Malthus’s criticism of Paine’s Rights of Man

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I

The aim of this paper is to explore the evolution of Thomas Robert Malthus’s (1766-1834) political views in the early 1800s, with special reference to his criticism of Thomas Paine’s (1737-1809) Rights of Man (1791-2).

Malthus’s Essay on the Principle of Population was first published anonymously in 1798. Its full title was An Essay on the Principle of Population, as It Affects the Future Improvement of Society, with Remarks on the Speculations of Mr. Godwin, M. Condorcet, and Other Writers. His main targets in the first Essay were, as its subtitle suggests, William Godwin’s (1756-1836) and Marquis de Condorcet’s (1743-94) extremely optimistic theories of eternal human progress. According to the famous ‘principle of population’, which was principally based on the hypothesis that the increase of population tends to outrun the means of subsistence, the utopian communities of Godwin and Condorcet were doomed to collapse due to overpopulation. Malthus maintained that ‘misery and vice’ were the only possibilities to control population. As early as 1798, he conceived of only two types of checks on population.

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2 I wish to Jérôme Lange, Atushi Masunaga, Yusuke Ando and Ryu Susato for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this essay. All remaining errors are mine.
growth - ‘positive checks’ to increase the death rate, and ‘preventive checks’ to reduce the birth rate.

Malthus regarded his first Essay as an unsatisfactory statement of the principle of population, because it was constructed ‘on the spur of the occasion’ (EPP, I, 1) largely in his own head. Then, he decided to revise and rewrite the first edition. In 1803, Malthus presented the second edition of his work. Its text was much enlarged from 50,000 to 200,000 words, and its long title was changed from 1798: An Essay on the Principle of Population; or, A View of its past and present Effects on Human Happiness; With an Inquiry into our Prospects respecting the future Removal or Mitigation of the Evils which it occasions. Malthus reduced Godwin’s and Condorcet’s utopian arguments. Instead, he provided a large body of additional historical, ethnographic and statistical evidence to back up the principle of population, and he softened his pessimism by newly introducing ‘moral restraint’ - delayed marriage and childbearing with abstinence - as a third category of check on population growth. With ‘moral restraint,’ ‘misery and vise’ can be eradicated at last.

Later, the Essay went through four subsequent editions in 1806, 1807, 1817 and 1826. It is widely accepted that the most significant changes in the Essay are found between the first edition of 1798 and the second of 1803. This is basically correct. Editions 3-6 include relatively minor changes from the second edition. It does not mean, however, that the differences between the second and following four editions are trivial and unworthy of serious examination. Rather, it should be noted that ‘the alterations made to the second Essay over the period 1803-1826 provide a running commentary on Malthus’s intellectual development’ (Winch 1987, 36).

As mentioned above, Godwin’s and Condorcet’s utopian arguments were
abbreviated in the second and following four editions of the *Essay*. Nevertheless, Malthus’s hostility to such visionaries as Godwin and Condorcet was still alive and very strong, so that he was able to add in 1803 a new chapter attacking Paine’s political ideas. Paine has often been grouped together with Godwin and Condorcet as intellectual devotees of the French Revolution. His *Rights of Man* has been well-known as one of the best-selling books in English history and the bible of working-class radicals. His political ideas undoubtedly inspired Malthus’s second *Essay*. The fact that Paine was added to the list of visionaries attacked in the second and later editions shows that the work continued to serve an anti-utopian purpose. Malthus went on attacking those critics who focused exclusively on unjust political institutions, and he held hostility to visionary doctrines of equality in all subsequent editions of the *Essay*.

