

The London School of Economics and Political
Science

*The Malthusian and the Anti-Malthusian:
The Use of Economic Ideas and Language in the Public
Discourse of Nineteenth-Century Britain*

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Abstract

The nineteenth century saw the birth of economics as a distinct academic discipline in Britain, and with it a new relationship between economic thinkers, policy makers and the wider public, who played an increasingly active role in the sphere of economic discourse. One of the most contentious economic and social debates of this time was the question of population; population growth was seen as both essential to the new industrial economy, but also feared for its association with social unrest and degeneracy. This thesis aims to make sense of the changing content and nature of this debate starting from its intellectual foundation—the Malthusian theory of population—by examining the use of Malthusian theory and rhetoric in the public discourse of population throughout the century.

In order to shed light on this changing discourse, this thesis contrasts two key moments in Britain's population debate; the public reaction to Poor Law reform in the 1830s and 40s, and the controversial question of birth control in the 1870s and 80s. Each of these debates can be seen as an independent, yet connected 'instance' of the Malthusian population debate, manifesting as public concern for the private matter of family size. Through an analysis of the discourse surrounding these two debates, notably the use of Malthusian language and rhetoric within the popular press, it is possible to draw some conclusions about the way economic rhetoric was used within the nineteenth-century public sphere. This thesis argues that the purposeful appropriation of Malthusian rhetoric within the public sphere represents a form of public engagement with economics that has until now been poorly understood.

"There are few works on political economy," said Malthus to me,
"which have been more spoken of and less read than mine."

—Quetelet, *A Treatise on Man and the Development of his Faculties*,
1842

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Chapter 1 – Introduction, Background and Sources

Introduction

The central aim of this thesis is to better understand the role that economic ideas and language play in public discourse, specifically at the level of ‘popular’ debate of newspapers, books and other media, but also within the intellectual sphere, and as part of wider social policy debates. There is no obvious or unique relationship between the formulation of economic theory and its expression in the public sphere; different economic thinkers have had more or less success in shaping public opinion and debate, which in turn has had more or less influence on policy debates. While the mathematical formalisation of economics over the course of the twentieth century has tended to lessen the public’s ability or desire to understand current academic research, there are always those economists who reach out to both the lay person and the policy maker alike.¹

The past two centuries have witnessed both the development of economics as an academic field in its own right, distinct from political and moral philosophy, but also the democratic advances and new conceptions of the role of the state that have increasingly driven policy makers to heed the advice of economic experts, as well as public opinion. The role of professional economists in policy debates is well noted, and there are innumerable examples of policies that have either been entirely driven by the discipline, or at least heavily influenced by it. This thesis will not examine this process however, but instead proposes to look at the less direct way in which economic thought has influenced the public debate, via the medium of popular discourse, instead of directly through formal channels of academic influence.

¹ See for example the reaction of the public, media commentators and politicians to Piketty’s (2014) *Capital in the 21st Century*

In order to come to any coherent understanding of this complicated and ever-changing process, this thesis will examine one particular debate that has occupied economic, public and political discourse for over two centuries; the question of population. Specifically, this thesis will examine the changing nature of the population debate over the nineteenth century in Britain, as this was the centre for a number of the great population controversies, as well as home to the many thinkers who weighed into this debate. The population debate is a worthwhile focus of study because it represents in some ways a continuous discourse, present in various forms throughout the nineteenth century (and beyond), but also precisely because the nature and content of this debate changed significantly throughout this period, reflecting changes in the public and academic concerns and conceptions of population, as well as changes in the public's willingness and ability to engage with economic ideas. Finally, this debate is as relevant today as it was in the nineteenth century, therefore it is important to understand the role of rhetoric and theory in the public discussion of this question.

This thesis will examine two key instances of this population debate in nineteenth-century Britain; the relationship between family size and poverty as considered in the Poor Law debates of the 1830s and 40s (Chapter 3), and the family limitation debates of the 1870s and 80, with the Bradlaugh-Besant trial of 1877 as focal point (Chapter 4). These instances, though touching on very different ideas and ideologies, demonstrate the public sphere's changing use of the simple and yet controversial theory of population proposed by T. R. Malthus in his 1798 anonymous pamphlet; *An Essay on the Principle of Population*. In its simplest form, Malthus' proposition was that fertility was inextricably linked to wages, and that population was inevitably limited by the constraints of both natural and human laws. The two debates described above both rely on this Malthusian paradigm, however each debate changes and reinterprets this paradigm, transforming the very meaning of Malthusianism throughout the course of the century.

What unifies these debates however, and makes them valuable case studies for this thesis, is their inherently public nature; the issues of poverty, fertility and class were

as controversial in the nineteenth century as they are today, if not more so. As well as the salience of these issues, the British public were becoming increasingly willing and able to discuss and contribute to debates of concern to them, whether through the media, public associations or political representation. It is unsurprising then that Malthusian ideas and language, so integral to these debates, would become a useful and persistent element of public discourse, with Malthus one of the few classical economists many today still know by name. One of the aims of this thesis is therefore to describe how and why Malthus' simple theory would go on to shape the major population debates of the nineteenth century, and how this in turn shaped the public conception of the doctrine of Malthusianism as it evolved throughout the century.

This thesis therefore contributes to a number of related debates within both the history of economics specifically and of public discourse more broadly. The first is the question of how economic knowledge travels both across time and space, as well as between different levels of discourse (academic, political, popular). By following Malthus' population theory across a century of debate, this thesis will shed light on the channels via which economic ideas travel between these different spheres and the process by which this occurs. This analysis will also provide insight into the broader issue of the interaction between economic theory, policy and the lay-public, a complicated relationship that has been under-explored in the traditional history of economics literature which tends to focus on the role of economists, sometimes policy makers, but rarely public actors, even though all are involved in the creation and dissemination of economic knowledge.

However, the main contribution of this thesis is a better understanding of how the public uses and engages with economic language and theory. What the use of Malthusian language in nineteenth-century Britain demonstrates is that far from being a passive actor in economic discourse—simply absorbing economic theory from the academic sphere through the work of 'popularisers'—the public sphere is in fact an active locus of economic rhetoric and debate. In the historical cases studied here, we will see how at the popular level of discourse, Malthusian

language and theory was appropriated and transformed for two very different, and even conflicting, social causes. The use of economics by the public is a crucial question both historically and to the present day, as it directly influences how economic ideas are received, or indeed rejected by the public.

1.1 Malthus and Malthusian Ideas in the Nineteenth Century

1.1.1 Malthus and the Essay on the Principle of Population

As one of the major contributors to the classical school of economics, Malthus has certainly not lacked scholarly attention, with numerous works dedicated to his life, times and work.² The work of Patricia James, Anthony Waterman, Donald Winch, Kenneth Smith and more recently, Robert Mayhew, represent the key contributions, and thus constitute the historiographical background for this thesis. James' *Population Malthus* (1979) is surely the most comprehensive account of Malthus' life, including the famous essay on population, as well as his other contributions to political economy.³ Winch's *Riches and Poverty* (1996) examines the role of Malthus' work in the changing political and moral landscape of his day, arguing that this debate represents "the beginnings of an important schism in British social and cultural history" (1996, p.6). Smith's (1951) focus is on the reception of the population essay during Malthus' lifetime, not only in academic circles but in the intellectual and political sphere more broadly. Where these works concentrate primarily on the period of Malthus' life, that is until 1834, Waterman (1998), Huzel (2006) and Mayhew (2014) have extended the analysis to the decades, and even

² Pullen, discussing this vast literature, acerbically notes that "The contradictory and repetitive nature of much of Malthus scholarship during the period 1933-97 suggests that the urge to publish has often proved stronger than the urge to understand" (Pullen 1998, p.349).

³ Malthus' other major contributions to political economy are *The Present High Price of Provisions* (1800), *Observations on the Effects of the Corn Laws* (1814) and *Principles of Political Economy* (1820).

centuries after Malthus' death. The scope and intention of these various works differ considerably, providing a range of interpretations of Malthus' contribution, which can only be briefly summarised here.

Malthus wrote the now infamous essay on population anonymously in 1789, with all accounts agreeing that this work was in many respects the young Malthus' contribution to an ongoing debate with his father, ardent fan of the enlightenment thinkers; Rousseau, Condorcet and Godwin. It was the utopian system proposed by Godwin in particular that Malthus wished to refute in this essay, although he made it clear that Godwin's vision was "by far the most beautiful and engaging of any that has yet appeared" (Malthus 1798, X.2).

Smith (1951) notes that initial interest in the anonymous first edition of the *Essay on the Principles of Population* was considerable, in spite of its unoriginal or unsurprising central hypothesis, which had been anticipated and in some cases almost fully articulated by a number of eighteenth-century thinkers, who had long been interested in the laws of population. Malthus himself was explicit about the inspiration he had drawn from the works of David Hume, Robert Wallace, Adam Smith and Richard Price (James 1979, p.60), but would never completely escape accusations of unoriginality. While many editions were to follow over the years, with considerable changes, it was in the first edition of 1789 that Malthus clearly outlined the theory of 'population' with which he would forever be associated;

That population cannot increase without the means of Subsistence, is a proposition so evident, that it needs no illustration.

That population does invariably increase, where there are the means of subsistence, the history of every people that have ever existed will abundantly prove.

And, that the superior power of population cannot be checked, without producing misery or vice, the ample portion of these too bitter ingredients in the cup of human life, and the continuance of the physical causes that seem to have produced them, bear too convincing a testimony. (Malthus 1798, p.37)

However it is probably Malthus' pronouncements on the ratio of increasing food production to population growth, and the proposition that population can double

every 25 years, for which he would be more famously known and frequently ridiculed:⁴

Assuming then, my postulata as granted, I say, that the power of population is indefinitely greater than the power in the earth to produce subsistence for man.
Population, when unchecked, increases in a geometrical ratio.
Subsistence increases only in an arithmetical ratio. A slight acquaintance with numbers will shew the immensity of the first power in comparison of the second. (Malthus 1798, I.17)

The role of these ratios in Malthus' work was problematic from the very first edition of the essay. At times they appear to serve only an illustrative role, an extreme or marginal case that showed the futility of Godwin's proposed utopia.⁵ However at other times, Malthus seems more convinced of their universal validity, arguing that it was these 'laws' that prevented any meaningful improvement in the conditions of the labouring classes in Britain. Performing a small act of rational reconstruction, we can see that Malthus' argument rested on the relatively uncontroversial idea that agricultural production must eventually face diminishing returns as more 'marginal' land was brought into use, while there was no such 'natural' limit on human fertility. However, Malthus' inconsistent use of these ratios would guarantee two centuries of gloating thanks to improvements in agricultural productivity (for example the discovery of phosphate fertiliser in the late nineteenth

⁴ The supposed ability of population to double every 25 years is taken from the case of America, Malthus referring to a "pamphlet published by a Dr. Styles and referred to by Dr. Price, that the inhabitants of the back settlements of America doubled their numbers in fifteen years" and later: "But to be quite sure that we do not go beyond the truth, we will only suppose the period of doubling to be twenty-five years, a ratio of increase, which is well known to have taken place throughout all the Northern States of America" (Malthus 1798, X.13).

⁵ Godwin's vision of society is perhaps best described by Winch as a 'post-economic utopia' (1996, p.258), in which all economic institutions (among which Godwin includes marriage, as well as property rights and labour relations) have been transcended, with their attendant evils of moral dependence and social injustice.

century, and synthetic fertilizer during the green revolution of the mid-twentieth century), as well as the dramatic reduction in birth rates that would occur after Malthus' death thanks to rapid social and technological change.

The success of the first edition can be attributed to a range of different factors. For one thing, the timing of the book coincided with a growing scepticism about the utopian ideals of the Enlightenment and French Revolution (which many in Britain considered a political failure by this time). Malthus' essay was also perceived as a direct attack on Godwin, the darling of late eighteenth century British intellectuals, and could therefore not go ignored. Finally the economic climate likely played some role in the success of the *Essay*; with wheat prices reaching record high prices due to poor weather at the turn of the century (Smith 1951, p.35). Underlying these factors was, of course, the rapidly changing nature of the British economy, from traditional agrarian to dynamic industrial powerhouse, resulting in population movement, demographic change and rapid urbanisation, with its accompanying ills.

By 1803, when a second, greatly modified, edition of the *Essay* was published, Malthus had already achieved a considerable intellectual reputation, despite the small circulation of both the first and second editions. Smith attributes this to a 'substantial oral tradition' that must have allowed for the diffusion of Malthus' ideas among intellectual circles of the day (Smith 1951, p.48). Possibly because of this, the early debate on Malthus' ideas was not always based on a sound reading of the *Essay*, but on isolated passages and selective quotes, both among Malthus' supporters and detractors.

A third edition in 1806 did not greatly alter the argument of the first two, but interestingly in this edition Malthus chose to include a summative appendix, which "replies to certain criticisms, and gives the 'aim and bent of the whole' to those who have not the leisure to read the whole work." (Malthus as quoted in Smith 1951, p.63). Both the third and fourth editions had a much wider circulation than the earlier two, perhaps partly as a result of their greater accessibility to a non-expert audience. Smith argues that the inclusion of this appendix "reinforces the view

that the Malthusian doctrine was become as much an oral tradition as a written one" (1951, p.63), resulting in a parallel oral debate on the merits of a Malthusian doctrine representing "opinions [Malthus] does not explicitly state, and which do not flow directly from his actual writings." (1951, p.64).

Malthus' explicit involvement with the controversial reform of the old Poor Laws began properly in 1807 when he wrote to the MP Samuel Whitbread on the latter's proposal to reform poor relief, which Whitbread argued had:

served to degrade those whom it was intended to exalt, to destroy the spirit of independence, throughout our land; to hold out hopes which cannot be realized; to encourage idleness and vice; and to produce a superfluous population, the offspring of improvidence, and the early victim of misery and want. (HL Deb 05 February 1807 vol 8 cc657-72)

In his letter, Malthus argued that legislation alone could not solve the problem of pauperism, and that on the whole the benefits of abolishing the poor laws altogether would outweigh their negative consequences, but stressed the need for gradual reform. This reform, and the controversy surrounding it, would however be postponed by the fall of Grenville's government in March 1807.

Whitbread's bill was however the catalyst for one of Malthus' most vocal critics, William Hazlitt, who published numerous letters and articles on what he saw as a callous attack on society's most vulnerable. Hazlitt was also a close friend of Godwin, and as such held nothing back in his critique, which he acknowledged at times was abusive (Smith 1951, p.70). However Hazlitt's critique of Malthus was not entirely based on the emotive nature of the issue or personal animosity; his criticism again emphasising the lack of originality in the essay, other than the invention of the famous ratios, of which he warns: "Mathematical terms carry with them an imposing air of accuracy and profundity, and ought, therefore, to be applied strictly, and with the greatest caution, or not at all" (1807 cited Smith, 1951, p. 71).

Until the end of the Napoleonic wars, interest in Malthus' essay was kept alive principally in the periodical reviews; two notable examples being the *Edinburgh Review* which had sided with Malthus from the beginning, and the *Quarterly*, in

which the originally hostile sentiment was slowly moderating. The passing of the Corn Law of 1815 brought Malthus back into the public debate, as did the publication of three books critical of his theories, by Simon Gray (1815), John Weyland (1816) and James Grahame (1816).⁶

A fifth edition of Malthus' essay published in 1817 included an expanded discussion of migration, the Corn Law and the reformation of the Poor Laws. Where his original work on the question of population was perceived as cruel and lacking humanity, Malthus' opposition to the repeal of the Corn Laws meant that the public now also saw him as a defender of landed interests. What Malthus actually argued for and the public's perception of his ideas were only to deviate further from this point in time on, Mayhew noting that "by 1817 the real doctrines of Malthus and those attached to his name were diverging, resulting in the creation of a monstrous shibboleth, "Malthusianism," at some distance from anything Malthus had actually advocated" (2014, p.98). James also notes that by this period, Malthus had become almost synonymous with the one solution to the population problem that he forever refused to consider, that is, contraception; "At this period Malthus might well have begun to feel that Malthusianism was becoming an evil genie beyond his control" (James 1979, p.376).

In 1828 the debate took a different direction with the entry of Nassau William Senior into the fray, a genuine 'political economist' whom Smith contrasts with the "doctors, writers, tory philanthropists, and social reformers" of the earlier debate (1951, p.180). Senior critiqued Malthus in two lectures at Oxford in 1828, supplemented by correspondence between the two economists in March and April of 1829. The discussion ended without any real consensus, and Smith considers that it is at this point that "The Malthusian influence had begun to wane" (1951, p.189).

⁶ For a comprehensive discussion of these three authors and their criticism of Malthus see Smith (1951, pp.86–110).

A unifying claim in many of these accounts is that from very early on in the nineteenth century the name Malthus, as well as the term 'Malthusian', were, if not universally, at least widely recognised within the public sphere. James tells how she

found no popular songs about Malthusianism, but allusion to Malthus in the literature and journalism of his day are legion... His contemporary fame is revealed, I think, most tellingly by all the casual passing references to Malthus, *which assume that everyone knew what he stood for*, in a range of popular works from Miss Mitford's *Our Village* to Byron's *Don Juan*. (James 1979, p.346, emphasis added)

Winch also notes that the term 'Malthusian' was already "in currency during Malthus's life" as a "term of opprobrium" (Winch 1996, p.224). It is one of the aims of this thesis to explore exactly this phenomenon, that is, how people came to understand 'what Malthus stood for'.

