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Economic, Social and Demographic Thought in the XIXth Century. The Population Debate from Malthus to Marx

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readers might label as typically French, especially in the opening sections that aim to set out the structure of the argument. More annoying, however, are the occasional lapses in idiomatic English (e.g., 'seeked' for 'sought', the use of words like 'levirate' without explanation) and the many proof-reading errors: missed apostrophes, words and phrases left in French, inconsistent dating of references, and bibliography entries out of alphabetical order. The author has not been well served by his publisher, whose responsibility it must be to ensure the text is properly checked and edited.

This is a learned book that offers intelligent contextualizing readings of some key texts of early modern political and economic thought, and uses these to make an important point about the conventional teleological narratives of the development of demography as a discipline. As someone who is interested in all these things, I found it informative and illuminating, but my concern is that the book will find itself caught between disciplinary boundaries, at least as they are constituted in the English-speaking world; it has something to offer to a wide range of different audiences, but does not succeed in engaging properly with any one of them.

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Economic, Social and Demographic Thought in the XIXth Century. The Population Debate from Malthus to Marx. 2009. By YVES CHARBIT. Dordrecht: Springer. Pp. ix + 189. £90.00. ISBN: 978-1-4020-9959-5.

In this volume, Yves Charbit describes how population thinking moved from a stage where it was primarily considered a theme of political philosophy towards a subject of social science, and a subject of economics in particular, making it ready to emerge as an independent scientific discipline towards the end of the nineteenth century. Still, there remained (and still remain) important connections between demographic analysis and political and moral philosophy.

The classical foundations, starting with Classical Greece and ending with the French physiocrats of the eighteenth century, are examined in another volume (Charbit 2010, which is also reviewed in this issue of the journal). In the volume reviewed here, the starting point is when the concept of population was incorporated in economic thinking from classi-

cal eighteenth-century economics onwards. Classical economics incorporated the *Homo æconomicus*, in his dual role of producer and consumer, in the concept of population. The latter concept, in turn, was integrated in the basic model of production, determined by three basic factors, namely, land, capital, and labour. In this model, population grows along with the demand for labour, which is regulated through changes in marriage and fertility. Hence, a scientific approach to population was emerging. At the same time, the debate on the relationship between population and economic growth, poverty, and the fate of the emerging proletariat always remained a moral and political issue as well.

After setting the stage in Chapter 1, Chapter 2 carefully examines how Thomas Malthus digested eighteenth-century economic thinking about population. It is well known that Malthus found many existing theories much too optimistic. Hence the pessimistic basic message in the first version of his *Essay on the Principle of Population* that population had the tendency to grow at a faster rate than the means of subsistence, which would cause mortality crises to check population growth. In demography textbooks, the treatment of Malthus is often limited to this simple and consistent message. Yves Charbit makes very clear in this book that Malthus's writing in fact contains a number of 'serious theoretical contradictions', although I would rather call them inconsistencies. Over the six editions of the *Essay* that were published during Malthus's life (the first in 1798, the sixth in 1826), his thinking became richer but at the cost of inconsistencies across editions. For example, Malthus is usually cited for his warnings against overpopulation; it is much less widely known that his writings also contained discussions of the risk of insufficient rather than excessive population growth. The early versions of the *Essay* had many of the characteristics of a polemical pamphlet, offering compelling arguments but based on incorrect assumptions about facts. The later versions offered a much richer scholarly analysis based on verified facts, but the arguments were much less compelling. The apparent inconsistencies between successive versions are not epistemological in nature but rather reflect the fact that Malthus had thoroughly revised his writings in the light of new data and analysis.

In Malthus's thinking about whether or not population growth was 'good' for the economy, Charbit discerns three models as the writings develop over time and as Malthus gradually moves from a biological and mechanistic vision about the regulation of population growth towards a social-scientific analysis. In the first and simplest model, population growth

is checked by mortality when it exceeds the means of subsistence. This model was exploited in the political arguments for reforming the English Poor Laws, although Charbit shows that Malthus was quite hesitant to push through the government's agenda (that abolished all assistance to the poor at the parish level): Malthus favoured a reform that was so gradual 'as not to affect any individual at present alive'. In the second model, the principle of population is part of a longer-term movement towards economic and population growth, with poverty crises along the way. This second model attributes a central role to marriage (delays) as a means to regulate population growth in response to the economic situation. In a third model, developed in the 1820s, Malthus moved away from the idea that population growth would be constrained by the means of subsistence, since the coming of the Industrial Revolution marked the fading of subsistence economics. In this model, the demand for labour controls demographic growth, and this demand emanates chiefly from the consumption of the growing middle classes. Charbit shows that, while earlier models (like the classical Ricardo model) envisioned convergence towards equilibrium, Malthus's later writings proposed a dynamic characterized by continuing growth, both demographic and economic. This is quite contrary to the cliché image of Malthusian thought.

