. They were in agreement regarding the incite that as nations’ population grew and its capital accumulated the rate of profit in farming would fall because of the need to turn to less and less productive land (Decreasing marginal

returns). However, Ricardo didn't agree that rent must be included in the natural price of a good as both Malthus and Adam Smith held. This difference in theory disseminated into the public forum and was eventually adopted by Mill. (Notes on Mill, Smith, Malthus, Ricardo)

Unlike Sumner, Mill did not agree with Malthus's conclusions about rent, instead he developed on Ricardo's concept of differential rent. This led to Mill's argument that rents can be taxed away because they have no impact on the price of raw produce, and they are only a matter of custom. This assumption led to a major difference in Mill's views about what would be needed to truly improve the welfare of the worker. By taking this view, Mill was opening a Pandora's box of implications that led him to favor more 'socialist'¹ policy changes in his conception of reformed capitalism. This occurred not because Ricardian economics supported the argument he preferred to make, but because of his indoctrination into Ricardian thinking during youth; probably due to the influence of his father, James Mill, a loyal follower of Ricardo. (Dorfman 157-160)

Interestingly, Ricardo's *Essay on the influence of the low price of Corn on the Profits of Stock* was heavily influenced by the theory of rent Malthus had recently published. In fact much of the sensible arguments made by Ricardo were based in Malthusian theory. Though they could not reach agreement regarding Corn Laws, their efforts to explain their views, to one another and the public, led to their *theory of the distribution of national income among the three great classes of claimants*. Upon Ricardo's death-bed Malthus exclaimed that he believed that through their exchange of ideas they would have agreed sooner or later. It could be argued², in part, Mill wanted to prove that they could agree upon his conception of reformed capitalism (Dorfman 158-164).

This classic rivalry in political economy is best seen from both perspectives, that is what the public of the time was granted, and that is how Mill approached many of the dilemmas that they presented. Malthus and Ricardo's correspondence and more importantly its publication, had an impact on how Mill was thinking when he wrote *Principles* that certainly influenced him to master the lessons of both thinkers.

Sumner and Darwin

For Sumner the underlying condition of society is dictated by the law of population combined with the law of diminishing returns. The influence of both Malthus and Ricardo is apparent here, with more of an emphasis towards a Malthusian bias. Sumner's focus on the pursuit of facts, a trait he praised in Malthus and Darwin, convinced him that the truth of

¹ Referring to his advocacy of workers' cooperatives, which while still being part of a capitalist market many (including Sumner) would call socialist.

² Couldn't include that in this essay

matters was apparent in the most cold, scientific predictions. It was his aim through sociology, to develop a conception of natural law for social matters, in order to further human welfare, such as a scientist would aspire to accomplish in any natural science (Star 623-5).

More than anything Sumner aspired to make great leaps in the understanding of sociology, and in works such as *Folkways* his independent and assiduous nature as an investigator made evident, his resemblance to the work ethic of Charles Darwin. He held great deference towards Darwin's meticulous concentration in pursuit of facts and in his opinion Darwin was someone "to whom truth reveals itself" (Starr, 625)

For Sumner, the "survival of the fittest" is the principle mechanism of progress because it fits perfectly with the laws of population and diminishing returns. Mill on the other hand wrote most of his publications before Darwin's *Magnum Opus* and relied on his own conception of competition. Sumner explains that nature is composed of resources which satisfy human need, and when humans are struggling in the same area to glean the same material goods necessary for survival, then specific social forces are involved. In 'social Darwinist'³ fashion, the human condition is then dictated by the ratio of people to resources available, in which the condition becomes increasingly competitive as the population grows. It is this condition of overpopulation which occasions the increased activity in pursuit of means of survival and stimulated the human appetite for social and economic adaption. The use of exchange, division of labor, art, and higher social organization (such as governments) are all the product of individual fitness beating out others in finding ways to cope with the conditions of existence.(Sumner 6-9)

Sumner was a man of science, and although he praised the findings of Darwin, it would be inappropriate to call him a social Darwinist in the way it is commonly referred to. He was indeed opposed to finding any moral or otherwise, basis for grievances regarding the distribution of capital rendered by capitalism. Wealth distribution is the product of the natural struggle for existence he argued, and the success of one man is not an advantage *against* the other because they are competitors in the same evolutionary game (Hofstadter 435,6).