On the 200th anniversary of the publication of the famous *Essay*, Waterman (1998) took the opportunity to assess the impact of Malthus in the history of economic thought, and in particular Malthus' place in the economic debate in the years shortly after his death in 1834. In contrast to the view discussed above that Malthus was a publically recognised figure both during his life and after 1834, Waterman contends that Malthus was essentially ignored by the academic sphere for the remainder of the nineteenth century,⁷ and that it was Keynes, using his 'immense literary prestige', who successfully revived interest in Malthus from the late 1930s (1998, p.298).⁸ This dichotomy between the public vs academic relevance of

⁷ "The only important attempt to take Malthus seriously in the later nineteenth century was that of James Bonar. His study *Malthus and His Work* was reprinted with small additions thirty-nine years later (Bonar [1885] 1924), which itself is evidence of Malthus's dwindling reputation among economists during the century following his death in 1834" (Waterman 1998, p.297).

⁸ Keynes' interest possibly ignited by Piero Sraffa's recent biographical research on Malthus, including the discovery of Malthus' side of the Malthus-Ricardo correspondence.

Malthus throughout the nineteenth century is one of the key themes of this thesis, which aims to show how Malthus stayed relevant in popular discourse, while mostly (although not completely) ignored by economists.

In 1935 Bonar, Fay and Keynes commemorated the centenary of Malthus' death with a collection of essays on the influence of Malthus both during and after his life. Fay, for example, makes a strong case for the 'fruitful' nature of Malthus' ideas, stating:

Now a man may influence his generation by way either of attraction or repulsion; and attraction may show itself in the translation of his teaching to other spheres of knowledge, as well as in the incorporation of it into the policy, practice and literature of the sphere for which it was designed. In every one of these ways the influence of Malthus was potent. (1935, p.226)

Bonar also emphasises Malthus' influence on policy making; including the creation of a regular population census and of course the Poor Law reforms, but also his influence on later thinkers like Charles Darwin, and his active role in the formation of the Statistical Society along with Quetelet and Babbage (1935, p.223).

These various accounts of the reception and spread of Malthusianism say very little about why the influence of Malthus in the economic debate waned so rapidly after his death, waiting a full hundred years to be revived by Keynes. Checkland (1949) offers one possible account of why this happened, describing a purposeful campaign waged by Ricardo's supporters against Malthus. Checkland singles out J. R. McCulloch in particular as the lead disseminator of Ricardian theory, describing him as "probably responsible for the annihilation of more constructive economic thinking than any other political economist" (1949, p.49), and as a key personality, if not key thinker in nineteenth-century economic thought.

James Mill also apparently played a key role in removing Malthus from the Ricardian school of thought, notably in his advice to Ricardo:

Ricardo was prepared to go into his third edition in the same spirit in which he had published the first two—making a further contribution to discussion, in which he was prepared to meet objections to his theory. He proposed to publish a whole series of Notes on Malthus'

case in an Appendix. Mill, whose sense of how to transform ideas into beliefs was so much stronger, advised otherwise... Malthus, on the other hand, was proffered no such advice, and continued to incorporate in his work the opposing case. The result, as Mill foresaw, was to give Ricardo's work an air of positiveness which that of Malthus wholly lacked. (Checkland 1949, p.50)

Malthus' participation in the Political Economy club, founded by Mill, is also blamed for his eventual obsolescence. Dissenting views were tolerated within the club, but it was used by Ricardo's supporters to present a unified, Ricardian theory of political economy to the outside world, with no room for Malthus' ideas. After Ricardo's death in 1823, the 'younger members' of the club met without Malthus to discuss a proposed series of Ricardo Memorial Lectures, for which Malthus was deemed an inappropriate speaker due to his diverging opinions, and unsurprisingly it was McCulloch who was chosen to give the first lectures (James 1979, p.361).

Much of the historiography discussed here touches on the issue of how Malthusian ideas were popularised at the time of his writing and beyond, but it rarely addresses the question directly, focussing instead on Malthus' influence in the more formal intellectual sphere. Huzel (2006) does look at the popularisation of Malthus' ideas, specifically in the early part of the nineteenth century while Malthus was alive:

Few would deny that from his first publication in 1798 to his death in 1834 he shaped the entire discourse on the poor and became the beacon against which all proposals for solving the growing problem of poverty in early industrial society had to be measured... *The term 'Malthusian' became embedded in the language of the early nineteenth century* and Malthus became one of the most controversial writers of his age. (2006, p.1, emphasis added)

Huzel examines three different avenues for the popularisation of Malthusian ideas in the early part of the century; the writings of Harriet Martineau (a vocal supporter), William Cobbett (a fervent critic), as well as the role of the 'Pauper' or 'Penny Press' more broadly (which was usually on Cobbett's side of the debate). Chapter 3 will explicitly address the public's use of Malthusian language in the 1830s and 40s, but less so from the perspective of the above popularisers, instead focussing on the more anonymous sphere of the popular press.

Other than Huzel's work, which only covers the period until the Poor Law controversy and Malthus death in 1834, the popular use of Malthusian ideas has been almost entirely neglected, and there has been almost no attempt made at analysing the use of Malthusian theory within the public discourse after this period.⁹ This thesis aims to address this gap in the literature, analysing the public use of Malthusian language throughout the nineteenth century, as well as providing new evidence on the role of Malthusian ideas in the poor relief debates of the 1830s and 40s.

1.1.2 Malthusian Ideas in Nineteenth Century Literature

While little work has been done on the popular reception of Malthusian ideas in the latter part of the nineteenth century, the field of literary studies provides a useful account of how certain 'Malthusian' ideas filtered into the public consciousness via the literary sphere. Although this thesis will focus on popular appropriation of Malthusianism (whereas most nineteenth-century authors are arguably members of the literary elite), this literature is worth considering as it does shed light on which Malthusian themes or tropes persisted in the public imagination over the course of the century.

Increased awareness of new demographic trends (population growth, urbanisation, migration, smaller families) is evidenced in the literature of the nineteenth century, mirroring to a large extent discussion in the academic sphere. Daly (2015) terms this literary concern with questions of population the 'demographic imagination',

⁹ In contrast there is a considerable literature on the diffusion of Malthusian ideas in France during the nineteenth century, for example Spengler (1936), Charbit (1981; 2009) and Ogden and Huss (1982). The French obsession with Malthusian ideas is thought to stem from a certain population paranoia; France experienced a considerable decrease in fertility in the nineteenth century and was concerned about the impact of this on its economic and military strength.

arguing that a large part of Victorian cultural production can be subsumed into this category.¹⁰ One of the more explicitly ‘Malthusian’ tropes that figures frequently in nineteenth century literature, and that relates to both the case studies of this thesis, is that of surplus population. Crucially, the idea of surplus population does not directly entail concern about over-population itself; as the century progressed, bringing a declining birth-rate and increased emigration, it became clear that Britain was not at risk of sinking under the weight of its population. Rather the theme of ‘surplus’ more commonly represents concern with particular groups within the population; the poor, women, children, criminals, and later in the century, specific racial groups.

The idea of a surplus population of paupers is a central theme for many of the realist authors of the nineteenth century, from the mid-century industrial novels¹¹ typified by Charles Dickens, Elizabeth Gaskell and Benjamin Disraeli, to the second generation ‘slum fiction’ writers including George Gissing, Margaret Harkness, Arthur Morrison, and Walter Besant.¹² While the problem of poverty was not a new one, the nineteenth-century vision of poverty was heavily influenced by Malthus’ arithmetic exposition, Himmelfarb (1984a) describing this as a transition from a ‘natural’ conception of poverty to a ‘social’ one. Writing about the ‘Malthusian Economies’ of *Jane Eyre*, Schlossberg (2001) argues that Charlotte Brontë’s novel of

¹⁰ Daly identifies five cultural broad cultural responses to nineteenth-century population growth which he terms apocalyptic, criminal, supernatural, visual, and proto-ecological (Daly 2015, p.6).

¹¹ Also called ‘social novels’, ‘social problem novels’ or ‘Condition-of-England novels’ (Simmons Jr. 2002).

¹² McKean (2011) argues that compared with the earlier industrial novels, the ‘slum fiction’ writers of the later part of the century were less concerned with social reform than the artistic merits of their fiction, that for them “The crowd symbolized a kind of incomplete humanity that befitted sensational writing, not rational reform” (McKean 2011, p.51).

1847 is a typical example of this increasingly mathematical concern with population and poverty, describing the narrative as:

dramatizing the laws of Malthusian economics, speaking powerfully to a range of mid-nineteenth-century social anxieties regarding the relationship between the overproduction of unwanted children and the threat of mass starvation on a national scale (Schlossberg 2001, p.489).

Orphans, factory children, spinsters and widows also figure prominently in Victorian novels as representatives of this 'surplus' population.¹³ In her work on the theme of child murder within British culture, McDonagh (2003) argues that the Victorians' renewed interest in fairy stories and folklore reflected growing public concern with childhood mortality (one of Malthus' positive checks); these stories often revolving around missing or stolen children. Probably its bleakest manifestation is in the 'mass of murdered infants' commonly supposed to have fallen victim to working class neglect or cruelty, with the theme of infanticide a frequent device in many novels of the century, e.g. Dickens' *The Chimes* (1844)¹⁴ and George Eliot's *Adam Bede* (1859).¹⁵

As well as concerns about over- or surplus population, the nineteenth century also saw a significant shift in the place of the family in literature, notably the institutions of marriage and motherhood. The 'marriage plot' (that is, the inevitable, happy marriage at the end of a novel), long a staple of British literature, takes on a darker, Malthusian aspect in the nineteenth century. Instead of providing a neat, happy

¹³ For example Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford* (1853) addresses the growing societal concern with unmarried women, 'residuals' of the arithmetic of marriage (Niles 2005).

¹⁴ In which the central character is shown a vision of his daughter about to drown herself and her infant from desperation, referencing the true story of Mary Furley, who survived while her child drowned, and was found guilty of murder (McDonagh 2003, p.119).

¹⁵ Dalley interprets the storyline of infanticide and constant use of the imagery of food as "as a register for Malthusian concerns about sex, family, responsibility, and dependence" (Dalley 2008, p.549).

ending, marriage itself becomes entwined with concerns of unchecked reproduction (as foreseen in Malthus' dystopian thought experiment), starvation, and ultimately death. The marriage plot thus bifurcates in the nineteenth century; Kreisel (2012) claiming that there are "two possible endings for Victorian plots: death and marriage" (Kreisel 2012, p.10).¹⁶ However, even in stories that end with a marriage, the characters have not necessarily avoided their Malthusian fate. In a study of the two-penny magazines of the early nineteenth century, Colella (2002) describes how the short stories published in these magazines (with predominantly working class readerships) almost always included some kind of 'Malthusian marriage plot'; the stories rarely end in marriage, and when they do, death is not far behind; "These plots convey a blatant Malthusian morale: better to burn than to marry, better to wait (indefinitely) than to die (young)" (Colella 2002, p.24).

Nineteenth-century literature thus reflected a repositioning of the family from the moral or religious sphere, to the economic; according to this new paradigm, decisions about courtship, marriage and child-bearing not only could be, but *should* be, decided by economic reasoning (or the Malthusian fate described above would be the result). This contrasts with the traditionally moral or religious view of marriage, as Dalley argues in her study of George Eliot's *Adam Bede* (1858):

The introduction of Malthusian theory into British society challenged traditional ideologies regarding sex and morality by, in some substantial degree, shifting focus from the religious imperative for marriage to the economic repercussions of marriage and sexuality. (Dalley 2008, p.550)

Importantly, this paradigm also shifted responsibility for the 'surplus poor' from society to the individual; poverty and suffering being the inevitable and predictable outcome of imprudent marriages, and not a failure of social or moral order. In

¹⁶ Kreisel's research aims to place the works of Thomas Hardy and George Eliot within the economic discourses of the time, from laissez-faire economics to the marginal utility theory of Jevons (Kreisel 2012).

literature this changing conception of economic responsibility at the family level is reflected in “the insistent repetition of images of hoarding, self-denial, and undue thrift in the Victorian novel—particularly on the part of female or feminized characters” (Kreisel 2012, p.6). Women in Victorian novels are thus presented as the ultimate ‘Malthusian’ decision makers, balancing the desire to marry or have children with the requirement to provide for the new mouths. Harriet Martineau, one of Malthus’ most prominent popularisers, depicts this ideal of the responsible economic woman in her *Illustrations of Political Economy* published between 1832 and 1834. Dzelzainis (2006) summarises the plot of one of the stories in this collection:

The eponymous heroine of ‘Cousin Marshall’ is praised for scrimping and saving to keep herself and her family from the workhouse, while her pauper relatives and neighbours mock her scrupulosity and exploit the generosity of the existing Poor Laws to the full. (Dzelzainis 2006, p.5)

However this idealised (and ideological) vision of economic woman attracted much criticism from other writers. Dzelzainis contrasts Martineau’s apology of Malthusianism with the writing of Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna’s; for example her four part *The Wrongs of Woman* (1843-44), which shows how female economic responsibility under a ‘Malthusian political economy’ (that is, no welfare provision outside of workhouses) inevitably leads to prostitution and even infanticide (Dzelzainis 2006).

This idea of an idealised economic man (or woman) became in itself a common target of Victorian social novelists, especially in the middle decades of the century. Dickens probably best exemplifies this critique, in novels like *A Christmas Carol* (1843) and *Hard Times* (1854), which Dickens himself states were intended to explicitly satirise “those who see figures and averages, and nothing else” (as quoted in Henderson 2000, p.142). This somewhat absurd caricature is often presented in stark contrast with the real sufferings of the labouring class, and the wider class conflicts between the labouring and capitalist classes. Winch notes, for example, that the marriage in *Hard Times* can be seen as “an alliance between an apologetic political economy and the interests of an exploiting class” (Winch 2000, p.245).

Winch argues that the caricature of Gradgrind is so effective because it does not ridicule 'economic man' but only exaggerates, and is even sympathetic to his naïve ambitions.¹⁷ The Malthusian can be a sympathetic character, even the hero; Schlossberg for instance recounts how Jane Eyre benefits in a Malthusian sense from the death of her classmates: "For Jane, counting the surviving bodies of her fellow schoolmates is not simply an intellectual or academic exercise: her strength, the reader slowly realizes with horror, is inversely proportional to that of the dying children" (Schlossberg, 2001, p. 503).

The caricature of the idealised economic man, and the reaction against this ideal in literature, speaks to the ongoing tension between romanticism and political economy that played out over the course of the century. Ironically it was in response to just this kind of idealised man that Malthus first wrote his *Essay on Population*, rebutting Godwin and Condorcet's vision of human and social perfectibility. For these and other Enlightenment thinkers, who proposed a utopia of free property and free association between the sexes, the issue of overpopulation was avoided by what they foresaw as the inevitable repression of sexual passion. Malthus, like the romantics of the nineteenth century, refuted the notion of a perfectible man with no sexual desires. The economic man of Malthus was instead an agent of biology and physiology, indeed Gallagher (1986) argues that this represents a rupture with the classical conception of the healthy body as metaphor for healthy population and therefore economy (found in Smith and Hume); the healthy body for Malthus instead leads to overpopulation and therefore economic misery. Early romantic writers like Southey and Coleridge attacked Malthus for what they saw as the blasphemy of this argument, which "implies that God created human beings who are helplessly in the grip of an overpowering instinct and

¹⁷ In Chapter 3 we will further explore the use of this 'Malthusian' caricature in newspapers of the 1830s and 40s.

doomed either to misery or sinfulness” (Gallagher 2008, p.77). However as the conception of ‘economic man’ evolved over the course of the nineteenth century, the antipathy of romanticism towards political economy focussed increasingly on this unnatural and certainly ‘inhuman’ rationalism, which although initially associated with Godwin and Condorcet, was increasingly projected on Malthus and new political economy more broadly.

1.2 Economics in the Public Sphere - Literature and Theory

While this thesis aims to contribute primarily to our understanding of the public use of economic ideas and language, and can thus be viewed in a broad sense as part of the history of economics, it will necessarily draw on a range of different literatures and theoretical frameworks. Where these literatures are specific to the location and period of a particular case study, discussion of these will be left to the relevant chapter. However there are a number of literatures that underpin this entire study, and provide theoretical context for the overall analysis of this thesis. The first of these is the growing literature on the dissemination of economic ideas, as well as that of the diffusion of ideas in general. The second is the broader literature on the role of economic ideas as well as economists themselves in the public sphere, including the role of economics in both politics and the media. The third is the rhetorical use of economics, that is, the role that economic language plays separately to its theoretical content.

1.2.1 The Diffusion of Economic Ideas

Turning first to the question of how economic ideas are disseminated, the literature most frequently discusses diffusion as a process within both time and space, but can also refer to the diffusion of ideas between different groups within society. An early attempt at describing this process in a systematic manner is given by Craufurd Goodwin (1972), who depicts economic ideas as travelling between four ‘social

processes'; (1) the formulation of pure economic theory, (2) the enunciation by professional economists of the policy implications of economic theory, (3) the expression of nonprofessional opinion on economic policy, and (4) economic activity itself. These four nodes allow for twelve directional links, representing therefore twelve different ways in which economic knowledge diffuses from one area to another, and which are all described in turn (Goodwin's diagram is reproduced in Figure 1 below).