Malthus’s critical comments on Paine’s *Rights of Man* are found in the sixth chapter (‘Effect of the knowledge of the principal cause of poverty on Civil Liberty’) of BOOK IV (‘Of our future Prospects respecting the removal or mitigation of the Evils arising from the Principle of Population’) of the second and later editions of the *Essay*.3

As Leslie Stephen rightly commented, ‘Malthus’s criticism of Paine is significant’ (Stephen 1900, II, 176). Regrettably, however, there have been relatively few studies on this subject, not to mention studies focusing specifically on the difference between 1803 and later editions. Most commentators have overlooked, ignored, or failed to grasp the shift of emphasis in Malthus’s criticism of Paine, particularly from 1803 to 1806. Thus, by highlighting this shift in focus, this paper sets out to clarify its significance in the

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3 While BOOK I and II of the 1803-1826 editions of the *Essay* are devoted to a solidly empirical demographic study of checks to population growth which have operated throughout history in all countries, BOOK III and IV seek possible non-utopian solutions to the several problems on morals and politics posed by population pressure – pauperism (The Poor Laws), education, civil and political liberties, etc.
evolution of Malthus’s thought.

The structure of this paper is as follows:

Section II reviews the relevant secondary literature.

Both Sections III& IV investigate the sixth chapter of BOOK IV of the second and later editions of the Essay, which is divided into 21 paragraphs in total.\(^4\) Section III outlines the first half (paragraphs 1-9) of the sixth chapter of BOOK IV, in which one finds the name of David Hume (1711-76) but not Paine. Section IV presents a sketch of the second half (paragraphs 10-21) of the same chapter, in which one finds Malthus’s attacks on Paine’s Rights of Man.

This essay concludes with Section V which affords some new perspectives on Malthus’s ideological shift in the early 1800s.

II

So far, a large volume of research focusing on the intellectual relationship between Godwin, Condorcet and Malthus has been conducted.\(^5\) Curiously, however, there have been remarkably few noticeable and reliable assessments of the intellectual relationship between Paine and Malthus, except for a few fragmentary comments by Stephen (1900), Keynes ([1933] 1972) ([1935] 1972), Himmelfarb (1984), Winch (1983) (1987) (1996) and Nagai (2000).\(^6\)

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\(^4\) As elaborated later, however, paragraph 12 appears in the second edition of the Essay, while paragraphs 19-20 appear in the third and following three editions of the Essay. As a result, the sixth chapter of BOOK IV of 1803 is composed of 19 paragraphs and that of 1806-1826 is composed of 20 paragraphs.


\(^6\) Patricia James’s Population Malthus: His Life and Times (James 1979) is without a doubt the greatest biography ever written of Malthus. This book remains authoritative, but it doesn’t seem to be the definitive biography of Malthus. One complaint is the lack of discussion regarding the
Leslie Stephen wrote a three-volume study of *The English Utilitarians* in 1900. Despite its age, this study is still worth consulting. The fourth chapter of Volume II, which deals mainly with Malthus, includes a useful summary of his criticism of Paine (Stephen 1900, II, 176). But his discussion seems quite unsatisfactory because it contains nothing other than a brief abstract. Stephen did not look at the modifications of Malthus’s comments on Paine from 1803 to 1806, and, as a matter of course, he failed in grasping how ‘significant’ Malthus’s criticism of Paine was in examining the development of his political views.

As is widely known, John Maynard Keynes praised Malthus highly as his intellectual forebear. The Royal Economic Society edition of Keynes’s *Essays in Biography* includes two essays on Malthus. One is relatively long, entitled ‘Robert Malthus: The First of the Cambridge Economist’ (Keynes 1933 [1972]) while the other is relatively short, entitled ‘Robert Malthus: Centenary Allocation’ (Keynes 1935 [1972]). Keynes did not comment in any significant way about Malthus’s criticism of Paine in either of his two essays. The most interesting features shared among them, however, is that, in trying to illustrate the development of Malthus’s conception of ‘effective demand’, Keynes quoted the same passage against Paine’s *Rights of Man*. One of Keynes’s two essays quoted paragraph 12 in the sixth chapter of BOOK IV of the 1803 *Essay* as a whole while the other quoted it partially (Keynes 1933 [1972], 90; 1935 [1972], 105). Besides, it is worth noting that this paragraph appeared only in the 1803 *Essay*. This bibliographic information inevitably drives us to the question of why this paragraph disappeared from 1806 onwards and the question of continuity and discontinuity between the second and later editions of the *Essay*.