However, Sumner had a deep "passion for humanity", not in the sense of infatuation with its great technological advancements, but as a man dedicated to finding truth as a way of providing for the human welfare. It was against the background of late 19th century America that Sumner became the cold, insensitive individual that seems fitting to a Social Darwinist. It was Darwin's influence on the American academics that polarized the opinion regarding social policy, sentimentalists and theologians on one side and economists and sociologists on the other. Sumner had established accreditation both as an economist and sociologist, but he was

³ Used loosely here

raised religious; before Darwin had published anything. His piousness was reflected in his work though, later, without the religious terminology, and his scientific conviction was driven by the intuitive, categorical, and prophetic nature of his mind all of which could be attributed to his taste for deeper meaning (Hofstadter 460,1).

Malthusian Roots

Sumner was deeply influenced by Malthus (more so than Ricardo) and for this reason he followed in Malthus's assertion that "Extravagant governments, abuses of public credit, wasteful taxation...juggling with currency, restrictions on trade...and other follies in economy and statecraft, are capable of wasting and nullifying all the gains of civilization (Malthus 107)."

This type of strict Malthusian influence leads to Sumner to reject policies such as Mill may have struggled with or even accepted⁴. Sumner thinks that there is "brilliant promise" for mankind during the time in which there is much distance between the population and the support of the land. However, ignorance, error and folly, he believes, have led us to use resources in causes that were meant to lend aid to human welfare, and instead have wasted those resources. "The sentimentalists have been preaching for a century notions of rights and equality, of the dignity, wisdom, and power of the proletariat, which have filled the minds of ignorant men with impossible dreams (Sumner, 9)."

Sumner's confidence in the superiority of the conscientious, productive, and prudent 'homo economicus' directed his antagonism toward reformism, socialism, and government interventionism. He opposed such ideals because his Malthusian roots made him certain that substantive policies in pursuit of such aims would end in disaster or at least economic decline. His sociology follows the biological and social understand that began with Malthus and led to Darwin and Later developed into Social Darwinism. If it weren't for Ricardo's immense influence on young Mill it is likely he would have developed in a similar direction (Hofstadter 462-5).

Sumner shared Malthus's view on poor laws and his conviction about what truly contributed to human welfare. He found in competition the solution to the social sciences without having to appeal to notions of natural rights or fundamental principles. It was the ratio of man to land that was the most fundamental principle, and it was more like law; the only natural right which then existed was the right to struggle in survival, and persevere perhaps successfully.

⁴ Ex: Mills' Reformed Capitalism

Conclusion

Although both Mill and Sumner proceed in the course set by the debate between Malthus and Ricardo during the corn law controversy, only Sumner stays true to the Malthusian doctrine on which the entire series of arguments are based. However, it may not have been wise to do so, but it most certainly was scientifically justified.

The decades long correspondence between Ricardo and Malthus, which, may not have led to much policy agreement, most certainly brought clarity to the arguments of both, particularly to those who are inclined to support one over the other. Mill found that he was impressed by the arguments of both thinkers and proceeded to develop principles of political economy that could satisfy each in a substantive way. Thus his theory includes elements of both, that leads to seemingly contradictory conclusion in his *Principles*.

This appearance of contradiction is due to the paradoxical nature of political economy, which was probably why Sumner the 'economist' found the subject to be so mysteriously intriguing. He took a sociological approach and stuck to what was known through the interpretation of statistics. Mill was more philosophical, and seemed to carry with him in his writings the realization that his own agency had an effect on the "outcome" of society.

Sumner did not consider until, perhaps, later in his life⁵, that the lessons imparted by Malthus and Darwin could, through natural rights like universal education, be taught and internalized by generations to come in a way that offset the very laws and conditions that in his opinion served to provide the necessary pattern of society.

⁵ See *William Graham Sumner as an Anti-Social Darwinist*, Norman Erik Smith for account of Sumner's later life and his change in philosophy (Sumner writes [there is] "a give and take between different societies, whose folkways influence each other's members, and if the societies unite in life, syncretism takes place" ... "Syncretism now takes place by literary contact or travel, and by wide spreading of all new discoveries and inventions which affect the folkways" → (In my opinion, he is trying to describe something that many people would call 'New Age')

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