Goodwin's principle aim in proposing this system was to clarify what he saw as unaddressed issues in the history of economics, providing a theoretical framework with which to conduct this research. While this framework does appear quite rigid, Goodwin stresses that the links described are:

Not simple and discrete and might perhaps even be visualized more easily as a network of loose influences. Or they may be thought of as the functional relationships in a general equilibrium system in which, after an adjustment period, the results of an initiating change will reverberate throughout the structure. (1972, p.413)

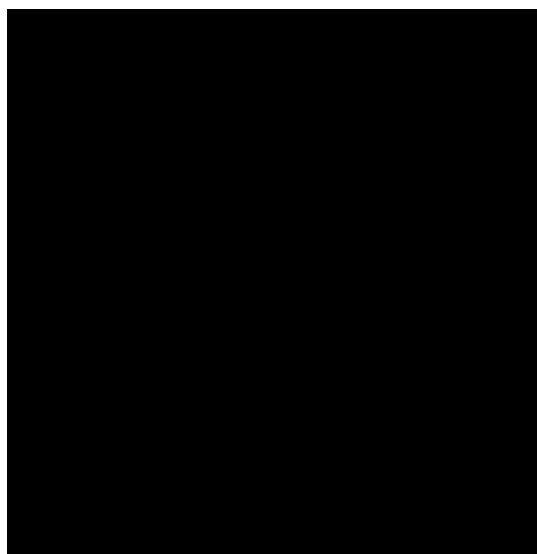


Figure 1: A systemised framework of economic knowledge diffusion, reproduced from Goodwin, 1972, p. 413.

The versatility of this framework makes it a useful starting point for conceptualising the diffusion of economic ideas. Goodwin's description of the various links between the social nodes is particularly interesting, for example link 10 is described as

Representing the impact of new theory upon nonprofessional opinion, [and] may be the one which has changed most in recent decades. A hundred years ago examples of nonprofessional appreciation of the policy significance of theoretical innovations were plentiful, for example, during the corn law debates. Today they are rare.¹⁸ (1972, p.413)

Goodwin's framework is also useful for conceptualising the various pathways through which economic knowledge might be transmitted. One of the main questions of this thesis is how Malthusian ideas travelled from the academic sphere; 'the formulation of pure economic theory' (node 1) to the public sphere; 'the expression of nonprofessional opinion on economic policy' (node 3). For example direct transmission between these two is characterised by link 10 as described above, however a two-step transmission can also be envisaged via links 1 then 3 (where knowledge travels via the policy making sphere) or via links 12 and then 8 (which relies on some form of performativity whereby economic knowledge changes the nature of the economy itself, and through it the way the public engages with this knowledge).

Another framework which is frequently found in the literature is the dichotomy between internal and external factors in the diffusion of economic ideas. Guthrie (1984) lists internal factors as being "the body of economic literature, the methodology of economics, interactions between economists, etc.", contrasting these with external factors that might include the policy needs of the time, or even "personal idiosyncrasies of economists." (1984, p.771). In a way this framework can be seen as a simplification of Goodwin's approach, with the creation of economic knowledge influenced by two spheres instead of three. It is also a less dynamic

¹⁸ Whether or not it is true that public engagement with economic theory is equally 'rare' today is of course up for debate, especially considering the recent surge in interest after the 2008 financial crisis. It is however particularly interesting for the purposes of this thesis that Goodwin identified the public's ability to adopt and make use of economic knowledge in the nineteenth century, and notably during the debates surrounding the Corn Laws in the 1840s.

framework, lacking the interdependent nature of Goodwin's web of diffusion. However this framework has been influential in the diffusion literature, its simplicity allowing for a wider range of historical interpretations of diffusion.

The variety of topics covered in the articles of the 2009 meeting of the Japanese and European Societies for the History of Economic Thought are good example of this breadth (Kurz et al. 2011). The articles in this collection examine instances of diffusion through both time and space, particularly the problematic issue of cross-cultural or linguistic diffusion of ideas. While the internal/external dichotomy lies at the heart of many of these contributions, it is a sufficiently versatile framework in which to work, as the definitions of 'internal' and 'external' are themselves open to interpretation. Tensions between different times, places or languages can thus readily be examined within this model of diffusion.

In the case of Malthus, it can certainly be argued that both 'internal' and 'external' factors played a role in how successful these ideas were in their own time as well as in later years. Using Guthrie's framework, we could consider the form in which economic debate traditionally took place at that time as an internal factor, being less technical or mathematical, instead relying on rhetoric and historical evidence. External factors include the availability of statistical information on population which was one of the most pressing issues for Malthus' early work; between the first and second edition of the essay he was able to either find or gather himself the necessary data, which greatly informed his later work. Another factor Guthrie considers external; interactions both professional and personal, between Malthus and the other economists of the Political Economy club, as well as other writers, certainly played an important role in the contest of ideas playing out in the early nineteenth century.¹⁹

¹⁹ James, for example, proposes a credible theory as to why Malthus was so despised by McCulloch; apparently Malthus had (unintentionally) failed to reply when the young writer

It was Joseph Spengler (1970) who perhaps first proposed examining the international diffusion of economic ideas, stating at the time that “Historians of ideas have devoted little attention to the social processes underlying the transmission of ideas from culture to culture and from nation to nation.” (1970, p.133). In arguing for greater research in this area, Spengler contributes a useful framework with which to assess the geographical or cultural diffusion of economics ideas, arguing that the researcher should consider:

(a) the *source*, together with the sender or transmitter; (b) the *media* of transmission; (c) the *content* transmitted; and (d) the *receiver*, together with his political and social milieu and range of opportunities. (1970, p.137)

On the nature of the content transmitted, Spengler argues that more conceptualised and mathematical concepts are the ones that are most easily and successfully transmitted across cultures, a claim that will be addressed in the scope of this thesis with regards to Malthus’ simple theory of population. Another interesting insight from Spengler is that the transmission of economic theory in itself is not as important or powerful as the transmission of economic practices and organisations; “the institutionalized expressions of economic ideas.” (1970, p.136). Thus it is necessary to look not only for evidence of the diffusion of specific economic theories (which are usually easy enough to identify as they are attached to a particular economist or economic school), but also the social and political paradigms that may also be transmitted, but are often less explicitly described and thus less easy to identify. The reform to the Poor Laws in 1834 is a clear example of the ‘institutionalisation’ of Malthus’ ideas, as will be examined in Chapter 3.

If the literature on the diffusion of economics ideas provides us with any conclusive lessons, it is that no one analytical approach is clearly superior. The appropriate theoretical framework will depend on the nature of the diffusion being studied;

sent both Malthus and Ricardo a copy of his work, while Ricardo replied thoughtfully and at length (James 1979, p.311).

whether it is a matter of diffusion between different actors of the same community (as in Goodwin) or between different communities altogether (as Spengler describes). Another approach is simply to borrow the most useful elements from each of the frameworks described, incorporating the concepts of directional diffusion between different social spheres, tensions between internal and external factors, and spatial and temporal diffusion.

The collection of papers in 'How Well Do Facts Travel?' (Howlett & Morgan 2011), while not focussing specifically on the diffusion of economic knowledge, provides a useful model of how different frameworks and theories of knowledge diffusion can be applied in a range of disciplines. The diversity of both content and approach in these chapters paints a nuanced picture of how facts travel, both in time and between different spheres of knowledge. The idea of what it means for a fact to 'travel well' is particularly emphasised. Morgan argues that facts travel well when they travel with integrity, that is, the content and credibility of the fact is maintained; and when they travel fruitfully, meaning the fact travels widely and finds different uses as well as users (Morgan 2011, p.12). In the case of Malthusian theory, this thesis suggests that an idea can travel fruitfully (that is, be useful) without maintaining its theoretical integrity.

Ramsden's chapter in this collection (2011) examines the way Calhoun's theories about the causal relationship between population crowding and pathological behaviour in rats migrated into the fields of psychology and planning. The successful diffusion of the concept of a 'behavioural sink' (representing a steady state of pathological behaviour) from out of the scientific sphere and into public consciousness is particularly relevant to this thesis, as it is an example of knowledge diffusion between different areas of the public sphere, as described by Goodwin. Also of relevance is Ramsden's assessment of when and how this diffusion occurred, coinciding with growing popular concern about overpopulation and urbanisation. As this thesis will show, the timing of political and social issues plays a crucial role in the way Malthusian ideas were taken up within public discourse of the nineteenth century.

Although by no means proposing a unifying theory of how economic ideas travel in the public discourse, this thesis will be able to test some hypotheses about the dissemination of Malthusianism in the nineteenth century in particular. Chapter 2 will examine quantitatively the salience of Malthusian language in a variety of public discourses, from the popular, through the intellectual, up to the political. Looking at the timing and relative importance of the use of Malthusian language within these spheres sheds light on the channels of diffusion, for example, whether discussion of economic ideas at the popular level precedes or follows political or academic debate. Chapters 3 and 4 will each examine the process by which this diffusion takes place in specific examples of the population debate, emphasising the role of the popular sphere as well as key actors at various levels within the public sphere.

1.2.2 Economics and the Public Sphere

The concept of the public sphere has become increasingly useful to a range of disciplines dealing with the issue of knowledge transfer and transformation within a social context.²⁰ It is perhaps most famously associated with Jürgen Habermas, who gave the following definition in *The Theory of Communicative Action*:

By "the public sphere" we mean first of all a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed. Access is guaranteed to all citizens. A portion of the public sphere comes into being in every conversation in which private individuals assemble to form a public body. (Habermas 1984, p.49)

This relationship between the private and the public is a crucial one, Habermas arguing that it was in fact the development of a private, or intimate sphere (the family) within a decentralising, market economy over the course of the seventeenth

²⁰ In a special issue of *Media, Culture and Society*, Lunt and Livingstone describe "'the rise and rise' of the concept of the public sphere within media studies" (Lunt & Livingstone 2013).

and eighteenth centuries, that created the space in which individuals could consider and debate the role and limits of a state acting upon their freedoms:

The private sphere comprised civil society in the narrower sense, that is to say, the realm of commodity exchange and of social labor; imbedded in it was the family with its interior domain (Intimsphäre). The public sphere in the political realm evolved from the public sphere in the world of letters; through the vehicle of public opinion it put the state in touch with the needs of society. (Habermas 1991, p.30)

The evolution of this new kind of public space is evidenced by the growing number of places where people could come to meet but more importantly debate, for example the explosion in the number of coffee shops during the eighteenth century.²¹ As well as new physical public spaces, this period also saw dramatic changes to the public's access to the written word, both as readers but equally importantly as writers. Habermas notes that the sale of monthly and weekly journals "doubled within a quarter century" after 1750 (Habermas 1991, p.51). What distinguished these as public spaces according to Habermas were a set of 'institutional criteria'; disregard for status, inclusivity, and a common concern with the public/private conflict as described above, and most importantly the state's role in this relationship.

An important factor in the development of the public sphere in nineteenth-century Britain was the increasing level of literacy of the working and middle classes. Extensive qualitative and quantitative evidence points to a steady rise in literacy for both men and women throughout the century. Already in the early part of the century literacy rates were relatively high, Schofield describing how "Literacy was clearly widespread: a majority of the population could read, and in the early nineteenth century there is plenty of evidence of a literate culture amongst large

²¹ "By the first decade of the eighteenth century London already had 3,000 of them, each with a core group of regulars" (Habermas 1991, p.32). Other examples of public spaces were Germany's Tischgesellschaften (table societies) and the French salons.

sections of the working class” (Schofield 1970, p.451).²² One of the reasons given for this dramatic increase is the growing availability of cheap newspapers in this period (which will be discussed in Chapter 2) and the importance of an autodidactic culture among the working classes (Rose 2002; Altick 1957). Importantly, illiteracy was not necessarily a barrier to engagement with public discourse; the public sphere of the nineteenth century involved a spoken as much as a written tradition, especially for the lower classes:

Farm laborers, mill hands, miners, handloom weavers, soldiers - all who had cause to be disaffected - were reading now or listening to someone else read. *They had discovered that the printed word was capable of uses far different from those with which they had come to associate it.* (Altick 1957, p.326, emphasis added)

Over recent years an increasing amount of attention has turned to the place of economics within this public sphere. Economics and economists have had a uniquely privileged role in the eye of the public and policy maker over the course of the twentieth century, although this role has changed dramatically and is by no means everywhere identical. Fourcade in particular, has contributed extensively to this question, notably in her study of economics within the public spheres of Britain, France and the United States, *Economists and Societies* (2009). Of British economic discourse, Fourcade claims that “Perhaps more than anywhere else, economic concerns and knowledge are part and parcel of British public culture” (Fourcade 2009, p.129) and that “in Britain the boundaries of economic expertise were more fluid and informally defined. An economist, in the British context, was essentially someone who possessed a socially validated experience with economic writing, commentary, or policy” (Fourcade 2009, p.130). The interaction of economic theory with public concerns and political goals goes back to the origins of economic debate,

²² Broadberry and O’Rourke (2010) find a similar pattern, reporting that overall literacy increased from 53% to 76% between 1820 and 1870. Mitch (1992) finds that while literacy of young adults had stagnated until the 1830s at around 50 percent, by the end of the century it had increased to 95%.

not within the universities, but in Habermas' public sphere; meetings of 'bourgeois' intellectuals, who would debate their ideas both behind closed doors (within the clubs and in their correspondence) as well as publically in the growing medium of the periodical press.

While not an invention of the nineteenth century, this period certainly saw the greatest innovation in both the quantity and variety of published materials, particularly newspapers and periodical reviews. Fetter, for example, describes the first half of the nineteenth century as the "era of the review" during which the British periodicals "carried on a continuous debate on economic theory and on economic policy, in which many of the great figures in economics, or in the political guidance of economic policy, took part" (Fetter 1965, p.424). Fourcade describes the place of economics in the public sphere in this period as follows:

Despite its relative neglect by universities in nineteenth-century England, political economy was a hot topic in popular reviews, learned societies, and clubs. Didactic tracts written for the general public, such as Mrs. Marcet's *Conversations on Political Economy* (1816) and Harriet Martineau's *Illustrations of Political Economy* (1832), enjoyed immense success. Serious economic debates took place in general-purpose publications such as the *Edinburgh Review*,²³ the *Quarterly Review*, or the *Westminster Review*. (Fourcade 2009, p.132)

However the expansion of the public sphere was not limited to upper class, intellectual circles and their publications. Technological, social and institutional changes allowed for a thriving popular press accessible to a growing proportion of the working class:²⁴

The first newspaper with a mass edition of over 50,000 copies was, significantly, the organ of the Chartist movement - Cobbett's *Political*

²³ It is worth noting that the first edition of the *Edinburgh Review* in 1802 begins with the lines "In committing this Work to the judgement of the Public, the Editors have but little to observe" (*The Edinburgh Review*, October 1802).

²⁴ The development of the newspaper industry over the course of the nineteenth century is described in section 2.3.

Register, published beginning in 1816. The same economic situation that pressured the masses into participating in the public sphere in the political realm denied them the level of education that would have enabled them to participate in the mode and on the level of bourgeois readers of journals. Soon, therefore, a penny press, which in the early thirties reached runs of 100,000 and 200,000 copies, and (by the middle of the century) the more widely distributed weekend press supplied the "psychological facilitation" that has characterized the commercial printed mass media ever since. (Habermas 1991, p.168)

The growing field of economic sociology similarly aims to answer the following kinds of questions, summarised in a special issue of the *European Journal of Sociology* dedicated to economics in the public sphere:

How is economic knowledge created and diffused? What professional and political processes and practices account for dominant understandings of economic action in public discussion? How do those dominant understandings influence moral claims in public debate? And how do historical turning points, key events, and new voices in public discussion shift the tenor and resonances of economic culture in the public sphere? (Bandelj et al. 2015, p.7)

These last two questions are of particular relevance to this thesis, which as a whole represents an examination of Malthus (or at least, Malthusianism) as a key actor in public debates about population during the nineteenth century, while the individual case studies (Chapters 3 and 4) examine key 'moments' in this ongoing debate. The changing place of morality in these debates is also an important theme underlying this analysis, and contributes to the broader claim of this thesis, that the popular response to debates about population in the nineteenth century represents a growing tension between the moral (or private) and economic (or public) spheres, with Malthusianism at the forefront of this conflict.

Our understanding of economics in the public sphere has benefited greatly from research of the kind brought together in the special edition of *History of Political Economy on The Economist as Public Intellectual* (Mata & Medema 2013). This collection examines the relationship between economists and their reading public, proposing that "economists' public interventions have been of profound consequence for both the structure and the content of the public sphere" (Mata & Medema 2013). Unlike many of the economists studied here, who actively and

directly engaged with mass media, Malthus' participation in the public debate was less intentional. His publications (books, pamphlets and articles), intended for the educated, reading public that Habermas calls 'bourgeois', were not accessible to the kind of mass public that would become more engaged with economic thinking in the twentieth century. That is not to say that the working classes did not engage with Malthusian ideas in the media available to them in the nineteenth century, in fact it is one of the principal claims of this thesis, that Malthusianism had a much larger role in popular discourse than has previously been supposed. However Malthus himself purposefully avoided engaging with the debate that did take place during his lifetime in the more popular press, which was often extremely emotive, and based on what Malthus saw as a misinterpretation of his work and intentions.²⁵ However Malthus was not completely insensible to the British public, writing in a letter to Thomas Chalmers that public opinion made any reform to the Poor Laws impractical,²⁶ and going so far as to agree that aspects of the old Poor Law might in fact act as a restraint on population.

While the concept of a public sphere described by these various literatures will be pivotal to the analysis of this thesis, a key difference is that instead of emphasising a unified, monolithic public discourse, this thesis reveals a public sphere that is composed of various, interconnected but distinct discourses.²⁷ On the most basic

²⁵ In his last known letter Malthus wrote that he found it "astonishing how many express a horror of my book who have never read it" (1834 cited James 1979, p.458).