intellectual relationship between Paine and Malthus.
Yoshio Nagai carried these questions one step further. He clearly pointed out that paragraph 12 appeared in the second Essay and evidently insisted that a passage from this paragraph – ‘She [=Nature] tells him [=a man whose labour the society does not want] to be gone’ - serves as evidence of the continuity of Paleian7 perspectives on man and nature between the 1798 and 1803 Essay (Nagai 2000, 123-124). Contrary to the commonly accepted interpretation, Nagai suggested the discontinuity between the second and later editions of the Essay. This remark is very intriguing and worth examining more closely.

Though the order in which the relevant studies are introduced may be reversed, Gertrude Himmelfarb pointed out the significance of paragraph 12 in the sixth chapter of BOOK IV of the 1803 Essay sooner than anybody else. Her antipathy to this passage is connected with her dislike of the supposedly demoralizing nature of Malthus’s political economy: ‘The most notorious passage, cited again and again by contemporaries as evidence of Malthus’s heartlessness, appeared only in the second edition. … Although Malthus hastened to remove this passage from subsequent editions …, it continued to be quoted against him’ (Himmelfarb 1984, 122-3). Her interpretation underlies E.P Thompson’s story in which a paternalistic ‘moral economy’ was replaced by a merciless ‘political economy’ (Thompson [1971] 1991).

Himmelfarb charged Malthus as the spokesman for ‘de-moralizing’ political economy. In making the case for Malthus as a political moralist, on the contrary, Donald Winch provided an alternative interpretation of paragraph 12: ‘His [=Malthus’s] speedy withdrawal of the polemical passage in the second Essay … is an indication of his desire to combat such readings’ (Winch 1987, 100). Besides, Winch clearly indicated

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7 William Paley (1743-1805): an English divine, Christian apologist, utilitarian, philosopher, and author of *Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy* (1795) and other works.
the fact that Malthus referred to “Hume’s ideas on the possible euthanasia, or ‘easiest
death’, of the British Constitution” when he diagnosed ‘the way in which popular
discontent, mob violence, and despotism were connected’ (Winch 1987, 51). This is a
very important remark relevant to the main subject of this paper. Though Winch did not
articulate as such, Malthus’s references to Hume and Paine appear in succession in the
same chapter, and they are both very closely connected to each other. This connection is
also very intriguing and worth considering in more detail.

In short, Malthus’s criticism of Paine - in particular, its alterations from the
1803 to 1806 Essay and its relationship with Hume’s ideas - is a subject worthy of
serious discussion, because it will almost certainly have great significance for exploring
his intellectual development

III

This section outlines the first half (paragraphs 1-9) of the sixth chapter of
BOOK IV of the second and later editions of the Essay.

Paragraphs 1-3 assess the prevailing ignorance of the principal cause of poverty
and its fatal consequences. According to Malthus, ‘the greatest part of the sufferings of
the lower classes of society’ (EPP, II, 122) were attributed exclusively to ‘themselves’
(ibid.), that is, to ‘the laws of nature and the imprudence of the poor’ (ibid.). This
doctrine may appear ‘unfavourable to the cause of liberty’ (ibid.), but the truth is the
opposite. The lower classes of people were so ignorant of the correct cause of distress
among them that they mistook it for a simple product of misrule. It provided
opportunities for the poor to turn into a mob, and in turn for the well-disposed people to
throw themselves into the arms of the military despot against the horrors of anarchy. A mob was ‘of all monsters, the most fatal to freedom’ \((EPP, II, 123)\)\(^8\).

Paragraph 4 is of such interest to be worth a full inclusion.