'Moral restraint', that is, the postponement of marriage (and, hence, childbearing), played a crucial role in Malthus's thinking. He argued that moral restraint was essential to reconcile continuing population growth with economic growth and with declining poverty. On religious grounds, he denounced 'prudential' restraint, that is, all pathways to limit the number of births apart from late marriage.

Chapter 2 ends with a paradoxical question: was Malthus a Malthusian or rather a population-expansionist? Only in the first of the three models identified by Charbit was Malthus warning against population growth. However, seen in the light of his complete works, Malthus was rather making a case in favour of both population and economic growth, guided by moral restraint, which he considered crucial for enabling longer-term planning rather than living by the day, and a sustainable interaction between modern industrial and agricultural production. The continuing connection between demographic analysis and moral and political philosophy is evident. Bourgeois practical morality, it was argued, would provide the necessary, natural and universal code of conduct for enabling sustained population growth as well as economic growth.

Malthus throws a very long shadow over population thinking in the nineteenth century. Following the *Essay*, all major intellectual figures who wrote about population used Malthus's writings as a point of reference. Chapter 3 examines how several French liberal economists made the transition from Malthusianism (used as a doctrine against the refutation of socialist ideas during the 1848 revolution) towards population-expansionism in the middle of the nineteenth century. At first, economists were optimistic about the compatibility between the new ('neo-Malthusian') demographic regime and the new social and economic order. From the 1860s onwards, however, Malthusianism was abandoned and a fear of depopulation emerged. Apart from reflecting the negative population growth trend observed for France, the change of mind was also inspired by social unrest and rising socialism. Economists became concerned about the country's strength, health, and security. As a result, the fact that infant mortality remained high despite economic progress became an important concern, not because economists were worried about the situation of the working classes as such, but for the sake of the international status of the country.

Again, Charbit points to underlying connections between population thought and moral philosophy. At first, the central concept recommended by the liberal economist was individual foresight: it was praiseworthy socially, economically, and morally. This bourgeois virtue was supposed to be the natural and rational, hence universally superior virtue that should be adopted by the working classes. However, towards the 1860s, owing to new domestic and international preoccupations and colonialism, a revival of mercantilism accompanied a growing concern about the nation's demographic strength. As a result, economists started to advocate populationist policies aimed at raising the birth rate. In times of declining fertility, a tension emerged between, on the one hand, a liberal ideology proclaiming the absolute freedom of the (head of the) family in all matters considered private (like the number of children) and, on the other hand, the perceived political interest of the state to have a young and growing population.

It is arguable that Charbit, in his analysis of the position taken by the French economists, remains too faithful to Malthus's distinction between moral restraint (i.e., late marriage) and prudential restraint (i.e., fertility control within marriage). As a result, Charbit perceives a 'contradiction' between the fact that liberal economists were both condemning the high fertility of the proletariat while also praising its observance of the Malthusian principle of moral

restraint. In contrast to Charbit, I am not convinced that the French economists observed such a contradiction. Certainly, the bourgeoisie was practising both moral and prudential restraint at the same time.

Chapter 4 argues that Pierre Joseph Proudhon, although he often defended Malthus against his opponents, eventually heavily opposed Malthus himself for the latter's defence of private property and social inequality. He argued that Malthus was completely wrong in saying that continual economic and population growth were reconcilable with the reduction of poverty in the modern liberal economy. One of the 'contradictions' of the capitalist economy, according to Proudhon, was the growth of national wealth despite the poverty of the working classes: work increases and production grows, but poverty becomes worse. Private property was the ultimate culprit, according to Proudhon. He proposed to replace it with a kind of exchange economy, totally free from control either by the state or any other institution. Such an economy, Proudhon argued, would allow a proper division of wealth in the population.

Inspired by Adam Smith, Proudhon rejected Malthus's population law and argued that production grew at an even faster rate than population owing to the division of labour and the use of machines; at one point he proposed the 'law' that the increase in wealth was the square of the number of workers. As noted earlier, however, the idea that production would grow only linearly while population would grow geometrically, was abandoned by Malthus himself in later versions of the *Essay*, when he stressed the role of industrialization and the effects of demand on production. Proudhon strongly opposed Malthus's views on controlling population growth by means of moral restraint (i.e., late marriage), and reproached him for wanting to turn marriage into a privilege for the rich. According to Proudhon, the reason for poverty was not excessive population growth but rather the concentration of property in the hands of the rich. The basic knot in the existing link between economy and demography was that, on the one hand, strong population growth would make the demand for food and goods grow so strong that the production side of the economy would not be able to keep pace; but on the other hand, if population were reduced, the number of producers would also fall, undermining the productive capacity of the economy. The solution according to Proudhon was simple. The principle for controlling population was 'work'; people should invest more in work and less in reproduction; working

harder would lead to a decrease in their 'reproductive strength'.