²⁶ Malthus told Chalmers that "I see little prospect at present of the opinion against the system of the Poor Laws becoming sufficiently general to warrant the adoption of measures for their abolition" (1822 cited James 1979, p.450).

²⁷ In his assessment of Habermas's work, Eley describes how in nineteenth-century Britain "the positive values of the liberal public sphere quickly acquired broader democratic resonance with the resulting emergence of impressive popular movements, each with its own distinctive movement cultures (i.e. form of public sphere)", citing Chartism and Owenism as examples of these distinctive public spheres (Eley 1992, p.304). Habermas himself paid little attention to what he termed the 'plebian public sphere'.

level these discourses can be distinguished by different areas of public concern; for example poverty (as a social problem) as opposed to family size (as an individual's problem). A distinction can also be made based on the paradigm within which discourse occurs, whether it be moral, political or economic. Finally, as identified by Habermas, accessibility is a key criterion for the existence of a public sphere, but it is obvious that the labouring classes did not have access to the same kind of media (whether as readers or contributors) as the wealthier more educated classes (and vice versa, certain working class media was not accessible, or at least, considered appropriate to the upper classes). A principal argument of this thesis is that Malthusianism in the nineteenth century cannot be thought of as a unified concept within public discourse, but instead crosses over multiple interrelated discourses, distinguished by theme, conceptual paradigm, and participant (although these boundaries are themselves not fixed). A corollary of this is that measuring 'public discourse' must go beyond assessing what are seen as the traditional debates or media of the time; the quantitative analysis of Chapter 2, for instance, demonstrates the salience and persistence of Malthusian language in the popular sphere at times when it was previously assumed Malthus was absent from the public mind.

1.2.3 Public Actors, the Public Sphere and the Press

Another important consideration is the issue of in what ways and to what extent public 'actors' (including politicians, commentators and the lay public) in fact engage with the public sphere described above. While it can be argued that articles printed in relatively affordable newspapers aimed at the labouring classes were indeed 'accessible' to the reading public of the nineteenth century, it is much harder to determine whether or not this media has a real and lasting impact on public opinion or debate. It will therefore be one of the key aims of this thesis to determine how (and for what purposes) the language and imagery of Malthusianism was used by various public actors (politicians, social commentators and social activists), and to what extent this rhetoric influenced wider public

discourse. While looking at a range of media, this thesis focusses on the role of the newspaper as this medium represented in many ways the frontier between public actors and the public sphere in the nineteenth century. Commentators of the time frequently noted this dual role; newspapers both reflected some kind of ‘public opinion’ (or at least claimed to), but it was also the medium by which public actors tried to consciously shape this opinion. The press in the nineteenth century can be thought of as both ‘mirror and maker’ of public opinion,²⁸ this thesis aims to further our understanding of this process through the two case studies of chapters 3 and 4.

The relationship between the parliament and the press evolved considerably over the course of the nineteenth century, which saw the rapid expansion of official state printing (through blue books and reports, and later Hansard) early in the century, as well as an increasingly dynamic and critical press with the incremental removal of the ‘taxes on knowledge’.²⁹ Where in the late eighteenth century the government could count on the loyalty of party newspapers, the increasing importance of advertising revenues meant that editors could take a more independent stance:

As organs of opinion the daily newspapers were simply the hired mouthpieces of one party or the other. Not until the nineteenth century was decades old would the increasing value of newspapers as advertising mediums allow them gradually to shake off government or party controls and to become independent voices of public sentiment. (Altick 1957, p.322)

Popular demand for reform in the early decades of the nineteenth century, combined with anxiety over the revolutionary movements of Europe no doubt contributed to a greater concern for public sentiment within the parliament, and thus more concern with the role of newspapers in either shaping or reflecting this

²⁸ This distinction, and the relationship between the press and the concept of ‘public opinion’ in the latter part of the century is most fruitfully explored by Thompson (2013).

²⁹ See Altick (1957) for a comprehensive history of the English reading public, and Hewitt (2014) for a more detailed account of the campaign against taxes on publishing in the nineteenth century.

sentiment.³⁰ By the 1830s it is clear that the press played a new role, mediating between the government and the public.

Frankel (2004) argues that the increasing availability of official publications during the Napoleonic Wars permanently changed the nature of public debate; providing new forms of political evidence with which the government, the press and other emerging public groups (such as unions or societies) could engage.³¹ Of particular note for this thesis is the role of economic (more specifically, Malthusian) evidence during the Poor Law debates of the 1830s, which Frankel also considers a crucial moment in the history of public debate in England:

By the 1830s, accompanying widespread social and political reforms, parliamentary printing seemed to explode. The Poor Law investigation of 1832 established modes of persuasion that combined the employment of a royal commission of inquiry with a campaign based on cascading printed matter. (Frankel 2004, p.310)

But of more interest here is how this rhetorical strategy was in reality translated and interpreted within the popular sphere; I argue in Chapter 3 that the government's decision to hinge the Poor Law Amendment on Malthusian arguments backfired at the popular level, with Malthusian rhetoric appropriated to attack the government and economics more widely for decades to come. Like Frankel, I argue that the Poor Law debates represent a new kind of public engagement with political debate, but in order to understand this engagement it is necessary to look at the use of economic rhetoric in popular discourse, and not just at the political level.

³⁰ Ideology also played an important role in the increased political engagement with the press, Wasson describing how "the whig ideology impelled members of the party to march with the spirit of the times and pay deference to public opinion. Their deepest instinct was to listen for signs of danger and adapt to change" (Wasson 2006, p.69).

³¹ Altick (1957) also claims that the Napoleonic Wars created a new demand for newspapers as the public became anxious about invasion and thus keen for international news.

As publishing became incrementally cheaper throughout the course of the century, and public interest in political questions more heated, social activists and commentators alike gained an increasingly successful platform via the press, periodicals and pamphlets. Gilmartin (1996) describes for instance how the Radical movement of the early nineteenth century made particularly sophisticated use of the press and other media in response to a growing discontent with an unrepresentative parliament. Parliamentary reporting in the radical newspapers (spearheaded by the likes of William Cobbett and his *Political Register*) allowed new access to political debate for a nation in which few were enfranchised.³² What distinguished this new form of political journalism was that it actively engaged with political debate rather than simply passively reporting on it:

In appealing from parliament and the parliamentary classes to popular counter-authorities (opinion, the people, the nation, the labouring classes), radical writers and editors developed print formats that deliberately emulated the conventions of the political establishment, thereby converting reading audiences into incipient constituencies. (Gilmartin 1996, p.29)

Outside of the formal political sphere, the nineteenth century also saw the development of a new kind of social commentary in response to the political debates of the time, making full use of the new powerful medium of the newspaper and periodical. Writers like Charles Dickens knowingly blurred the boundary between journalism and fiction in their accounts of the political debates of the day, both in form³³ and content. Butwin (1977) argues that *Hard Times* (1854) represents

³² Even after the Great Reform Act of 1832 the voting public consisted of only a tiny fraction of the total population (O’Gorman 1986).

³³ It can be argued that the physical form of nineteenth-century pamphlets, newspapers and periodicals also played a role in blurring the boundaries between different spheres of public discourse. Huett for instance describes how “the monthlies and quarterlies, which tended to appeal to wealthier or better-educated readers, were small in format and physically rather substantial, containing many pages of printed matter” (2005, p.72) while “the penny and halfpenny weeklies were not generally designed to resemble books, but instead were rather

a new genre of 'social reform novel', which exist within a wider public debate, and make demands on their readers to engage in social and political life in a way other novels did not:

In the case of *Hard Times* the original readers were encouraged to see the novel as a form of journalism to be read continuously with *Household Words*, the weekly magazine in which it appeared. The novel of social reform exists in a continuum with journalism and defines its audience within the general public rather than among the community of "ideal readers" of fiction whose response justifies most literary criticism. (Butwin 1977, p.167)

Unlike Dickens, the social activist and writer Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna (who edited the *Christian Lady's Magazine* from 1834 to 1846) was wary of the dangerous confusion of fact and fiction in discussing pressing social problems (including "factory reform, slavery, political economy, women's education, and the political situation in Ireland" (Janssen 2011, p.333)). In her series of articles called simply *Politics*, Tonna presents these debates as fictional discussions between herself and an 'irritable yet wise uncle', but as Janssen shows she is insistent on not embellishing or exaggerating these important questions:

She admits to altering names and grouping characters together, but asserts, "We will set forth nothing but what has been stated on oath, corroborated on oath, and on oath confirmed beyond the possibility of an evasive question," referring to the parliamentary blue-book reports on which her narratives were based. (Janssen 2011, p.342)

Nineteenth-century newspapers played a unique role within the broader conception of public opinion as represented by the 'press, platform and petition', combining and empowering these different forms of public engagement, especially for the working and lower-middle classes.

As the bourgeois public sphere was assimilated to the constitutional state, it tended to abandon certain forms of political sociability and retreat to the virtual space of print... A radical counterpublic, meanwhile, remained stubbornly active and physical, never confined

closer to the format of the newspaper", printed in quarto or octavo format, on thin paper with two columns on text (Huett 2005).

to the printed page. Radical weeklies were saturated with speeches and debates, and with rich evidence of collective reading practices. (Gilmartin 1996, p.30)

This assertion is very much borne out by the analysis of the newspaper samples in the two case studies of this thesis; the articles sampled represent a mix of traditional reporting and opinion (both editorial and through readers' letters), while a significant proportion consists of reports of public meetings or lectures, petitions, parliamentary proceedings, trials and diverse other forms of public engagement, as Gilmartin claims. This brings us back to the conceptualisation of a divided but not disconnected public sphere in which multiple discursive spaces coexist. To understand why Malthusian ideas remained so important throughout the nineteenth century requires us to understand the differing use of these ideas (and language) in both the 'bourgeois' discursive space (represented most simply by the literary reviews and academic journals), as well as their appropriation within a more popular sphere. It is this second kind of engagement that will be particularly important for this thesis; the popular rather than editorial power of the press. In chapters 3 and 4 this allows us to determine to what extent Malthusian language found its way to working or middle-class discourse (and to what rhetorical use it was put), as this discourse is then reflected back through the newspapers. This analysis is possible precisely because the newspapers of the nineteenth century, more than simple organs of news or commentary, were a space in which a variety of working and middle class political engagements are represented. While we can rarely, for example, know the exact language that was used in the Chartist meetings of the 1830s, reports of these meetings in the press represent a kind of echo or artefact of this discourse.

1.2.4 The Rhetoric of Economics

Returning to the central question of this thesis; how and why some economic ideas become successful and useful within public discourse, it is clear that any answer to this question risks being either too broad or too specific, relevant only to a

particular moment in history or perhaps worse, to none at all. Investigating the path travelled by a particular economic idea, here the Malthusian theory of population, through a series of connected yet distinct moments in history will certainly provide some specific answers, but how can this examination shed light on the broader question above? I aim to show in this thesis that the evolution and dissemination of Malthus' simple theory in public discourse is indeed a uniquely informative case; that it represents a broader problem of how economic ideas shape public discourse, and the way these ideas are made useful within the public sphere.

The two case studies chosen to map the course of Malthusianism through British public discourse of the nineteenth century both represent moments when Malthus' simple population theory suddenly becomes integral to the public discourse of the day; specifically in debates about poverty and fertility. Malthus' theory played a crucial public role in these debates, central to the rhetoric of both policy makers and the public alike. Spanning the years from Malthus' death in 1834 to the turn of the twentieth century, they also tell an important story of how an idea can evolve over time and in different social and even geographical contexts. The Malthusianism of the Poor Law debates is not the same Malthusianism that is employed by those arguing in favour of family planning.

These case studies, however, do more than simply provide an intellectual genealogy of Malthusian ideas in the public discourse of nineteenth-century Britain. In this thesis I aim to show how these two moments in fact represent turning points in the role of economic ideas in the public sphere both in Britain and more widely during the nineteenth century. The two case studies bookend a period in which the role and power of the public sphere underwent a radical transformation, as discussed above. Each period thus sheds light on a very specific, potentially unique, relationship between public discourse and economic knowledge. However, these moments in history are not completely independent from each other or isolated from the broader changes in the form and content of public discourse.

One of the main contentions of this thesis is that these debates share more than just their association with the theories of Malthus, but instead revolve around a

common tension that can help explain both the changing role of economics in the public sphere over this period, as well as why Malthus' ideas are so prominent within public discourse to this day. In each of these case studies, and more broadly throughout history, this tension exists whenever economic theory is seen as imposing on the private or the moral sphere, often taking the form of policies aimed at modifying behaviour not previously viewed as purely economic. In advancing any such reform there is an inevitable conflict between the discourses of social *norms* and economic *laws*, with the public sphere representing the frontline of these conflicting discourses.

Each of the debates studied in this thesis represents a critical moment in this ongoing conflict. Before the rise of economic thinking, questions of fertility had always been viewed as belonging to the moral, religious or ethical spheres.³⁴ However as economic thinking became increasingly relevant to public debate, and more importantly political decision making, the personal question of fertility turned increasingly to a public debate on population (both in terms of quantity and quality). Malthusian ideas became controversial because of this perceived transgression, caught between the lay public and the political economist or the policy maker, the latter seen as trespassing on the private behaviours and moralities of the former, with economic theory legitimising their interference. Malthusian ideas were thus doubly useful in public discourse; firstly as justification for economic policy and intervention on the part of policy makers, and secondly, as a rhetorical reaction against this intervention on the part of the lay-public. The incongruous nature of both public popularity and revulsion towards Malthusian ideas is an understandable, if extreme outcome of this conflict.

The approach of this thesis therefore fits closely within the paradigm of A. O. Hirschman, in its exploration of the relationship between market discourse and the

³⁴ See for example Polanyi (1944), McCloskey (2010), Hirschman (1977).

moral or social order (Hirschman 1977). However where Hirschman's analysis emphasises the changing nature of both social and market discourse over the centuries, this thesis explicitly investigates the frictions at the boundaries of these competing spheres, specifically in the Malthusian controversies described above. This tension between the private and the economic spheres, played out in the shared space of public discourse, thus provides a useful conceptual framework for this thesis, motivating the choice of case studies, the sources and methodologies used.

In querying the use of Malthusian language within these case studies, the ideas of Quentin Skinner will be particularly useful. Skinner's approach to intellectual history moves away from the more traditional history of 'unit concepts', to a focus instead on the rhetorical use of concepts: "there cannot be a history of unit ideas as such, but only a history of the various uses to which they have been put by different agents at different times" (Skinner 2002, p.176).³⁵

Skinner distinguishes between two distinct dimensions, or uses of language:

One has conventionally been describes as the dimension of meaning, the study of the sense and reference allegedly attaching to words and sentences. The other is perhaps best described in Austin's terms as the dimension of linguistic action, the study of the range of things that speakers are capable of doing in (and by) the use of words and sentences. (Skinner 2002, p.3)

Rather than simply querying what 'Malthus' or 'Malthusian' mean within the different debates studied here, we must query the intentionality behind the use of this language. It is already well known that 'Malthusian' was a term of abuse in the popular discourse of the 1830s and 40s (Chapter 3), but what was this rhetoric intended to achieve? By refining the various rhetorical uses of this pejorative term,

³⁵ Or put more simply: "The only histories of ideas to be written are histories of their uses in arguments" (Skinner 2002, p.86).

we can see that how the appropriation of economic language was in fact a reaction against the perceived imposition of economics on private life. Likewise it is often assumed that the 'Malthusian' League (Chapter 4) simply represents a change in the *meaning* of the term 'Malthusian' (to intend support for birth control). But an examination of the intention, or rhetorical strategy, behind this usage reveals that Malthusian language played an essential role in legitimising and popularising family limitation.

Incorporating Skinner's linguistic approach to discourse analysis thus helps us better understand how Malthusian language was made useful in the various debates of the century, sometimes with completely contradictory aims. This approach also complements Goodwin's framework of economic knowledge transfer between different groups in the public sphere, as economic ideas can be used and transformed by these different actors for their own rhetorical purposes. While economic theory is traditionally thought of as moving from the academic to the popular sphere through popularisation or government policy, the cases in this thesis show that public actors can appropriate economic language in direct opposition to economists and policy makers.

1.3 Sources and Methodological Approach

The central question of this thesis is an unusual one for history of economics, in that it proposes to examine and explain how economic ideas are integrated and made useful within public discourse more broadly, as opposed to the privileged discourse of academia. The sources used in this thesis must therefore reflect this approach, and must help us understand how every-day, public debates of poverty and population were shaped by economic ideas. The primary sources I have chosen to use are therefore published books, newspaper articles and periodical reviews, transcripts of political debates, public debates and lectures, and publicly available pamphlets and government reports. Furthermore I will make use of personal

correspondence and diaries where these contribute to our understanding of the roles played by particular actors within the public debate and their motives.

In order to assess the changes in the public discourses of population and Malthusianism in nineteenth-century Britain, this thesis will combine both qualitative and quantitative methodology. The first of these methods is the more traditional approach to intellectual history, and the history of economic thought in particular, and consists of a selective reading of the primary sources relevant to the question at hand, as described above. This analysis, applied to the two case studies described in the introduction, allows us to investigate how the public discourses of population changed over the course of the century, and specifically how Malthusian rhetoric was employed in the various media and by various actors in each of the debates.