Of the tendency of mobs to produce tyranny, we may not be long\(^9\) without an example in this country. As a friend to freedom, and an enemy to large standing armies, it is with extreme reluctance that I am compelled to acknowledge, that, had it not been for the organized force in the country\(^{10}\), the distresses of the people during the late scarcities\(^{11}\), encouraged by the extreme ignorance and folly of many among the higher classes, might have driven them to commit the most dreadful outrages, and ultimately to involve the country in all the horrors of famine. Should such periods often recur, a recurrence which we have too much reason to apprehend from the present state of the country, the prospect which opens to our view is melancholy in the extreme. The English constitution will be seen hastening with rapid strides to the *Euthanasia* foretold by Hume; unless its progress be interrupted by some popular commotion; and this alternative presents a picture still more appalling to the imagination. If political discontents were blended with the cries of hunger, and a revolution were to take place by the instrumentality of a mob clamouring for want of food, the consequences would be unceasing change, and unceasing carnage, the bloody career of which, nothing but the establishment of some complete

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\(^8\) Here I should like to acknowledge the general influence which Donald Winch’s work has had on my understanding of this aspect of Malthus’s thinking; see especially Winch (1983, 76; 1987, 51).

\(^9\) In 1817 this was changed to: … we may not, perhaps, be long without an example in this country.

\(^{10}\) In 1806 Malthus made two alterations to this sentence: As a friend to freedom, and naturally an enemy to large standing armies … I am compelled to acknowledge that, had it not been for the great organized force in the country …

\(^{11}\) In 1817 a footnote was added here: 1800 and 1801.
despotism could arrest. \((EPP, \text{II, 123-4})^{12}\)

First, note that Malthus announced himself to be ‘an enemy to large standing armies’. As Donald Winch rightly pointed out, Malthus regretted that ‘their existence had proved necessary during the food riots of 1800 and 1801’ \((\text{Winch 1983, 76})\) in the language of a ‘Country’ Whig tradition.\(^13\)

Secondly, note the phrase of ‘\textit{Euthanasia [of the English constitution] foretold by Hume’. The word ‘\textit{Euthanasia}’ appears in Hume’s essay, ‘\textit{Whether the British Government Inclines More to Absolute Monarchy, or to a Republic}’ \((1742)\). Malthus’s reference to this essay serves as the material to interpret the intellectual connection between Malthus and Hume. In spite of the lack of any discussion on the subsistence crisis, Hume’s analysis on the British constitution gave a lot of inspiration to Malthus’s diagnosis of the contemporary scarcities. Malthus attempted to apply Hume’s moderate, prudent and anti-utopian political views on the British government to the analysis of the subsistence crisis of 1800-1. Malthus feared the high possibility that the rise of hungry mobs facing the subsistence crisis would lead to anarchy and consequently an absolute monarchy.

\(^{12}\) Italics in original.

\(^{13}\) See also Winch \((1987, 52)\). For a detailed explanation of a ‘Country’ ideology, see Dickinson \((1977, \text{ch.5})\). On this aspect of Malthus’s thinking in the 1780s and the 1790s, see Nakazawa \((2013)\).

\(^{14}\) Around the end of this essay, Hume stated: ‘\textit{The tide has run long, and with some rapidity, to the side of popular government, and is just beginning to turn towards monarchy. / It is well known, that every government must come to a period, and that death is unavoidable to the political as well as to the animal body. … Here I would frankly declare, that, though liberty be preferable to slavery, in almost every case; … And, as such a violent government cannot long subsist, we shall, at last, after many convulsions, and civil wars, find repose in absolute monarchy, which it would have been happier for us to have established peaceably from the beginning. Absolute monarchy, therefore, is the easiest death, the true \textit{Euthanasia} of the BRITISH constitution. / Thus, if we have reason to be more jealous of monarchy, because the danger is more imminent from that quarter; we have also reason to be more jealous of popular government, because that danger is more terrible. This may teach us a lesson of moderation in all our political controversies’} \((\text{Hume [1742] 1994, 31-32; Italics and bold in original})\).
Paragraphs 5-9 assess the causes of ‘those gradual encroachments of power, which have taken place of late years’ (EPP, II, 124) by focusing on the movements of the country gentlemen and the common people.

