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Now if only I can find a place for this in my book msâ€¦!

The question is about how original Thomas Robert Malthusâ€™s argument isâ€”that humanity is doomed by fecundity to poverty, with patriarchy, monarchy, and orthodoxy being the only path to build not a good but a not-totally-horrible society:



Unleashing the Devil of Malthus, by Stable Diffusion via NightCafe

Matthew Yglesias asks a questionâ€¦!

Iâ€™ve always wondered if [Malthus is] the conventional reference precisely because it was becoming wrong â€” are there lots of random uncontroversial 16th century texts making the same argument?â€¦! [1](#)

I think the answer is: Not really.

On the one hand, there are enough people talking that you can pretty much find somebody saying something that you can, from your perspective, retcon into an early crude expression of whatever it is you want to find.

The real question is: Did what they said immediately die out? Or was it re-transmitted and did it have echoes, even in a relatively minor way, in its time and place?

Then the next order questions here are: Was Malthus a genius, who put the points exceptionally well? Or was the intellectual network environment then such that, this time, the idea would go not just viral but globally viral?

The answer to that question is: Yes.

Malthus was an extremely sharp guy. His *Essay on the Principle of Population* [2](#) hit the world at a moment in which the idea that Utopia might be fueled by material and moral progress, and might be in our future, was gaining traction in a way that, to my knowledge, it never had before. It was, however, debatable. And there were lots of people who had strong material and even moral attachment to the anti-progressive conservative case. And so, in the network intellectual environment then, Malthusâ€™s *Essay on Population* was the very first Slatepitch.

I cannot, back before 1500, find anyone of even minor note and influenceâ€”Posidonios of Rhodes is the closest I have come [3](#)â€”arguing that Utopia may be in our future because there is an arrow to material and moral knowledge. All the utopias I have found are either elsewhere, in the past, or a matter of divine intervention: Moreâ€™s Utopia on a distant island newly made accessible by the caravel; lots of stories of Golden Ages in the past; and, of course, the new Jerusalem descending from the clouds. Utopias in some past Golden Age seem to me to be especially common in Western Europe after the fall of the Roman Empireâ€”when people could just look aroundâ€”and perhaps in China after the fall of the Han Empire, when literati would weaponize the memory of the accomplishments of the ancients, when emperors were just, counselors were wise, public order was maintained, and barbarian warriors were in their place.

There are, sometimes, assertions that the current regime is uniquely powerful, rich and just. The Assyrian Empire was good at this, as was the Persian, and the Spirit Dynasty. The epitome of this, to my knowledge, is the Roman version of Ætlius Aristides, given before the emperor Antoninus Pius just before the coming of the Antonine Plague. [4](#)

There are, sometimes, assertions that the current empire is uniquely powerful, rich and just: The Assyrian Empire was good at this, as was the Persian Loyal-Spirit Dynasty. The epitome of this, to my knowledge, is the Roman oration of Aëtius Aristides, given before the emperor Antoninus Pius just before the coming of the Antonine Plague. [4](#)

Starting around 1600, however, we have a shift. We have Tommaso Campanella's *City of the Sun*. [5](#) We have Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis*. [6](#)

The first talks about how there has been more invention in the past century than in all of previous history, and thus how the City of the Sun is in our future. Unfortunately for us, the effect is rather ruined by his attribution of the shift to the astrological influence of Scorpio and of the Moon.

The second calls for large-scale government subsidization of scientific research and development in the institutional form of Salomon's House – to the enlarging of the human empire, and the effecting of all things possible.

These books had their circulation at their time, and can mark a shift to an episteme in which technology – and, later, morality – did have an arrow of progress.

Thereafter, in Western Europe at least, you have growing assertions that we moderns are more accomplished in pretty much every way than those ancients. You have the coming of the Enlightenment. You have the idea of Progress and of the Arc of History.

But from 1600 to 1780 these ideas are clearly speculative – not something to base actual policies on, indeed, much thought on. The Dutch Republic saw itself a, mostly, restoring its ancient feudal privileges after their erosion by foreign absolutist monarchs. English Whigs were as likely to appeal to the Ancient Constitution and to Anglo-Saxon liberty. You start to get things like *Novus Ordo Seclorum* [7](#) – a new order of the ages – inscribed by Charles Thompson, Secretary of the U.S. Congress under the Articles of Confederation, on the Great Seal of the United States, along with the eye and the unfinished pyramid. (And even there the reference is to a line of Virgil's about the restoration of the past Golden Age of Saturn. [8](#))

There is an active debate in Political Economy about the standard of living of the common people. But it is a balanced argument about whether a good society is one in which the common people are worse off or better off, other things equal. The argument that a society with a poorer commons is, in fact, a better society, points to the fact that if the poor are really poor they are willing to work for peanuts, and thus a given amount of social power crystallized in the form of wealth can command more work either for the military purposes of the government or to satisfy the consumption desires of the rich. The counter-argument is that a society with a wealthy commons has a middle class with assets and has strong commodity flows, both of which can be taxed.

In 1776 Adam Smith argues strongly that a better society has a richer commons:

Is this improvement in the circumstances of the lower ranks of the people to be regarded as an advantage, or as an inconveniency, to the society? The answer seems at first abundantly plain. Servants, labourers, and workmen of different kinds, make up the far greater part of every great political society. But what improves the circumstances of the greater part, can never be regarded as any inconveniency to the whole. No society can surely be flourishing and happy, of which the far greater part of the members are poor and miserable. It is but equity, besides, that they who feed, clothe, and lodge the whole body of the people, should have such a share of the produce of their own labour as to be themselves tolerably well fed, clothed, and lodged. [9](#)

But he does not go on to say that – and technological and moral progress are leading us to that better society. Instead, Smith *almost* makes the Malthusian argument:

Every species of animals naturally multiplies in proportion to the means of their subsistence, and no species can ever multiply beyond it. But in civilized society, it is only among the inferior ranks of people that the scantiness of subsistence can set limits to the further multiplication of the human species; and it can do so in no other way than by destroying a great part of the children which their fruitful marriages produce.

