Essay #1: Smith & Malthus

The Enlightenment dramatically impacted the way Europeans thought about themselves and the world around them. Scientific and philosophic discoveries led many to question the legacy of aristocratic, religious, and hierarchical institutions. The Enlighteners believed that, through the free exercise of Man's Reason, one could institute an egalitarian form of government and gain rational insight into the rules and processes governing society and nature. Yet, after the calamitous French Revolution and the subsequent expansion of the market economy, modernization instead led to extreme poverty, pollution, and wealth inequality. On the one hand, both Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* (1776) and Thomas Malthus's *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798) belong to the Enlightenment tradition, exhibiting a belief in the power of Reason to gain insight into natural laws. On the other hand, both arrive at seemingly irreconcilable conclusions about the perfectibility of man and society: whereas Smith sees society as continuously improving as a result of the division of labor and increased productivity, Malthus sees a future of conflict, misery, and vice as a result of the antagonism between reproduction and subsistence. Thus, while the ideas of the Enlightenment play a crucial role in uniting both texts, the genesis of modernization led to two very different attitudes about man and society.

In *The Wealth of Nations* and *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, Adam Smith and Thomas Malthus share certain presuppositions about the way society operates. Both thinkers believe that certain natural rules and historical processes govern man and society and that, through Reason, one can gain insight into them. At the same time, both Smith and Malthus understand man to be essentially split between natural needs and

social obligations, between individual self-interests and society as a whole. For Smith, labor and money are the essential processes underlying society: on the one hand, this involves the division of labor, of social stratification and class; on the other hand, it involves the transition from barter to coinage. In the case of labor, Smith argues against the notion that a nation's wealth derives from its national resources. He instead formulates an axiom that places labor at the heart of social processes:

> The annual labour of every nation is the fund which originally supplies it with all the necessaries and conveniences of life which it annually consumes, and which consist always, either in the immediate produce of that labour, or in what is purchased with that produce from other nations.[1]

Here Smith emphasizes the *universal* character of labor using words such as "every," "all," and "always." In doing so, his writing reflects the predominant attitude of Enlightenment thinkers who sought to gain insight into universal, natural laws.

In the case of money, Smith again emphasizes the importance of universal rules and processes. He writes that, "It is the necessary, though very slow and gradual consequence of a certain propensity in human nature which has in view no such extensive utility; the propensity to truck, barter, and exchange one thing for another."[2] Thus, Smith views the development of bartering as founded upon "human nature," yet guided by certain "necessary" historical principles and social interactions (trade) that allow Smith to think in abstract terms about "value" as a whole.

Similarly, Malthus, too, emphasizes the importance of rules and processes governing nature and society. For Malthus, subsistence and reproduction are the two fundamental laws that, "ever since we have had any knowledge of mankind, appear to have been fixed laws of our nature; and, as we have not hitherto seen any alteration in

[1] Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, p. 10.
[2] Ibid., p. 25.

them, we have no right to conclude that they will ever cease to be what they now are…"[3] Malthus argues that these "laws" can be rationally, viz. mathematically, comprehended: "Population, when unchecked, increases in a geometrical ratio. Subsistence increases only in an arithmetical ratio."[4] Thus, for Malthus there is also a split between man's self-interest and that of society as a whole: because one must reproduce and consume, society will inevitably be imperfect and unequal.

Although Smith and Malthus share certain presuppositions about how society operates, they are seemingly at odds on the perfectibility of man and society due to their contrasting visions of modernity. Whereas Smith believes that the division of labor has led to and will continue to lead towards the improvement of society, Malthus believes that the conflict between population and subsistence in industrialized society will lead to further misery and vice. Despite their ostensible differences, however, both ultimately offer visions of the "ideal" subject. For Smith, the division of labor leads to a significant increase in the productive powers of labor thanks to an increase in the dexterity and skill of workers and in the level of employment ("useful labor"). Because of this development, Smith argues that

> Among civilized and thriving nations…the produce of the whole labour of society is so great, that all are often abundantly supplied, and a workman, even of the lowest and poorest order, if he is frugal and industrious, may enjoy a greater share of the necessaries and conveniences of life than it is possibly for any savage to acquire.[5]

Here Smith emphasizes not only how society has transitioned from "savage" to "civilized," but how this transition is marked by "abundance," "thriving," and an egalitarian order in which even those at the bottom of society can live a decent life.

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[3] Thomas Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, p. 13.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Smith, p. 10.

Throughout *The Wealth of Nations*, Smith describes this transition as being marked by "improvement in the dexterity of the workman,"[6] a "great increase of the quantity of work,"[7] the "progress of society,"[8] "more expert[ise],"[9] and "universal opulence."[10] Thus, like many Enlighteners, Smith views the development of society as not only guided by rational principles (the twin processes of money and labor), but as the progression towards an ideal. For Smith, this ideal is a complex and harmonious order in which the rational individual contributes towards the productivity of society as a whole.

For Malthus, however, society is irreducibly marked by inequality, conflict, misery, and vice due to human nature. As Malthus writes:

> I have read some of the speculations on the perfectibility of man and of society with great pleasure. I have been warmed and delighted with the enchanting picture which they hold forth. I ardently wish for such happy improvements But I see great and, to my understanding, unconquerable difficulties in the way to them.[11]

Here Malthus reacts to the utopian visions of Godwin, Condorcet, and others who believed in the perfectibility of man. A few pages later he writes, "Consequently, if the premises are just, the argument is conclusive against the perfectibility of the mass of mankind," describing the powers of population and production as a "natural inequality."[12] Yet, despite his belief that man and society are inherently imperfect, Malthus simultaneously proposes a vision of the "ideal" through his notion of "positive" and "preventative" checks. In the case of the former, starvation, miscarriages, and disease inhibit population growth. In the case of the latter, Malthus proposes that the poor, who,

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[6] Ibid., p. 13.
[7] Ibid., p. 17.
[8] Ibid., p. 21.
[9] Ibid., p. 22.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Malthus, p. 11.
[12] Ibid., p. 14.

according to his thesis, will always suffer from misery and vice due to the natural inequality of population and production, ought to adopt a policy of abstinence.[13] In making this provocative claim, Malthus proposes a stern form of Protestant bourgeois morality as a means to both perfect (or "check") society and produce the ideal subject.

Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* and Thomas Malthus's *An Essay on the Principle of Population* both share similar presuppositions about how society operates, conceiving of it in the vein of Enlightenment thought as guided by rational processes and natural rules. Yet the two strongly disagree on the outcome of these processes as a result of the development of modernization and its subsequent transformation of society: whereas Smith sees society as moving towards an ideal due to the division of labor, Malthus sees society as inherently unequal and leading towards misery and vice. Despite these differences, however, both offer their own conceptions of the ideal man and society, one as a complex, harmonious, and rational machine and the other as a self-interested Protestant morality.

[13] See p. 44. Malthus contrasts his position to that of the "poor laws" instituted in England, which he sees as a form of "dependent" poverty that, in fact, increases misery and vice due to it allegedly leading to increases in reproduction. Again, Malthus uses the contrast between the "poor laws" and his policy of abstinence as a veiled contrast between universal, social good ("utopian") and individual self-interest (what we might call "realist"), which is itself its own ideal.

Works Cited

Malthus, Thomas. *An Essay on the Principle of Population (Oxford World's Classics)*. New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 1999.

Smith, Adam. *The Wealth of Nations (Bantam Classics)*. New York: Bantam Classics, 2003.