Much of this analysis will be contextual; while some form of Malthusian rhetoric figures in each of the case studies, the use of this language is inconsistent, and at times even contradictory.³⁶ The context of this evolving use will thus be particularly informative in evaluating the way the public discourse of population has evolved over time. In terms of the context of this discourse, a number of aspects will be examined. These include the author of the text (or speech), and their social context, for example an economist speaking to other academics, or a layman speaking to the working class at public meetings. A closely related issue is that of *intention*, i.e. what is the purpose of the text; to persuade, to criticise or even to entertain? While it is not always possible to determine intention from the text itself, we can use other social cues, and even personal accounts to better understand the purpose of a text.³⁷

³⁶ For example the use of 'Malthusian' language to legitimise birth control as seen in Chapter 4.

³⁷ The issue of intention is particularly relevant when examining anonymous writing in the newspapers and periodicals of the time.

We must also be careful to distinguish the text's intended audience as compared to its actual audience, and correspondingly the possibility of different interpretations of the same text within different audiences.³⁸

The second methodological approach that will be used in this thesis is quantitative. This approach to textual analysis has a long history (De Bellis 2009), but it is the recent availability of digitised texts that has led to its increasing popularity in the fields of literary studies in particular, but also in a wider range of other disciplines where cultural and textual analysis is required. This approach is broadly referred to as 'bibliometrics'; "the application of mathematics and statistical methods to books and other media of communication." (Pritchard 1969), but has also more recently been termed 'distant reading' (Moretti 2013), as well as 'culturomics' (Michel et al. 2011). While these terms all refer broadly to quantitative textual analysis as a methodology, they refer to a range of techniques and paradigms, reflecting differences in disciplinary approaches as well as the kinds of data available in different fields.

The recently developed 'Google Ngram' corpus will provide one source for the quantitative analysis of nineteenth-century public discourse, representing the digitisation of over 8 million published works, or about 6% of all books ever published from the year 1500, with eight languages currently covered (Michel et al. 2011; Lin et al. 2012). Google Ngram essentially provides yearly data on the frequency with which a particular term (or group of terms) appears within the

³⁸ This is particularly relevant when looking at the 'popularisers' of economic thought of the nineteenth century; while they might have intended to reach a popular audience, there was no guarantee that the working classes would engage with their ideas, or receive them in the way that the popularisers had hoped, as is seen in Chapter 3. This is what Jonathan Rose terms the 'receptive fallacy'; "That is, the critic assumes that whatever the author put into a text—or whatever the critic chooses to read into that text—is the message that the common reader receives, without studying the responses of any actual reader other than the critic himself" (Rose 1992, p.49). Another example is the 'Book of Murder' also examined in Chapter 3, which some audience recognised as satire, while others believed it to be earnest.

given corpus. For example, the name 'Malthus' corresponds to around 0.0002% of all words published during the period 1800-2000.³⁹ This allows us to analyse, in a very broad manner, changes in the relative use of certain words or names in published works over time, thereby providing one perspective on changes in the public discourse. Conveniently for this research, Google has distinguished books published in Britain from the corpus of all English language works, allowing us to analyse the trends of British publications separately from works published in other countries.

This thesis will also make extensive use of the '19th century British Newspapers' archive; a collaboration between the British Library and Gale Cengage Learning. This archive consists of more than two million digitised pages from 48 British newspapers between 1800 and 1900, with full runs wherever possible. Importantly for this thesis, the archivists have selected a wide range of newspapers in terms of both geography and readership (resulting in 17 national and 29 regional papers), and with a good representation of the 'penny papers' that were aimed at the working and clerical classes. Another important consideration for the archivists which makes this source particularly valuable in assessing the nature of public discourse, is that the newspapers were selected to be representative in terms of readership and influence of editorials (Shaw 2007).

Quantitative analysis of nineteenth-century newspapers and books has become an increasingly useful tool in the fields of Victorian literary and historical studies, due to a combination of both the increasing availability of digitised content from this period and its public availability due to lapsed copyright. Researchers in this area have been enthusiastic in taking advantage of the power of quantitative analysis when combined with more traditional qualitative forms of research, and it is this

³⁹ The online 'Google Ngram viewer' allows for simple analysis of this sort: <https://books.google.com/ngrams>

'balanced' methodological approach that will motivate the analysis in this thesis. Gibbs and Cohen (2011), for example, make use of the Google Books digitised corpus to demonstrate the changing place of religion in Victorian culture, defending the complementary nature of the "supposed methodological poles" of qualitative and quantitative analysis. And while enthusiastic about the possibilities of quantitative analysis, they argue that it can only take us so far in our understanding of Victorian culture, with the results of such analysis acting as "signposts toward further exploration rather than conclusive evidence" (Gibbs & Cohen 2011, p.74). Chapter 2 is in some ways an exercise in finding these 'signposts', pointing to the periods in which Malthusian language gains importance in public discourse, but without telling us how or why this language is being used.

Nicholson (2012), Liddle (2012) and Colella (2013) all make use of various digitised newspapers in applying bibliometric analysis to the study of Victorian culture. Of newspapers, Nicholson argues that "No other form of Victorian print culture allows us to explore the period with such precision" (Nicholson 2012, p.242), proposing a simple methodology when undertaking this kind of analysis. Liddle (2012) exploits some novel attributes of the newspaper archive to draw conclusions about the evolution of the press during the nineteenth century. Using the size in kilobytes of digitised articles as a proxy for information density, he argues that newspaper content increased exponentially over the century, contrary to the established view of a relatively stable industry for the first half of the century.

The approach used by Colella (2013) most closely resembles the methodology used in this thesis; combining an analysis of the quantitative attributes of digitised archives with a closer analysis of a chosen sample of articles. Borrowing from Deirdre McCloskey, Colella argues that "Digital archives of Victorian periodicals are the locus where "habits of the lip" translated into print can be observed most efficiently." (2013, p.318). Using this approach to investigate attitudes towards business in the periodical press from 1850 to 1880, she finds that references to the term "man of business" are mostly favourable, as are references to "business habits" and "business life" (although less so), lending weight to the argument that by the

late nineteenth century business had acquired a certain legitimacy in the public eye, as argued by McCloskey (2010).

The Hansard House of Commons and Lords debates, which have also been digitised from 1803 to 2005, as well as official government reports and publications will form another valuable primary source in this research. These debates and publications provide valuable insights on how and when certain ideas entered the political sphere, and how they shaped policy making at the time. Frankel (2004) provides a particularly useful overview of the place of government publications in the public sphere, arguing that “by the middle of the nineteenth century the state itself became a cultural force, producing and peddling official publications.” (2004, p.309). Finally, this thesis will make use of a variety of personal correspondences and diaries of the key actors in the three debates being examined. This analysis serves to highlight the motivations and intentions of these actors, and will explore how these individuals perceived their own place in the public debate, as well as their ability to influence it.

The range of sources described above allow us to analyse the changing population debate of the nineteenth century from a number of different angles, using both the broad, analytical approach of bibliometrics as well as more traditional, discourse analysis using the rhetorical approach of Skinner discussed in 1.2.3. Each primary source serves to answer a slightly different question about these debates, but together will contribute to our understanding of the nature and content of public discourse during this period, and the changing way this discourse made use of Malthusian language and theory.

Chapter 2 – Malthus and Malthusianism in Public Discourse: A Bibliometric Approach to the History of Economics

Introduction

While the existing literature on Malthus tells us a great deal about how the population question was debated in the intellectual or academic sphere, it tells us less about how Malthus' ideas were received and discussed by the public more broadly throughout the nineteenth century. The themes of population and poverty, and the relationship between them, were deeply relevant in the every-day life of much of British society, and the moral tone in which they were discussed by Malthus and other writers inevitably lead to passionate debate at all levels of society. The salience of the population problem only increased throughout the century after the essay's publication, thanks in large part to the increasing quantity of statistics available to researchers and the public, including the decennial census from 1801.

As discussed in Chapter 1, there is a considerable literature on the popular reception of Malthus in the nineteenth century, but this has tended to focus on the first three decades of the century, and has prioritised the work of either popularisers such as Harriet Martineau, or radical journalists such as Cobbett, who represent only a small part of the public discourse of the day (and in many ways only represent a view of the public sphere 'from above'). This chapter builds on this work, making use of bibliometric techniques which allow for a broader perspective on the public discourse of the nineteenth century, through the changing use of language in various media. Understanding how the public perception of Malthusian ideas changed over the course of a century would require an overview of an impossibly large corpus of books, newspapers and pamphlets from this period, or more realistically, a subsample which is selected by the researcher, and thus not necessarily representative. Unlike traditional contributions to the history of ideas, which have focussed on a select number of publications or authors, or a

shorter time frame, this chapter will examine four distinct sections of the public sphere over the entire nineteenth (and in one case, twentieth) century, to assess when and how Malthus figured in public writing.

The first of these sources is the Google Ngram database, which reports the frequency of words in published books from 1500 to today. The second is the digitised collection of the major periodical reviews of the nineteenth century (the *Edinburgh Review*, the *Quarterly Review*, the *Westminster Review* and *Blackwood's Edinburgh Review*). The third of these is the digitised archive of nineteenth century British newspapers. And the final medium that will be examined is the Hansard parliamentary debates for both the House of Commons and House of Lords.

At this point in time the bibliometric approach to discourse analysis has only rarely been applied to the history of economics;⁴⁰ however a number of scholars of Victorian studies have recognised its potential, as discussed in Chapter 1. These are early days for the use of bibliometric analysis in the history of public discourse, and many of the digital archives with which it may be used are still being developed and refined. Issues of bias and sample composition are therefore non-negligible, and while measures can and are taken here to mitigate such bias as much as possible, any conclusions should be understood in light of this caveat.⁴¹

Another caveat is that bibliometric analysis reflects only the content of these various media, and therefore tells us little about both the quantitative importance of each medium, nor does it tell us about their actual audiences. We have little information

⁴⁰ One example being Ravallion (2011), who looks at the use of the term 'Poverty' in the Google Ngram corpus, discussing this in relation to the changing attitudes to poverty alleviation in different periods.

⁴¹ One of the strengths of bibliometric analysis of large corpuses like Google Ngram or the British Library digitised newspaper archive is that the researcher is removed from the process of selection, so even if there are underlying sampling issues within each corpus, it is unlikely to be related to a particular research question.

on the circulation of most newspapers in the nineteenth century, nor book sales. We also cannot make inferences about the ability of various social groups to access these media; books were expensive in the nineteenth century, but it was common for the working class to buy their books second hand, or share them between friends and family (Rose 1992). Even literacy itself is not always a good indication of access to literature, as the literate could read newspapers to the illiterate, or at least relay the most interesting parts of these. Determining who the audiences were for parliamentary debate is equally problematic, as these only found their way to the public through (often inaccurate) reports in newspapers. Despite these reservations, I believe that the novelty and scope of the questions that can be explored with these new techniques justify this tentative analysis.

2.1 Malthus and the Population Debate in Nineteenth and Twentieth-Century Books

In this section I will make use of the only recently developed Google Ngram corpus; the result of an ongoing digitisation project headed by Google, involving dozens of libraries around the world. The current database contains more than eight million books in eight languages (with over 4.5 million English books), representing 6% of all books published (Lin et al. 2012; Michel et al. 2011). The Google Ngram corpus reports the usage frequency of words (including groups of multiple words) used in published works over the last five centuries. As the selection of books digitised is not made public, and depends in large part on the historic catalogues of the various institutions taking part, there is the possibility of a sampling bias in the composition of the corpus. These concerns can to a certain extent be mitigated, as will be discussed later, and provided any analysis is considered with some caution the project remains a worthwhile avenue for the study of the written word over time.

Before turning to the nineteenth century in particular, it is interesting to note the changing way in which Malthus has been discussed and referenced in the two centuries since his ideas were first published. Figure 2 shows us the frequency of

references to Malthus in British publications as a percentage of all words in the Google Ngram digitised corpus.⁴² Over this period the name 'Malthus' on average made up about 0.0002% of all words published in British books, rising to around 0.0004% by the end of the twentieth century.⁴³

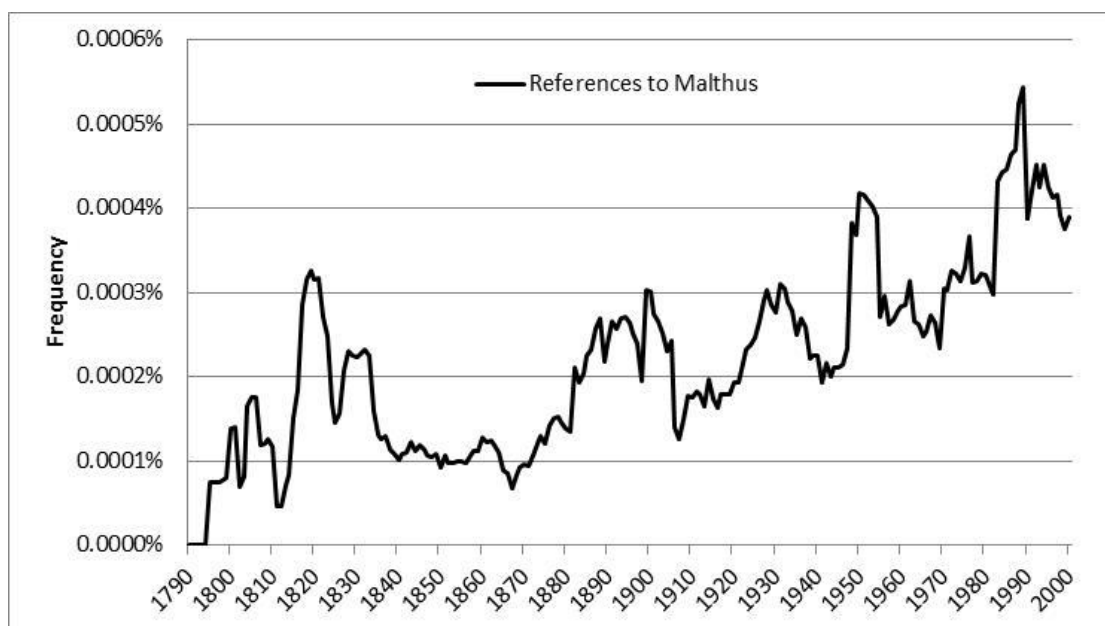


Figure 2: References to Malthus in British books 1790-2000, source: Google Ngram

The first observation that can be made is that as well as showing an increasing trend throughout these two centuries, the frequency of references to Malthus in British books varies considerably right up to the present day.⁴⁴ If these fluctuations became less pronounced over time, it could be argued that the ideas in question, while

⁴² For assistance with the 'R' code used to generate these graphs many thanks to the blogger 'Stubborn Mule': <http://www.stubbornmule.net/>

⁴³ For comparison, the common word 'dog' makes up around 0.004% of all words in British books, while 'the' represents around 5% of words

⁴⁴ In Robert Mayhew's 2014 work on Malthus for a general audience, he quotes Garrett Hardin insightfully predicting that "if ever someone constructs a carefully documented graph of the public attitude toward population after Malthus, it surely would look like a roller-coaster ride." Mayhew adding that "Whatever the truth of this assertion, it clearly applies to attitudes towards Malthus himself." (2014, p.2)

possibly controversial to begin with, had eventually become a 'normal' or uncontroversial part of public discourse. The regular and consistently large peaks and troughs that we observe in Figure 2, however, suggest an almost periodic return to Malthusian ideas in public discourse. Perhaps surprisingly, Malthus and his ideas are even more so the subject of discussion and controversy today as they were at the start of the nineteenth century. One of the main aims of this thesis is to determine to what extent this pattern of fluctuating interest represents the changing public engagement with a consistent 'Malthusian' debate on population, or whether instead these 'peaks' in interest correspond to disconnected debates or controversies in the public sphere that make use of a 'Malthusian' language, but do not necessarily engage with the broader arguments of political economy.

Another phenomenon to note is that while the frequency of references to Malthus fluctuates substantially in the early nineteenth century, and again from around 1880 onwards, the middle of the century (that is, the 1840s through to the 70s) sees a relative stabilisation in references to Malthus. Given the prominence of social issues like population and poverty in public debate throughout this period, it is surprising that interest in Malthus would remain stable for so long. The 1830s and 40s in particular saw a heightened level of political and public debate on various social and economic reforms, including the 1832 Reform Act, the 1833 Factory Acts and Slavery Abolition Act, the 1843 Poor Law Amendment, as well as ongoing debates about the protectionist Corn Laws. The low and stable number of references during the following decades thus raises the question of how Malthus returned to public debate so rapidly from 1880. This chapter will try and shed some light on these questions, suggesting that it was popular media as well as political debate which played a crucial role in keeping Malthus and his ideas in the public consciousness through the middle decades of the century.

One potential issue with using Google Ngram as a way of studying these trends is that there might be a bias in the sample of books that were digitised. For example, if more books from around 1820 that relate to the theme of population were digitised because there are a disproportionate number of these books in the libraries

involved in the project, then we might expect to see more references to Malthus around this time. One way of addressing this issue is to compare the trends we observe above, which represents frequencies of the word in question within the British English corpus as of 2012 (the most recent Ngram corpus), with a similar search in the 'Google Million' corpus. This corpus consists of a randomised sample of one million English language books, with no more than 6,000 books chosen from each year (to avoid the selection bias described above), with the sampling reflecting subject distributions within each year. This corresponds, as much as is possible, to a representative corpus, and is thus useful for determining whether any underlying bias exists in the British corpus. Figure 3 below shows the result of this comparison for the frequency of the name 'Malthus'.