Thus, Smith say, coming closest to Malthus it is only in countries in which the economy is growing rapidly that wages can be above subsistence:

It is not the actual greatness of national wealth, but its continual increase, which occasions a rise in the wages of labour. It is not, accordingly, in the richest countries, but in the most thriving, or in those which are growing rich the fastest, that the wages of labour are highest. Though the wealth of a country should be very great, yet if it has been long stationary, we must not expect to find the wages of labour very high in it. If in such a country the wages of labour had ever been more than sufficient to maintain the labourer, and to enable him to bring up a family, the competition of the labourers and the interest of the masters would soon reduce them to the lowest rate which is consistent with common humanity. China has been long one of the richest, that is, one of the most fertile, best cultivated, most industrious, and most populous, countries in the world. It seems, however, to have been long stationary.

But Smith does not draw *Malthusian* conclusions from this. Rather, he denounces the cruel and oppressive British East India Company:

Want, famine, and mortality, would immediately prevail till the number of inhabitants in the country was reduced to what could easily be maintained by the revenue and stock which had escaped either the tyranny or calamity. This, perhaps, is nearly the present state of Bengal – a fertile country – where subsistence should not be very difficult, and where, notwithstanding, three or four hundred thousand people die of hunger in one year. The difference between the genius of the British constitution, which protects and governs North America, and that of the mercantile company which oppresses and domineers in the East Indies, cannot, perhaps, be better illustrated than by the different state of those countries.

(Note that Smith's – civilized society – reference here captures Smith's belief that the rich are undergoing the Demographic Transition – although it does not sound as though he sees that as an unambiguously good thing:

A half-starved Highland woman frequently bears more than twenty children, while a pampered fine lady is often incapable of bearing any, and is generally exhausted by two or three. Barrenness, so frequent among women of fashion, is very rare among those of inferior station. Luxury, in the fair sex, while it inflames, perhaps, the passion for enjoyment, seems always to weaken, and frequently to destroy altogether, the powers of generation.

The natural questions for us at this point would be: Is continuous improvement in the arts and sciences that allows for a perpetual escape from the stationary state, and thus for a high, even if not growing, level of wages for the commons possible? Or is humanity doomed in the long run to the miserable stationary state, in which there are always a few rising societies where the commons are prosperous, and declining societies of mass famine?

Smith simply drops these long run, historical destiny of the human race questions. Instead, he veers off into various observations on short-term wage fluctuations.

It is left to Malthus to highlight, put the pedal-to-the-metal, and focus on the Malthusian argument proper: that material technological progress cannot help. And it is Malthus who goes on to make Hirschman's – perversity – argument [10](#) – who goes on to say that what Godwin and Wollstonecraft call moral progress is actually moral regress.

What is needed, says Malthus, is simple: Patriarchy, Monarchy, and Orthodox.

- Patriarchy, so that daughters cannot get their fathers' permission to marry until their potential husband have prosperous farms of their own, which means until their late 20s, for delaying childbearing until nearly 30 pushes down the birth rate and allows for a large wedge between sociological and biological subsistence.
- Monarchy, by having the king's figure as father of the people buttress the position of the father as king of the family
- Orthodoxy, so that women are convinced that premarital sex will send them to hell.

Keep patriarchy, monarchy, and orthodoxy strong, says Malthus, and you can have a society in which the commons are prosperous. Give way to the siren song of Enlightenment believers in – progress – like Godwin, and that Harvey Wollstonecraft, and you doom humanity to starvation, misery, and endemic famine.

It is not so much that Malthus writes and the Malthusian argument comes to the forefront when it is – becoming wrong. It is, rather, that Malthus writes and the Malthusian argument comes to the forefront when the counterargument, that there can be progress, becomes strongly and frequently enough expressed to be irritating to right wingers. The environment has to be one in which people see a chance that the Enlightenment is going to win. And that does not happen until the Age of Revolution starting in 1776.

[1]: **Matthew Yglesias**: – I have always wondered –



Matthew Yglesias [@mattyglesias](#)
[@StefanFSchubert](#) – I've always wondered if he's the conventional reference precisely because it was becoming wrong – are there lots of random uncontroversial 16th century texts making the same argument?
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[2]: **Thomas Robert Malthus** (1798): *Essay on the Principle of Population* <<https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/4239>>

[3]: **Lucius Annaeus Seneca Minor** (64): *On the Part Played by Philosophy in the Progress of Man*





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- [4]: **Ālius Aristides** (ca.143): *The Roman Oration* <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/1005702>>
- [5]: **Tommaso Campanella** (1623): *The City of the Sun* <<https://ia904502.us.archive.org/30/items/thecityofthesun02816gut/tcots10.txt>>
- [6]: **Francis Bacon** (1627): *The New Atlantis* <<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/2434/2434-h/2434-h.htm>>
- [7]: **Wikipedia**: *Novus Ordo Seclorum* <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Novus_ordo_seclorum>
- [8]: **Publius Vergilius Maro** (ca. 38): *Eclogues* <<https://gutenberg.org/ebooks/230>>
- [9]: **Adam Smith** (1776): *An Inquiry into the Nature & Causes of the Wealth of Nations* <<https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/3300/pg3300-images.html>>
- [10]: **Albert Hirschman** (1991): *The Rhetoric of Reaction: Perversity, Futility, Jeopardy* <<https://archive.org/details/rhetoricofreacti0000hirs>>

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