Malthus confirmed the traditional role of the country gentlemen as ‘guardians of British liberty’ (ibid.) and lamented that they had abandoned their original duties. At the same time, however, he acknowledged that the existing state of crisis had obliged them to do so. Being ‘actuated more by fear than treachery’\(^\text{15}\) (EPP, II, 126), they could not help making concessions to oppressive government ‘on condition of being protected from the mob’ (EPP, II, 124). Supplemented by Hume’s discussion, Malthus concluded that ‘Should the British constitution ultimately lapse into a despotism, as has been prophesied [by Hume]\(^\text{16}\), I shall think that the country gentlemen of England will have really much more to answer for than the ministers’\(^\text{17}\) (EPP, II, 126).

In addition, Malthus found the ultimate causes of the existing state of emergency to be ‘more the ignorance and delusion of the lower classes of the people … than the actual disposition of the government to tyranny’ (EPP, II, 125). As previously explained in his pamphlet on The High Price of Provisions (1800)\(^\text{18}\), it is a great mistake to think that ‘the destruction of the Parliament, the Lord Mayor, and the monopolizers, would make bread cheap, and that a revolution would enable them all to support their families’ (ibid.). The prevailing ignorance of the cause of the high price of bread among the poor led to popular disturbances.

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\(^{15}\) In 1806 treachery was replaced by ‘corruption’.

\(^{16}\) Nakazawa’s insertion.

\(^{17}\) In 1817 the word really was excised.

\(^{18}\) In this pamphlet Malthus stated: ‘The continuation of extraordinary high prices, after a harvest that was at one time looked forward to as abundant, has contributed still more to astonish and perplex the public mind. Many men of sense have joined in the universal cry of the common people, that there must be roguery somewhere; and the general indignation has fallen upon monopolizers, forestallers, and regraters …’ (Malthus [1800]1986, 6).
IV

This section presents a sketch of the second half (paragraphs 10-21) of the sixth chapter of BOOK IV of the second and later editions of the Essay, with attention to the debt Malthus owed to Hume when Malthus criticized Paine’s claim of a ‘right to subsistence’ and plans for what we now call a ‘welfare state’.

At the beginning of paragraph 10, Malthus criticized Paine by name:

The circulation of Paine's Rights of Man [sic], it is supposed, has done great mischief among the lower and middling classes of people in this country. This is probably true; but not because man is without rights, or that these rights ought not to be known; but because Mr. Paine has fallen into some fundamental errors respecting the principles of government, and in many important points has shown himself totally unacquainted with the structure of society, and the different moral effects to be expected from the physical difference between this country and America. (EPP, II, 126)

Leslie Stephen has provided a useful summary of paragraphs 10, 11 and 13. He summarized:

Malthus's criticism of Paine is significant. He agrees with Paine that the cause of popular risings is ‘want of happiness’ 19. But Paine, he remarks, was ‘in

19 EPP, II, 127.
many important points totally ignorant of the structure of society’; and has fallen into the error of attributing all want of happiness to government. Consequently, Paine advocates a plan for distributing taxes among the poorest classes, which would aggravate the evils a hundredfold. He fully admits with Paine that man has rights. The true line of answer would be to show what those rights are. To give this answer is not Malthus's present business; but there is one right, at any rate, which a man does not and cannot possess: namely, the ‘right to subsistence when his labour will not fairly purchase it’. He does not possess it because he cannot possess it; to try to secure it is to try to ‘reverse the laws of nature’, and therefore to produce cruel suffering by practising an ‘inhuman deceit’. The Abbé Raynal had said that a man had a right to subsist ‘before all social laws’. Man had the same right, replied Malthus, as he had to live a hundred or a thousand years. He may live, if he can without interfering with others. Social laws have, in fact, enlarged the power of subsistence; but neither before nor after their institution could an unlimited number subsist. Briefly, the question of fact comes before the question of right, and the fault of the revolutionary theorists was to settle the right without reference to the possibility of making the right correspond to the fact. (Stephen1900, II, 176)