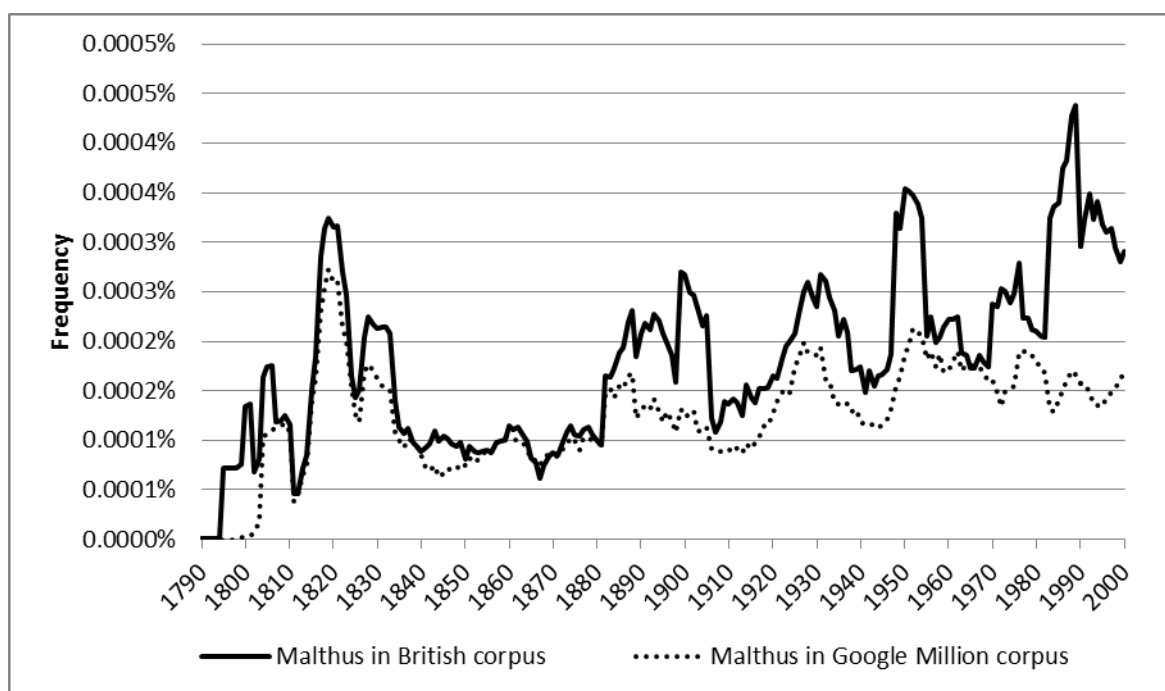


Figure 3: Malthus in the British and Google Million corpora 1790-2000, source: Google Ngram

It is important to note that the 'Google Million' corpus is constructed to be representative of books in the English language as a whole, not specifically those published in Great Britain. Furthermore this corpus was compiled as part of the first 2009 Google Ngram database, which included a much smaller number of books and less refined digitisation (Michel et al. 2011). Despite these differences the results for the two corpora as shown in Figure 3 are remarkably similar for the

nineteenth century in particular. Unsurprisingly, references to Malthus are slightly more common in the British English corpus than in the 'Google Million', considering his importance in British intellectual history. However, despite differences of absolute magnitude, the cyclical movements in both series is very similar. The more considerable divergence of these series in the late twentieth century could be a result of the smaller number of recent books digitised in the 2009 corpus, but as this thesis focuses on the nineteenth century this is of no great concern.

Another way of mitigating the possibility of bias in the corpus is to compare the results found for Malthus with some kind of 'baseline' that accounts for changes in the extent of economic discourse over the century. If it was indeed the case that the digitised books were skewed towards economics texts in certain years and not others, then this should be apparent in the results for all economic terms in the corpus. To proxy for this baseline level of economic debate I look at the total frequency of terms like 'economic', 'economics', 'economy' and 'economist' in Google Ngram for the British corpus. Over the period of the nineteenth century the frequency of these terms is surprisingly stable, other than a sharper rise from about 1885 until the end of the century. Importantly, there are not the sharp spikes that we see in the frequency of references to Malthus, suggesting that the digitised corpus is not biased towards economic publications in certain years. We can then use this baseline to normalise the frequency of references to Malthus, but this has little effect on the overall pattern, other than dampening the increase in references towards the end of the century. We can therefore be satisfied that the pattern seen in frequency of references to Malthus do indeed represent, as much as we will ever know, the changing relevance of Malthus in published books over this period in Great Britain.

However this still doesn't answer the question of what exactly people were discussing when they were making reference to Malthus in these many books. While we can be reasonably certain than these results don't simply reflect a bias in the composition of the digitised corpus, it is still possible that the patterns observed

above don't represent genuine public engagement with Malthus' ideas in particular, but rather form part of a broader economic dialogue that was at times more or less salient. To explore this possibility we can compare references to Malthus with references to another prominent economist writing at a similar time, the most obvious choice being David Ricardo (1772-1823). A quick look at the Ngram results for both Malthus and Ricardo reveal a very high co-movement in references to the two economists, with references to Ricardo a little lower at the start of the century but overtaking Malthus by the end. One interpretation is that the economic debate of the nineteenth century, as it played out in published works, did little to distinguish between various economists and their ideas, instead engaging with the discipline of political economy as a reasonably coherent whole, despite strong intellectual disagreement at the level of individual economists like Malthus and Ricardo. Another interpretation could be that Ricardo and Malthus, as intellectual antagonists, tended to be discussed in opposition to each other. However, without access to the original data going into the corpus, it is difficult to distinguish between these alternative hypotheses as we do not know how often references to both economists occurred within the same text, or if they occurred within the same text, what the relationship between the terms was.⁴⁵

While this quantitative approach limits what can be inferred about the kinds of debates to which economic ideas contributed, it is possible to determine some interesting correlations from the data. For example looking at frequency of the word 'population' and its correlation with the names Malthus and Ricardo might shed some light on the role of these two classical economists in the ongoing

⁴⁵ For instance, using 'proximity operators' to determine whether Malthus and Ricardo usually figure together in a list of economists. While this couldn't be quantitatively tested here, the closer reading of the newspaper sample in the subsequent chapters suggests that this was often the case; that is, when Malthus figured alongside other economists in the same text it was often in an enumeration of the major Classical economists, i.e. "Smith, Ricardo and Malthus".

population debate until the present day. Table 1 below shows the correlation of the terms 'Malthus', 'Malthusian', 'Malthusianism', 'Ricardo' and 'Population', for four fifty-year periods spanning the last two centuries. The first periods broadly encompasses Malthus' working life, running from 1790 to 1839, the second from 1840 to 1889, the third from 1890 to 1939 and the final from 1940 to 1989.⁴⁶

During the first period of the nineteenth century, from 1790-1839, the frequency of the term 'population' correlates positively with both economists, in fact Ricardo (with a correlation coefficient of 0.79) is more highly correlated with the term 'population' than Malthus (0.52). This suggests that Malthus and Ricardo played similar roles in the discourse of the time, and that Ricardo's economic system was in fact more important for discussions of population than Malthus'. The correlation coefficients of the terms 'Malthusian' and 'Malthusianism' are both high (0.75 and 0.71), but in this period the sample size for these terms was very small, and so these numbers are not necessarily informative. From 1840 until 1889 the coefficients for all the terms are considerably lower, with 'Malthus' now showing the highest correlation with 'population' at 0.44, and between 'Ricardo' and 'population'; 0.36. Interestingly this period also sees a higher correlation between 'Malthus' and 'Ricardo', giving weight to the idea that after his death Malthus was relevant to the academic debate only insofar as he was relevant to the new Ricardian school of Political Economy.

⁴⁶ This approach is certainly not perfect, but allows us to see any dramatic changes in the correlation coefficients over the four periods. Although we have the Google Ngram data up until 2000, it makes sense to start the analysis in 1790, and for consistency the periods are of equal length at fifty years. Furthermore, as discussed above there might be robustness issues with the data for the most recent decades, and thus excluding them further strengthens the analysis here.

Table 1: Correlation of Malthus, Malthusian, Malthusianism, Ricardo and Population 1790-1990, source: Google Ngram

1790-1839					
	<i>Malthus</i>	<i>Malthusian</i>	<i>Malthusianism</i>	<i>Ricardo</i>	<i>Population</i>
Malthus	1.00				
Malthusian	0.09	1.00			
Malthusianism	0.05	0.94	1.00		
Ricardo	0.61	0.54	0.46	1.00	
Population	0.52	0.75	0.71	0.79	1.00
1840-1889					
	<i>Malthus</i>	<i>Malthusian</i>	<i>Malthusianism</i>	<i>Ricardo</i>	<i>Population</i>
Malthus	1.00				
Malthusian	0.58	1.00			
Malthusianism	0.88	0.78	1.00		
Ricardo	0.81	0.42	0.65	1.00	
Population	0.44	0.37	0.40	0.36	1.00
1890-1939					
	<i>Malthus</i>	<i>Malthusian</i>	<i>Malthusianism</i>	<i>Ricardo</i>	<i>Population</i>
Malthus	1.00				
Malthusian	0.19	1.00			
Malthusianism	0.16	0.48	1.00		
Ricardo	0.45	0.60	0.15	1.00	
Population	0.00	0.61	-0.06	0.68	1.00
1940-1989					
	<i>Malthus</i>	<i>Malthusian</i>	<i>Malthusianism</i>	<i>Ricardo</i>	<i>Population</i>
Malthus	1.00				
Malthusian	0.40	1.00			
Malthusianism	0.10	0.68	1.00		
Ricardo	0.79	0.35	-0.08	1.00	
Population	0.06	0.74	0.28	0.33	1.00

The following two periods, spanning most of the twentieth century, present some more surprising results. The correlation coefficient for the terms 'population' and 'Malthus' from 1890 to 1939 is zero (at two decimal places), that is, by the end of the nineteenth century and for the first few decades of the twentieth, there is no statistical connection between Malthus and the issue of population in published books. 'Ricardo' on the other hand is still highly correlated with 'population' with

a coefficient of 0.68. However while 'Malthus' shows no correlation with 'population', the term 'Malthusian' is also quite strongly correlated at 0.66.

The fourth period, from 1940 until 1989 confirms these trends; 'Malthus' is still barely correlated with 'population' (0.06), Ricardo is somewhat correlated (0.33) but the term 'Malthusian' is now the most highly correlated with 'population' at 0.74. This analysis tells us that while Malthus and Ricardo were both strongly associated with the issue of population in the first part of the nineteenth century, this association is much weaker in the second part of the century. By the twentieth century, the name 'Malthus' is hardly correlated with 'population' at all, instead it is the term 'Malthusian' that comes to be associated strongly with population by the end of the twentieth century. While it has often been noted that this adjective has increasingly come to stand for 'Population Malthus'⁴⁷ over the years, it is interesting to see this phenomenon so clearly represented in the data.

Despite the limitations of using the Google Ngram corpus to assess the changing nature of economic discourse over time, the growing importance of the term 'Malthusian' is in itself a useful and informative result. Even without a more conventional 'close reading' style of analysis, the changing importance of the name 'Malthus' vs the adjective 'Malthusian', and their association with terms like 'population', suggests a shift in the way that Malthus' ideas contribute to public debate at various levels. This changing importance can also be seen in the proportion of 'direct' references to Malthus (i.e. by name), compared with all references to Malthus (whether the name, or the words 'Malthusian' or 'Malthusianism'), with results shown in Figure 4 below.

⁴⁷ A description coined by James (1979).

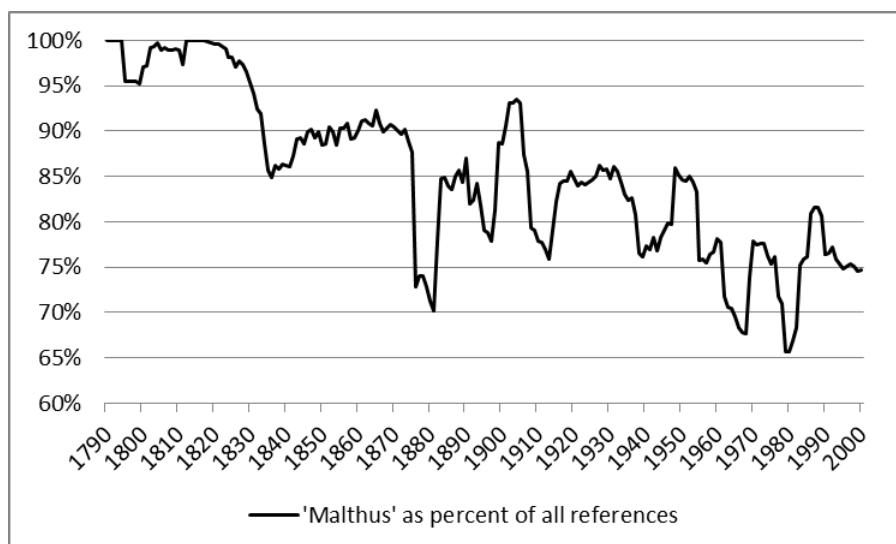


Figure 4: 'Malthus' references as proportion of references to 'Malthus', 'Malthusian', and 'Malthusianism', source: Google Ngram

What is most immediately apparent is the steady decline in the proportion of direct references to Malthus over the course of the two centuries, dropping from almost 100% of reference at the turn of the nineteenth century to around three-quarters by the end of the twentieth. As with the results for frequency of total references shown in Figure 2, the variability of this proportion is extremely high, frequently moving by up to 20 percentage points over a matter of years (partly as a result of the small sample size). The timing of these changes is also interesting to note. For example, around the time of Malthus' death in 1834, there is a decline of around 15% in references that mentions him by name, in other words, a significant increase in the use of the terms 'Malthusian' and 'Malthusianism' in books published around this time. An even bigger drop of around 20% occurs in the 1870s, quite possibly linked to the appropriation of the term 'Malthusian' by the pro-family planning 'Malthusian League', which will be investigated in Chapter 4. From the turn of the twentieth century the trend is just as variable, with somewhat smaller amplitude. Pinning down these fluctuations to specific events is not easy, however the coefficients in Table 1 suggest that it is in this period that the term 'Malthusian' becomes closely associated with the issue of population.

In many ways the Ngram data fits very well with what we currently know about the dissemination of Malthusian thought over the last two centuries. The overall

positive trend in references to Malthus is consistent with the increasing salience of the issue of population and its relationship with poverty throughout the twentieth century, and the simple fact that Malthus is still a comparatively well-known intellectual figure. The Ngram data above does, however, present us with two related anomalies, that do not fit the current narrative of Malthus in the nineteenth century. The first is the long plateau in reference frequency which seems to correspond with Malthus' death in 1834 and lasts until around 1880, and the second is the sudden surge in interest from the 1880s onwards. Addressing the second of these anomalies first, it is not the revival of interest in Malthus that is anomalous, but rather that the timing that does not fit with the standard theory that it was Keynes who reintroduced Malthus to the economic debate in the 1930s (Waterman 1998). There are a number of reasons to expect interest in Malthus to increase in the 1880s though, including the controversies surrounding the Malthusian League and the contraception question more broadly, and also growing interest in Darwin's writing on evolution.

The Google Ngram database by its nature gives us a very broad idea of how the relative use of certain terms has changed over time, and thus an important insight into the changing nature of public discourse. However in order to investigate the paradox described above, that is, the Malthus missing from public debate, it is necessary to narrow the scope of the analysis to determine if the patterns described above are mirrored by the smaller, self-contained debates going on at the level of the public intellectual in nineteenth century Britain.

2.2 Malthus in Intellectual Discourse; the Periodical Reviews of Nineteenth-Century Britain

In this section I turn to the way Malthus figured in the intellectual or 'academic' sphere; that is the debates taking place in the various periodicals and reviews of the time. To do so I look at total references to Malthus in the four periodicals that played the biggest role in the political economy debates of the nineteenth century;

the *Edinburgh Review* (1802-1929)⁴⁸, the *Quarterly Review* (1809-1967)⁴⁹, *Blackwood's Edinburgh Review* (1817-1980)⁵⁰ and the *Westminster Review* (1824-1914)⁵¹. Before the demarcation of economics as an academic subject independent of history and moral philosophy in the late nineteenth century, these literary periodicals were the primary means by which economic thought and literature were debated. Fetter (1965) singles out the four periodicals above as particularly important in economic discourse, arguing that they “stand out above the others from almost any point of view, and certainly from the point of view of the economist. Among the periodicals

⁴⁸ Founded by Francis Jeffrey, Sydney Smith, Francis Horner and Henry Brougham, the *Edinburgh Review* was published quarterly and sold for 6s, articles tended to be long, and all contributions were anonymous until 1912 (Brake & Demoor 2009). Politically speaking the *Edinburgh Review* was very much a Whig publication. Fetter describes how “The *Edinburgh* had a success that exceeded the dreams of its founders. In its early years Tories had contributed to it and read it, but increasingly it became a political organ, and by the time the Whigs came to power in the 1830s it was virtually their official spokesman” (Fetter 1965, p.426)

⁴⁹ Founded by the publisher John Murry II as a Tory response to the *Edinburgh Review*, the *Quarterly Review* also sold for 6s, consisted of long articles on a wide variety of topics, unlike the political economy focus of the *Edinburgh Review*; “The editors of the *Quarterly Review* and many of its leading contributors on economic subjects distrusted political economy and generally had no basis for taking a stand on economic policy except in terms of politics and emotion” (Fetter 1958, p.48).

⁵⁰ *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, founded by William Blackwood, was a monthly magazine priced at 2s 6d, which combined political commentary, fiction, poetry and satire. Of the magazine's politics, Fetter notes that “Blackwood's might be edited by Tories, but it berated or poked fun at Tory leaders with almost as much relish as it criticized Whigs... Blackwood's had many articles on economic issues, some brilliant, some contradictory, some humorous, but all agreeing that political economists were the bane of the nation” (Fetter 1965, p.427).