The denunciation of the capitalist system by Proudhon was vigorously supported by Engels and Marx. The population thinking of the latter two is examined in Chapter 5. Engels strongly argued against the Malthusian rationale for the Poor Law reforms. He argued that it was the deterioration of working conditions that incited workers to marry early and increase their fertility, in the belief that they would benefit from the extra income provided by wives and children. Engels also rejected the Malthusian idea of 'overpopulation': capital increased daily, labour power grew together with population, and technological progress allowed growing productivity.

Marx argued that the crucial thing about the relation between population and the economy was not the number of people or workers as such, but their relationship with the means of production, that is, the proportion of workers that had to sell their labour to survive. The capitalist mode of production, involving the accumulation of capital in the hands of a few, presupposed the existence of an ever-increasing labour force, an 'industrial reserve army'.

Malthus and Marx were radically opposed figures in the debate on population in all respects. Each of them formulated their own 'law of population'. Malthus believed in the universality of 'the principle of population' across time and space, claiming that population dynamics were specific to every mode of production. For Marx, the law of population was at the same time the law of a historically situated mode of production. He agreed with Engels that, in the capitalist system, the poverty of the working class explained early marriage and high fertility, as well as the rural exodus, rather than the other way around. However, in the end, owing to the implications of the capitalist economic system for their miserable conditions, the demographic growth of the proletariat would be accompanied by a growing awareness of its own situation. Ultimately, the tension would cause the collapse of capitalism. Malthus, in contrast, expected that the internal tensions of capitalism would disappear because a growing middle class would ensure that the demand for capitalist products would continue to grow.

This book offers very illuminating insight into the population debate as it played out during a crucial stage of economic and demographic modernization, and during a period that was crucial for the emergence of population studies as a scientific discipline. Although at times the text reads a bit like a collection

of scattered exegetic notes for a lecture on the original sources rather than a coherent analysis, I would certainly recommend this book as a guide to the original sources. Charbit saves his synthesis and analysis of nineteenth-century population thought largely for the last chapter, which is a very welcome chapter indeed. The insights he offers into the sometimes inconsistent analyses of these great intellectual figures of the nineteenth century shows that many of the arguments heard today in the ongoing debate about population growth, economic growth, and poverty, were already voiced in the nineteenth century. I am left with the impression that we have not made much progress since then in fundamental theory.

Between the First and the Second World War, the drop in the birth rate and the population slump made Malthusian theory look obsolete. It rose from its ashes after the Second World War in response to the population explosion in less developed countries. Charbit argues that it would be unfair to evaluate the value of Malthus's work by its fit with the later evolution of population and the economy, because 'demography is neither theoretical physics nor is it mineralogical chemistry' (p. 48): because it is a human science, theories are and should be based on factors that are peculiar to a given historical context. Although I agree that historical peculiarities do and should play a role in social-scientific research and theory, one could also argue that this epistemological point of view suggests a lack of ambition for the social sciences. Why would this argument hold for the social sciences and not for the biological sciences? Are not plants and animals, in their phenotypic appearance and behaviour, also peculiar to their historical environment? Darwinian evolutionary theory can be considered superior to the earlier, alternative ways of theorizing biological diversity because it is able to account *ex ante* for biological diversity and developments that occurred in time after the formulation of the theory. Should we not strive for theories of population that can do the same?

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The Changing Body: Health, Nutrition and Human Development in the Western World since 1700. 2011. By RODERICK FLOUD, ROBERT W. FOGEL, BERNARD HARRIS, and SOK CHUL HONG. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Pp. xxvi + 431. £19.99 or US\$32.99 paperback. ISBN: 978-0-521-70561-5.

Anthropometric history has been a fruitful, although not uncontroversial, area of study over the last 40 years. This book builds on and combines previous studies of human heights and weights using a plethora of other data (such as that on food output and wastage, measures of economic growth, and population figures including age and income distributions) to comment on the relationship between increases in human stature and modern economic growth since the Industrial Revolution. It is an important contribution to the literature, although it is unlikely to silence the controversy.

The book is organized into seven chapters. In the first, the authors introduce the concept of 'technophysio evolution' to describe a virtuous circle of improving nutritional status that allows more energy available for work. Work produces economic growth and improvements in the standard of living, food availability, and public health and technology, which in turn improve net nutritional status and provide more energy for work, thus contributing to a potentially never-ending upward spiral of health and productivity. Chapter 2 considers ways of reconstructing the historical relationships between biological and economic factors using only patchy data. The relationship between body size and mortality is established, and energy cost accounting is used to explore plausible and consistent balances between energy inputs, amounts of energy needed to function depending on body size and disease loads, and energy expended according to age, sex, and workload. The effect that the distribution of resources over populations has on proportions in poverty is compared against the historical record for consistency and plausibility. Chapter 3 uses these methods to address issues debated by historians and historical demographers, such as the origin of the Industrial Revolution and the relative roles of nutrition and public health in the decline of mortality. Chapters 4–6 provide more detailed analyses of technophysio evolution and human health over the long term in England and Wales, Continental Europe, and the USA, respectively, and Chapter 7 offers a conclusion and speculates on prospects for the future.