20 EPP, II, 126. Stephen’s citation is slightly incorrect. In reality, Malthus wrote: ‘in many important points has shown himself totally unacquainted with the structure of society’.
21 EPP, II, 127.
22 Ibid.
23 Ibid.
Malthus strongly objected to the rights of man which he regarded as false or pretended. However, he did not reject the concept of the rights of man itself. He contended that the rights of man, properly understood and justly interpreted, did not include a 'right to subsistence'. He condemned Paine for having ‘fallen into some fundamental errors respecting the principles of government’ (EPP, II, 126) when Paine attributed ‘all want of happiness to government’ (EPP, II, 127) and proposed a plan for what we now call a ‘welfare state’ – a plan of ‘distributing the produce of the taxes to the poorer classes of society’ (ibid.). In Malthus’s view, want of happiness should be largely attributed to population pressure as a law of nature.

Stephen did not refer to paragraph 12. As previously mentioned, however, this paragraph appears only in the 1803 Essay. It is worth quoting the entire paragraph for further discussion:

A man who is born into a world already possessed, if he cannot get subsistence from his parents on whom he has a just demand, and if the society do not want his labour, has no claim of right to the smallest portion of food, and, in fact, has no business to be where he is. At nature’s mighty feast there is no vacant cover for him. She tells him to be gone, and will quickly execute her own orders, if he does not work upon the compassion of some of her guests. If these guests get up and make room for him, other intruders immediately appear demanding the same favour. The report of a provision for all that come, fills the hall with numerous claimants. The order and harmony of the feast is disturbed, the plenty that before reigned is changed into scarcity; and the

26 Paine advocated an early-modern version of the contemporary welfare state. See Claeys (1989, 80-82, 98-100).
happiness of the guests is destroyed by the spectacle of misery and dependence in every part of the hall, and by the clamorous importunity of those, who are justly enraged at not finding the provision which they had been taught to expect. The guests learn too late their error, in counteracting those strict orders to all intruders, issued by the great mistress of the feast, who, wishing that all her guests should have plenty, and knowing that she could not provide for unlimited numbers, humanely refused to admit fresh comers when her table was already full. (*EPP*, II, 127-8)

The point to be discussed here is, as previously mentioned in section II, why this paragraph was excised from 1806 onwards. We would speculate that the 1803 edition of the *Essay* - in particular, this paragraph - emphasized the powerful mechanism of the law of nature, while the 1806 edition - and the three subsequent editions of 1807, 1817 and 1826 - laid more emphasis on the increased effectiveness of government policies to alleviate poverty than had been the case before. Alterations between 1803 and 1806 should be sought for such conjectures.

Paragraphs 14, 15 and 17 discuss the way the improvements in government are promoted by the general circulation of the true knowledge of the causes of poverty. This applies to the poor as well as the people of property. Paragraph 16 explains of ‘the extreme probability that such a revolution would terminate in a much worse despotism than that which it had destroyed’ (*EPP*, II, 129), as if it recalled Hume’s analysis on the British constitution.

The 1806 edition of the *Essay* added the passage cited below to paragraph 18:
Though government has but little power in the direct and immediate relief of poverty, yet its indirect influence on the prosperity of its subjects is striking and incontestable. And the reason is, that though it is comparatively impotent in its efforts to make the food of a country keep pace with an unrestricted increase of population, yet its influence is great in giving the best direction to those checks, which in some form or other must necessarily take place. (*EPP*, II, 130-131)\textsuperscript{27}

Malthus evidently expressed positive expectations for government measures. This passage suggests that Malthus’s attitude towards government policies had drastically changed from 1803 to 1806.