⁵¹ The *Westminster Review* was a quarterly which sold for 6s, and was founded by Jeremy Bentham “to challenge the aristocratic bias of the existing reviews and to promote the philosophy and the policy proposals of the Utilitarians and Philosophical Radicals. In the economic field the philosophy was laissez faire, with particular emphasis on international free trade and on the abolition of private privilege and governmental favors” (Fetter 1962, p.570).

read by the educated man, they had, year in and year out, the largest circulation and the greatest influence", adding:

It is doubtful whether any books by economists had as many readers in the first half of the century as did these reviews. In its best years the Edinburgh sold around 15,000 copies, the Quarterly close to 10,000, Blackwood's 6,000 or more, and the Westminster probably somewhere between 2,000 and 3,000." \ (1965, p.425)

Unlike a number of other European countries, Britain did not have a dedicated economics journal until late in the century with the establishment of the British Economics Association in 1890, which published the *Economic Journal* from 1891 (Coats 1996).⁵² While these four periodicals became less important to economic writers in the second half of the century, there were few other alternatives in which to publish. Coats comments that "After 1850, leading British economists continued to publish in the literary reviews, if only for want of suitable alternative outlets" (Coats 1996, p.66).⁵³ One of these alternatives was the journal of the Royal Statistical Society, which was published from 1834, the year of Malthus' death. References to Malthus in this journal are examined in greater detail in Chapter 4, the pattern of these references is similar to that of the four literary periodicals, with very few references in the middle part of the century and a significant increase from the 1880s onwards.

The total number of articles in these reviews that reference Malthus, or the terms 'Malthusian' or 'Malthusianism' are shown in Figure 5 below, with the total represented by the solid line.

⁵² A rival journal with a more social-reformist agenda, *The Economic Review* also appeared in 1891.

⁵³ "English-speaking historians of economic thought take it for granted that the British led the nineteenth century world in the advance of economic theory or analysis, but it is not so widely recognized that they lagged seriously in the provision of academic lecture courses, degrees, professorial or other academic appointments, and the usual paraphernalia of academicization - of which journals are an integral part." (Coats 1996, p.69)

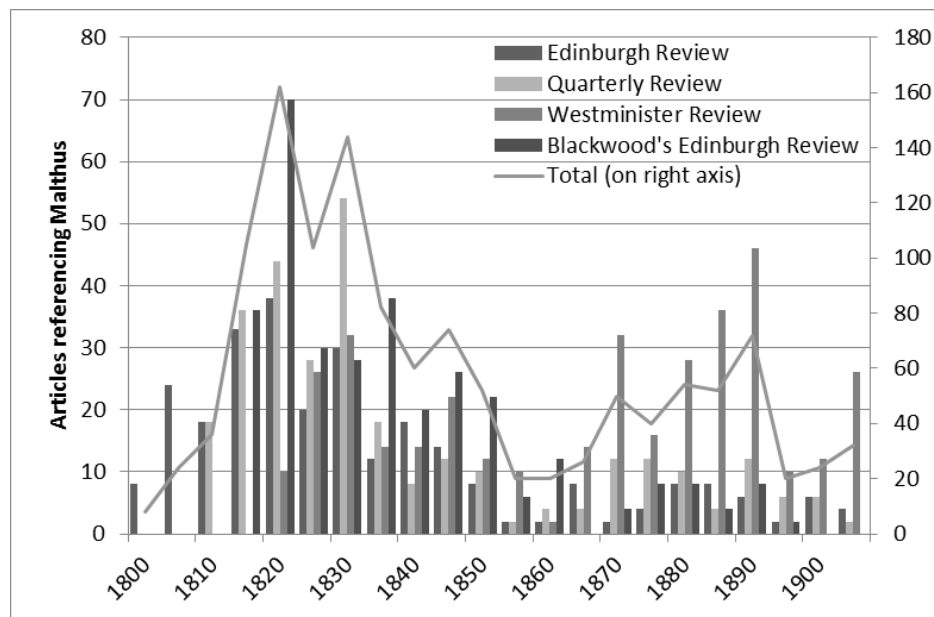


Figure 5: References to Malthus in the *Edinburgh Review*, *Quarterly Review*, *Westminster Review* and *Blackwood's Edinburgh Review*, source: ProQuest British Periodicals Collection

It is immediately clear that this data shows a very clear resemblance to the frequency of references in the Google Ngram corpus (Figure 2, p.57), that is, a high number of references in the early part of the century⁵⁴, a significant drop after about 1835 (from a total of 144 articles in the first half of the 1830s to only 82 in the second half), a subsequent lull in the middle decades, and then somewhat of a revival in the latter part of the century.

There is however some variation between the periodicals in terms of this timing. The *Edinburgh Review*, founded the earliest in 1802, was the first to publicise Malthus' work. Far from being a neutral participant in the public debate of this time, the *Edinburgh Review* was strongly aligned with Whig policy;

It came to produce a 'continuous Whig barrage'. Party policies were laid out; new concepts of advanced economic thinking were

⁵⁴ The low number of references at the very start of the century should be discounted as two of the periodicals, *Blackwood's Edinburgh Review* and the *Westminster Review*, were not in press until the 1820s.

explained; it 'gave the public final verdicts in portable form'. (Wasson 2006, p.71)

By the late 1820s however, the *Edinburgh Review* had been overtaken in terms of articles referencing Malthus, by the other three reviews. *Blackwood's Edinburgh Review*, which was highly critical of Malthus in particular and political economy more broadly, had the higher number of articles in the early part of the century, with 100 articles in the 1820s. However by the second half of the nineteenth century it was primarily the *Westminster Review* (which although critical, was more likely to engage with Malthusian theory) that published the largest number of articles referencing Malthus.⁵⁵

Returning to the paradox of Malthus' relative absence from public discourse after his death in 1834, a number of authors describe a deliberate marginalisation of dissenting voices such as Malthus' from the political economy debate of the 1820s and 30s, arguing that personal and intellectual politics were very much responsible for subsequent rise of Ricardian thinking, thanks to the actions of his followers. The often vigorous debates of the Political Economy Club of which Malthus was a member played out mostly in private, and any written public commentary was anonymous, confusing the distinction between the various 'sides' in the conflict and thus leaving the public with the impression that political economy represented a single doctrine.⁵⁶ Checkland points to the role that James Mill and John Ramsay

⁵⁵ Fetter writes that "Both the Quarterly and Blackwood's were critical of Malthus' writings on population, and of the conclusions which he and his followers drew in regard to the Poor Laws. If one may take Blackwood's and the Quarterly as spokesmen for conservatism, their articles are impressive evidence against a frequently held idea that to British conservatives Malthus was a prophet because his doctrines relieved the rich of responsibility for the condition of the poor. On the other hand the Edinburgh and the Westminster, much as they might disagree with Malthus on the Corn Laws or effective demand, were greatly influenced by Malthus' population views, or at least by the conclusions that they drew from them" (Fetter 1965, p.435).

⁵⁶ "It was never required of Ricardo or Malthus or their several supporters that they should set forth their views in such a form as to earn the layman's support. The very intimacy and

McCulloch in particular played in ensuring that the Ricardian system would prevail after his death in 1823, and become the publically recognised doctrine of the New Political Economy.⁵⁷ Malthus' participation in the club therefore limited his ability to contribute to the public debate while alive, and almost guaranteed his legacy would be ignored in favour of the Ricardian paradigm after his death.

This theory can to some degree be tested by looking at the way that Ricardo was discussed in these same periodicals at the time. If Checkland is correct in his assessment we would expect to see references to Ricardo (or Ricardian theory) increase as references to Malthus and Malthusian theory decrease, notable after Malthus' death in 1834. However in Figure 6, which shows the total number of articles referencing each economist in the four periodicals, we observe no such reversal. As well as representing a much smaller number of total articles, references to Ricardo follow a very similar trend to those mentioning Malthus; an increase over the first decades of the century, followed by a sharp drop in the late 1830s. In fact the drop in number of reference to Ricardo after 1835 is even sharper than that for Malthus; with 70% fewer references in the second half of the 1830s for Ricardo, against 43% fewer for Malthus. There is a small increase in references to Ricardo in the early 1840s, but the subsequent years fail to see the resurgence of Ricardo in the discourse of economic periodicals as we might expect if Ricardo's system of political economy had truly triumphed.

restraint of the exchange between Ricardo, Malthus, Say and others deprived contemporaries of a sense of what was at stake. The debate was closed and the winner decisively declared before the public really knew what was going on." (Checkland 1949, p.41)

⁵⁷ Keynes himself declared that "Ricardo conquered England as completely as the Holy Inquisition conquered Spain." (Keynes 1936, p.32)

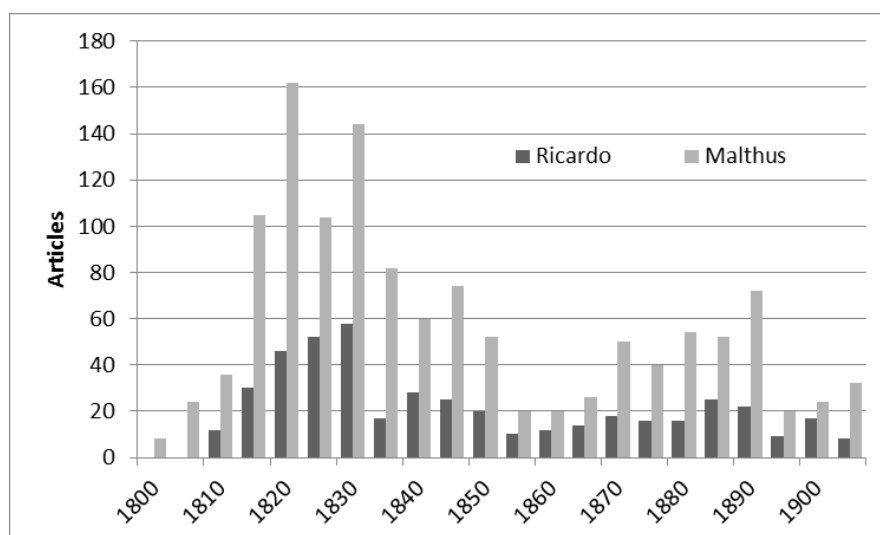


Figure 6: References to Ricardo and Malthus in the *Edinburgh Review*, *Quarterly Review*, *Westminster Review* and *Blackwood's Edinburgh Review*, source: ProQuest British Periodicals Collection

The picture that emerges of economics discourse in the nineteenth century is therefore a more complicated one than might have previously been thought. Assumptions about the importance of individual economists in driving debate might need rethinking, especially in the middle decades of the century when some of the key figures in nineteenth-century economic thinking are conspicuously absent, as seen here. This analysis however does confirm the dramatic evolution of the economics discipline in the second half of the century, from one debated behind closed doors and anonymously in select periodicals, to a more general and open debate increasingly found in the journals and public meetings of intellectual societies. Ironically, it seems that the move away from the anonymity of the clubs and reviews resulted in an economic discipline less dependent on individual personalities and the politics of intimate groups of friends (and enemies).

Before turning to the more popular medium of newspapers, it is worth noting that nineteenth century periodical reviews played an interesting role in public discourse, in some ways sitting between the popular press and the realms of academic and political thought of published books. The periodicals saw their role as shaping a more refined public opinion, as opposed to the newspapers of the time, which were seen as reflecting the public's baser opinions (Asquith 1978). As self-appointed gatekeepers of public discourse, writers for the periodical reviews often showed

concern for the development of a new engaged public, and the changing language of public discourse. One writer lamented in *Chambers's Edinburgh Review* that by 1842 a new vocabulary of population had emerged in the popular press:

It was at an earlier time that the word *population* came into vogue, probably in consequence of Mr Malthus's doctrine. Goldsmith, speaking of the intrusion of a mad dog into a village, would have said-"The inhabitants rose to give it chase;" but a modern newspaper, chronicling such an event, would say-"The population rose to a man." Population, we believe, does not strictly apply to persons; but no matter. Let the word, like the dog, have its day. Besides, we always observe that, when grammarians begin to persecute a word, it is sure to be just the more persisted in. The best way to get the British "population" out of any such heresy is to let them flounder in it till they are wearied, when they will be pretty sure to get out of it themselves. ("Favourite Phrases of the Press" 1842, p.237)

That this writer proposes Malthus as the cause of this change in language suggests that popular awareness of Malthus was enough to produce this change in the popular vocabulary of population in the early nineteenth century.

2.3 Malthus in Popular Discourse; Nineteenth-Century British Newspapers

The burgeoning public sphere of the nineteenth century is perhaps most obvious in the world of newspapers. At the turn of the century printing technology had barely changed for more than three hundred years (Musson 1958), but advances in printing press technology throughout the century made it possible to print newspapers copies faster and at less cost. In 1798 the invention of the Stanhope press greatly improved printing efficiency; an iron-hand press (instead of wood), it allowed for larger broadsheets to be printed with less effort, and was capable of pressing 250 copies an hour. Printing speeds were further improved with Friedrich Koenig's 1811 invention of the steam-driven press, which was capable of 1,000 copies per hour (Musson 1958). The Koenig press was quickly taken up by *The Times* in 1814, followed by other London and provincial newspapers in the 1820s, and finally the working-class press in the 1830s. By 1848 innovations in how the

type was affixed to the press's cylinders made it possible to print between 8 and 12 thousand impressions an hour (Asquith 1978). In the 1860s a final major development in printing technology was the introduction of the reel-fed rotary perfecting press, which allowed printing on both sides of a sheet and resulted in an output of 10,500 (8-page) newspapers per hour (Musson 1958). As well as improvements in printing, other technological advances also contributed to the increasing power of newspapers as a medium of public discourse. The rapid expansion of the rail network from the 1830s allowed for much faster distribution of newspapers as well as collection of news. This was made even easier with the spread of the telegraph, which became a crucial part of the newspaper business from the 1840s onwards (Musson 1958).

Institutional changes also had a major influence on the development of newspaper culture in the nineteenth century, notably the changing taxation arrangements of newspaper in Britain; the so-called 'taxes on knowledge'. The first stamp tax on publications was enacted in 1712, requiring a tax of 1d. on all newspapers printed on a whole-sheet. These taxes were perceived by many less as means of raising revenue as of controlling, or at least limiting, the freedom of the press. The stamp tax was further increased to 4d. in 1815, and applied indiscriminately to all newspapers no matter the size, including pamphlets. While this higher tax put many newspapers out of business, it also had the unforeseen consequence of fuelling a new unstamped, illegal press that was highly critical of the government and enabled a flourishing working-class discourse to emerge.⁵⁸ Growing public resentment combined with more moderate voices in parliament led to a reduction of the stamp tax to 1d. in 1836, while duty on pamphlets had been abolished in 1833 (Asquith 1978).

⁵⁸ Wiener, commenting on the "unprecedented quantitative explosion of popular journalism during these years", records 546 new illegal journals between 1830 and 1836, as well as "innumerable tracts, broadsides, and pamphlets" (Wiener 1971, p.2)

As well as these changes to the supply side of the newspaper industry, public demand for newspapers was influenced by a number of factors. The first and most obvious of these was the increase in literacy throughout this period, as discussed earlier. However the increasing importance of newspapers within the public sphere also reflects the public's changing expectations about the role of the media, in particular its ability to act as a check on the power of government. Boyce argues that by the mid-nineteenth century the concept of the press as a 'fourth estate' of public life was prevalent, especially in the perception of newspaper editors and journalists themselves (Boyce 1978). The need for newspapers to reflect public opinion can be attributed to the perceived unrepresentativeness of parliament, especially before the Reform Act of 1832.

All these factors, both on the demand and supply side, led to an incredible increase in the number of newspapers in circulation, rising from around 100 in 1750 to over 500 in 1820, to more than 2,600 by 1850, and to over 6,000 by the end of the century (Williams 1978). Circulation data is hard to come by for much of this period, but we know that many newspapers expanded greatly in reach over the course of the century. *The Manchester Guardian*, for instance, expanded its circulation from around 3,000 a week in 1828 to 10,000 a week in 1855. The Times increased circulation from around 5,000 in 1813 to 40,000 by 1859 (Musson 1958). Circulation numbers alone are not enough to determine how many people actually read these newspapers, which were often shared and read communally in a range of public spaces including taverns, coffeehouses, newsrooms, clubs and public meetings.⁵⁹

The digitisation of a large number of British newspapers allows us to undertake a similar kind of analysis to determine the changing importance of Malthus in the popular discourse of the nineteenth century. The 19th Century British Newspaper

⁵⁹ Asquith claims that each newspaper was read by an average of between 10 to 30 people (Asquith 1978, p.101).

archive⁶⁰ represents a corpus of 48 British newspapers between 1800 and 1900, with full runs wherever possible, with selection of publications included based on representativeness in terms of geography and readership, with preference given to more influential newspapers based on editorial status (Shaw 2007). This collection therefore provides a valuable insight into the daily popular discourse of nineteenth-century Britain.

Instead of looking at relative word frequency as was done for the Google Ngram corpus (i.e. 'Malthus' as a percent of all printed words), the nature of the newspaper data allows us only to determine the total number of newspaper articles referencing Malthus, either directly by name or through the terms 'Malthusian' and 'Malthusianism'. This is an acceptable approach, however, as the database of newspapers has already been selected for representativeness, and thus total article counts should give an accurate picture of how salient certain themes and topics were throughout the period.