Paragraphs 19-20 newly appeared in the 1806 *Essay*. It is clear that both of them laid more emphasis on the effectiveness of government policies to alleviate poverty than had been evident in 1803:

The first grand requisite to the growth of prudential habits is the perfect security of property; and the next perhaps is that respectability and importance, which are given to the lower classes by equal laws, and the possession of some influence in the framing of them. The more excellent therefore is the government, the more does it tend to generate that prudence and elevation of sentiment, by which alone in the present state of our being poverty can be avoided. (*EPP*, II, 131)

\textsuperscript{27} Here I am basically following Donald Winch’s insightful interpretation of this paragraph: ‘Though “indirect”, Malthus held from 1806 onward that the contribution of government to prosperity was “striking and incontestable”’ (Winch 1996, 340).
It has been sometimes asserted that the only reason why it is advantageous that the people should have some share in the government, is that a representation of the people tends best to secure the framing of good and equal laws; but that, if the same object could be attained under a despotism, the same advantage would accrue to the community. If however the representative system, by securing to the lower classes of society a more equal and liberal mode of treatment from their superiors, gives to each individual a greater personal respectability, and a greater fear of personal degradation; it is evident that it will powerfully co-operate with the security of property in animating the exertions of industry, and in generating habits of prudence; and thus more powerfully tend to increase the riches and prosperity of the lower classes of the community, than if the same laws had existed under a despotism. (ibid.)

Poverty can be gradually reduced and alleviated, but not abolished and exterminated, by government policies. Malthus was an advocate of gradual parliamentary reform, because he thought that it tended to ‘increase the riches and prosperity of the lower classes of the community’ in cooperation with ‘the security of property’. Property is not secure ‘under a despotism’.

The new passage added to paragraph 21 in the second Essay more clearly displays the evolution of Malthus’s political views from 1803 to 1806:

But though the tendency of a free constitution and a good government to diminish poverty be certain; yet their effect in this way must necessarily be indirect and slow, and very different from the direct and immediate relief,
which the lower classes of people are too frequently in the habit of looking forward to as the consequence of a revolution. This habit of expecting too much, and the irritation occasioned by disappointment, continually give a wrong direction to their efforts in favour of liberty, and constantly tend to defeat the accomplishment of those gradual reforms in government, and that slow melioration of the condition of the lower classes of society, which are really attainable. It is of the very highest importance therefore, to know distinctly what government cannot do, as well as what it can. (ibid.)

Malthus advocated moderate and gradual institutional reforms as a means to prevent violent revolutions.

V

The essential points of my argument have been expressed in the preceding pages. Two possible conclusions are drawn from this research.

First, the 1803 Essay, which was written soon after the peak of the food riot crisis, emphasized the powerful mechanism of the law of nature, while the 1806 edition emphasized more than before on the prudential check to population. Parallel with this shift of emphasis, Malthus came to lay more stress on parliamentary reform. He held that the spread of the habits of prudence and diligence among the lower classes of society, which would give rise to their economic and moral improvement, tended to be promoted by the gradual extension of popular participation in politics. Accordingly, while there is some continuity between the second and later editions of the Essay, this
paper holds that there is more discontinuity between them.

Secondly, much of Malthus’s criticism of Paine was based on Hume’s discussion of the British constitution. Malthus referred to Hume’s essay ‘Whether the British government inclines more to absolute monarchy, or to a republic’, and attempted to apply Hume’s moderate, prudent and anti-utopian political views on the British government to the analysis of the subsistence crisis of 1800-1. He developed a clear insight into the causes and effects of the contemporary subsistence crisis by connecting his principle of population and Hume’s political ideas, and consequently set forth a moderate, prudent and anti-utopian plan for political reforms.

References


Rights of Man. Thomas Paine. No One Left to Lie To: The Triangulations of William Jefferson Clinton. Paine had done so with delight in the year before he published Rights of Man, adding a covering letter which described the key as “this early trophy of the spoils of despotism, and the first ripe fruits of American principles transplanted into Europe.” The key hangs to this day on the wall of Washington’s home at Mount Vernon.