In total 3,696 articles in the British Library's archive mentioned either 'Malthus', 'Malthusian' or 'Malthusianism', with results shown in Figure 7 below. The earliest article dates from 1804 and the latest from 1910. It should be noted that articles that refer to both the name Malthus as well as the terms 'Malthusian' or 'Malthusianism' will figure in more than one of these categories. Interestingly though, of the 1,377 articles that contained the word 'Malthusian', only 165 also contained the name Malthus. This leaves 1,212 newspaper articles that used the term 'Malthusian' without referring to the man himself. In contrast there are only 14 articles making reference to the term 'Ricardian' and only one to 'Ricardianism' in the entire archive, although the total number of articles mentioning Ricardo is of a similar

⁶⁰ A collaboration between the British Library and Gale Cengage Learning, available at <http://www.bl.uk/reshelp/findhelprestype/news/newspdigproj/database/>

magnitude to those mentioning Malthus.⁶¹ The line in Figure 7 shows the proportion of articles that makes reference to the terms 'Malthusian' and 'Malthusianism' as a percentage of the total number of articles referencing Malthus in any way.

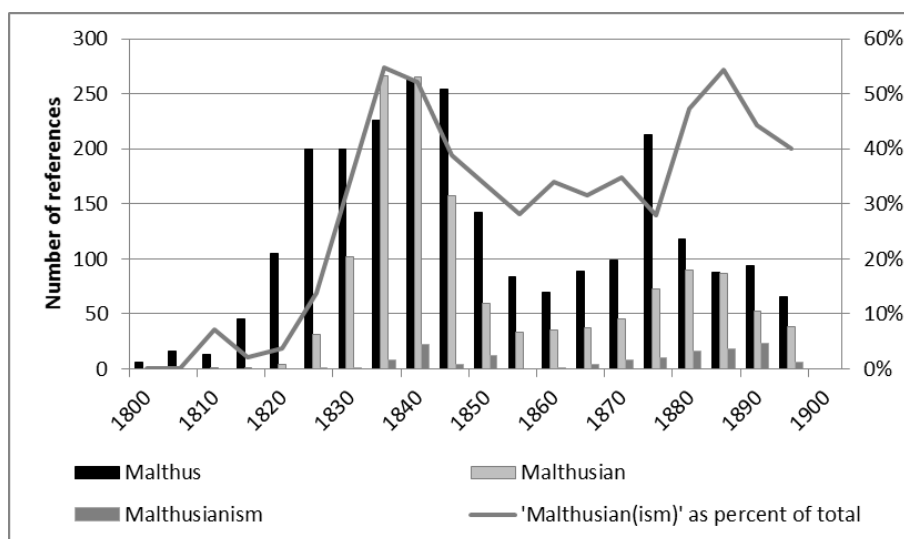


Figure 7: References to Malthus, 'Malthusian' and 'Malthusianism' in 19th century British newspapers, source: Gale Cengage/British Library

A few things are interesting about the above results. The first is the sharp increase in references to Malthus in the early part of the nineteenth century, indicating that as a public figure and intellectual, Malthus very quickly became a recognisable actor of the public debate in Britain (as represented by newspaper coverage). The

⁶¹ It is much harder to know the total number of articles that reference Ricardo the political economist, due to the more common nature of the name, Ricardo coming from a family of 17 himself, and siring 8 children. Searching for 'Ricardo' yields 18,426 results, however taking a random sample, I estimate at the 95% confidence level that only $16 \pm 5\%$ of these articles are about David Ricardo the political economist, that is somewhere between 2,026 and 3,869 articles. This exercise makes it clear how careful one has to be when employing a quantitative approach like this too naively. For example, the unsolved murder of high society lawyer Charles Bravo in 1876 is responsible for a large number of the 'Ricardo' results around this time, the principal suspect being the widow of Ricardo's great-nephew. Other false positives include a ship named the Ricardo, a character in a long-running serial, a racehorse, and of course the many distant relatives who were in some way involved in public life (including two sons in parliament).

second thing to note is that the term 'Malthusian' seems to have emerged surprisingly early, with references appearing in the first part of the 1820s and rapidly increasing from there. The rate of increase in the number of references to the term 'Malthusian' is in fact more rapid than for the name Malthus, overtaking the latter in terms of total references in the late 1830s. However when taken as a whole both sets of references in general follow the pattern we observe in the Google Ngram corpus; with an increased level of interest in the early and later part of the nineteenth century.⁶²

Looking at the number of articles that include the words 'Malthusian' or 'Malthusianism' as a percentage of all the articles (the grey line in Figure 7) gives us an idea of the changing way Malthus figured in public discourse throughout the century. We can see that periods when total references are highest also correspond to the periods with the highest proportion of references to the term 'Malthusian' as compared with the name 'Malthus', peaking at just over half of all references in the 1830s and 1880s. This was the same result we found in the Ngram data, as seen in Figure 4 (p. 65), with reference to Malthus as a proportion of all references dropping sharply in the 1830s and 1880s. This suggests that at those times when the public is more concerned with issues that are linked to Malthus, like population and poverty, the way that his ideas are employed as rhetorical 'evidence' within these debates changes. This hypothesis will be examined in the following chapters which examine each of these periods in turn.

One interpretation of the increased salience of 'Malthusian' ideas or 'Malthusianism' as a doctrine, as opposed to direct references to Malthus himself, is that at certain times the public discourse invokes the broader, more useful

⁶² It should be noted that the sharp increase in references to Malthus in the second half of the 1870s (with 213 articles) is mostly due to the prominence of Colonel Malthus in the media at this time, with many articles reporting on his participation in the Anglo-Zulu war of 1879 for example.

arguments that a doctrine provides, rather than engaging with the nuances of an economic theory or the arguments of a particular individual.⁶³ When public debate intensifies around questions of population, for example during the debates on poor relief and contraception, it could be expected that various economic ideas would be simplified and even reinterpreted for the ease of argument and persuasion. The above bibliometric analysis allows us to observe one aspect of this phenomenon in the patterns of newspapers references to Malthus and Malthusianism in the nineteenth century.

This analysis therefore suggests a possible reason for the persistence of Malthusianism as a recognisable economic theme (meaning public, rather than academic, recognition), which survives in the discourse of population to this day. As population and resource debates intensified in the twentieth century, with a greater awareness of environmental constraints in the developed world and high fertility in the still developing nations, the salience of Malthusian ideas in popular discourse only increased. The simple argument of Malthus' population essay lends itself particularly well to this process, in no small part because of his choice to present it as the simple mathematical relationship between population growth and agricultural productivity.

2.4 Malthus in Political Discourse; the Parliamentary Debates of the Nineteenth Century

We finally turn to the use of Malthusian language within the sphere of government debate. The digitisation of the Hansard records dating back to 1803 allows us to

⁶³ For example, the use of terms like 'Freudian' to represent all manifestations of repressed sexuality, or 'Marxist' and 'Stalinist' as a derogatory term for any argument for socialism. In rhetorical terms this represents a kind of 'straw-manning', that is, reducing a complex argument into a more easily refuted ideal.

perform a similar analysis as above, searching for references to Malthus (and the term 'Malthusian') within the parliamentary debates in both the House of Commons and Lords. The results are shown below in Figure 8. While parliamentary debate is by no means perfectly representative of the wider public discourse, politicians in the nineteenth century were very much aware of and at times responsive to this discourse. Parliamentary debate will not be the focus of the remaining chapters, but it is worth considering in the wider context of public debate, and is thus examined briefly here.

Turning to Figure 8, it is interesting to note that reference to Malthus appear very early in the Hansard records. The earliest reference to Malthus is by The Earl of Selkirk in the House of Lords debate on the Slave Trade Abolition Bill, who noted that:

In countries where the means of human subsistence were proportionate to the number of inhabitants, the increase of population had always been found progressive. This principle had been acknowledged by all writers on the subject, and had been unanswerably explained in the able work of Mr. Malthus upon population. (HL Deb 05 February 1807 vol 8 cc657-72)⁶⁴

During the first three decades of the century we see a relatively stable number of references to Malthus in the parliamentary debates, often cited in a similar manner to the two examples above; that is with specific reference to Malthus' population theory and in a tone that suggests respect for intellectual expertise. These references to Malthus cease almost completely in the middle of the century, with only a few references in the latter half.

⁶⁴ The same year the House of Commons saw the beginnings of the debates on the Poor Law Bills as will be discussed in Chapter 3.

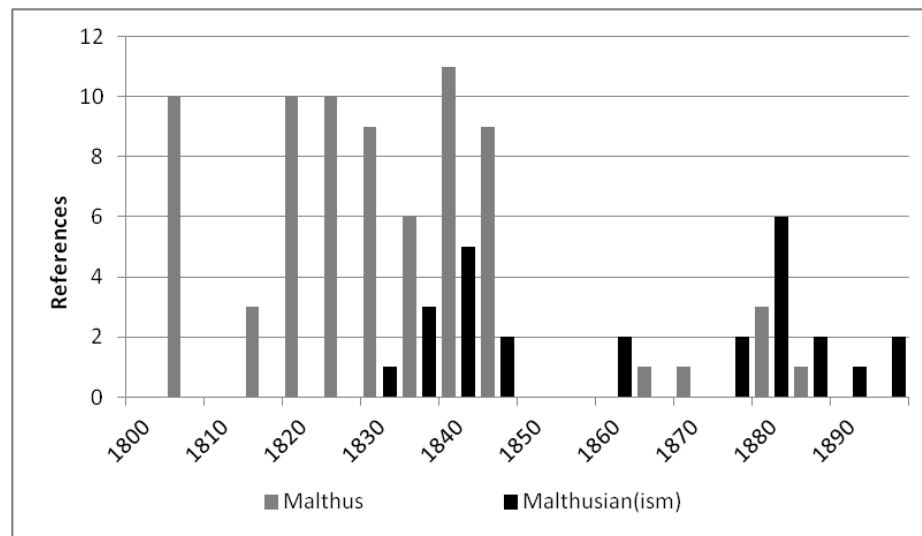


Figure 8: References to Malthus in parliamentary debate, source: Historical Hansard

Looking instead at references to the terms ‘Malthusian’ and ‘Malthusianism’ we again see a similar pattern to the results described earlier in this chapter; with peaks in the 1840s and 1880s, matching the timing of the Poor Law and birth control debates in Britain (discussed in Chapters 3 and 4 respectively). The earliest reference to the term ‘Malthusian’ is from 1831, before Malthus’ death, when a Sir Joseph Yorke in the House of Commons referred to the “Malthusian principles now in fashion” (HC Deb 08 March 1831 vol 3 cc181-247) in a debate on reform of parliamentary representation.

While there are some occasional references to Malthus himself later in the century, it is apparent that within the political debate of the late nineteenth century, as in the wider public sphere, the Malthusian ‘doctrine’ (as opposed to Malthus’ ideas) was a more useful tool of political rhetoric. In the following chapters we will see exactly how this rhetoric is used by different actors within the various population controversies of the century.

While the parliamentary debates represent a much smaller subset of the public debate than the newspaper archives, totalling a few hundred references to Malthus as opposed to a few thousand, it is interesting that we can still observe the same patterns that we see in the published works and newspapers of the time. This suggests that the political debate of the nineteenth century was reflected to some

extent the public discourse of the time, which is an interesting finding in itself. As with much of the analysis in this chapter it is, however, difficult to tease out causality from these correlations. Newspapers play a mediating role between popular and political debate, in that they both report political debate to the public, but also distil public sentiment which politicians will reflect in their speeches and actions. Looking at the above correlations we cannot say whether politicians invoked Malthus because the public was already interested in Malthusian ideas, or vice versa, we can only say that Malthus was a figure of rhetorical importance to both politicians and within the wider popular sphere.

It is also informative to compare the references to Malthus in Hansard to some kind of 'baseline' political interest in economic issues, to determine if the pattern seen above simply reflects changes in the overall use of economic language in parliament, as opposed to interest in Malthus specifically. Direct comparison with a contemporary economist like Ricardo is again difficult, as Ricardo himself was a member of parliament from 1819 until his death in 1823, and two of his sons also became MPs. Instead I look at the total number of references to 'economic' terms⁶⁵ in the Historical Hansard database, with results shown from 1800 to 1900 in Figure 9 below.

⁶⁵ These consist of terms like 'economics', 'economic', 'economical', 'economy' and 'economist(s)'. However this method suffers from some false positives, returning results like 'economise' which are sometimes used in a non-economic context.

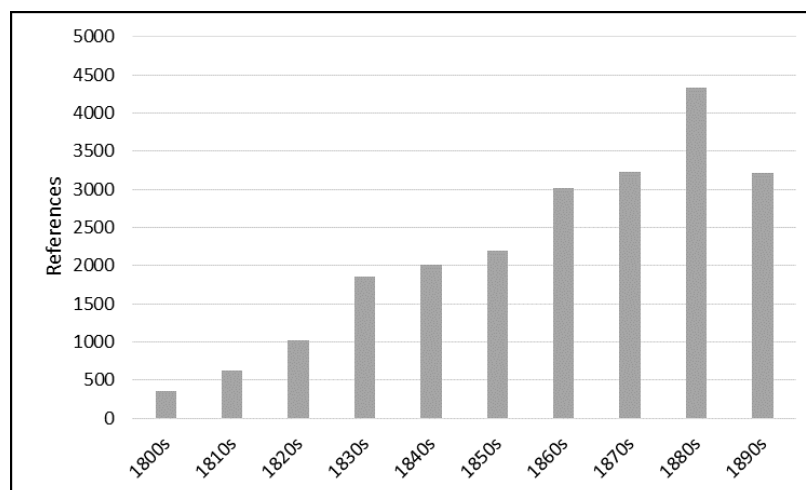


Figure 9: References to 'economic', 'economist' or 'economy' in parliament 1800-1900, source: Historical Hansard

This exercise shows an almost uniformly increasing use of economic language in parliament throughout the nineteenth century, with the exception of a relatively higher number in the 1880s (possibly linked to the 'long depression' which began in the 1870s) and lower number in the last decade of the century. The early decades of the century show very little use of economic terms in parliament, and while there is an increase from the 1820s to 1830s, there is no significant spike in use of these terms in the 1830s and 40s, the period at which we saw the greatest increase of Malthusian terms in the newspapers.

2.5 Multiple Discourses, Different Malthus's

The above analysis paints a surprisingly consistent picture of the use of Malthus' ideas in the public discourse of nineteenth-century Britain, despite relying on four very different levels of discourse (published books, academic periodicals, newspapers, and political debate). However it must be remembered that while there will be some overlap between these spheres, they represent potentially very different debates and possibly reflect entirely different concerns and motivations. The following chapters will examine two such moments, with the intention of explaining how Malthusian ideas became useful not only in very different debates but within different 'levels' of discourse, whether academic, political or popular.

The bibliometric approach of this chapter allows us to identify a broad pattern in the use of Malthus and his ideas within a range of media in nineteenth-century Britain, a pattern that has previously gone unnoticed in the extensive history of Malthus and his place in economic debate. The initial high level of interest in Malthus, followed by a sustained plateau and then sudden revival later in the century is in and of itself a useful finding, pointing to the rapid changes in academic and public recognition that an economic doctrine can undergo. However more importantly, the above analysis has highlighted a key difference in the way that Malthus figured in the various kinds of discourse.

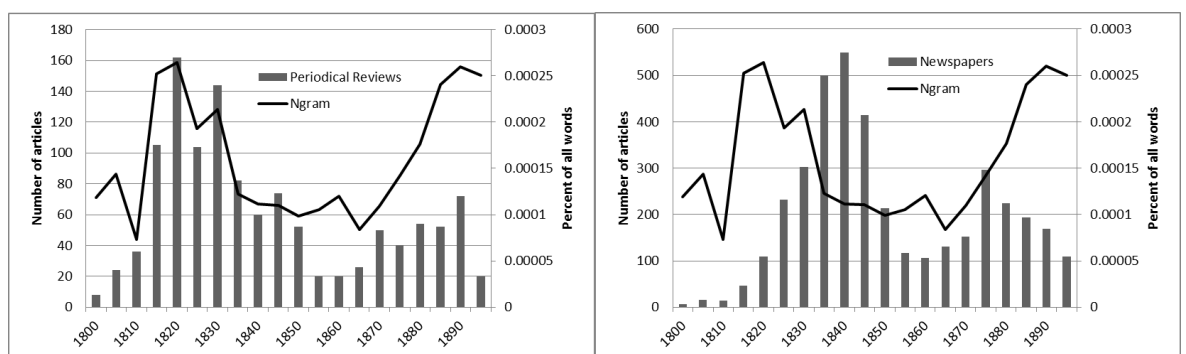


Figure 10: Malthus in British books, literary periodicals and newspapers

Figure 10 above illustrates the key difference in terms of Malthus' importance to debate between the 'higher' level discourse of published books and academic periodicals, and the more popular, or public level of discourse in newspapers. The pattern of references to Malthus is broadly the same in both the Ngram corpus of published books and the academic periodicals (left panel), with a peak in references in the early and later part of the century. While the general trend in references in newspapers is the same (with an early and late-century peak), it is apparent that the peaks do not occur concurrently. The first spike in references in the newspapers is clearly later than that in either published books or academic periodicals, occurring after Malthus' death in 1834 rather than during his lifetime. Conversely, the second peak later in the century seems to occur slightly earlier in the newspapers, with a sudden increase in articles mentioning Malthus from 1875-80, whereas references in books and periodicals continue to increase right up until the end of the century, peaking in 1890-95. It is these two peaks in the newspaper references that will be

examined in chapters 3 and 4, with the aim of explaining how Malthusian language became relevant to popular discourse in these periods.

The results discussed in this chapter must also be understood in the context of an ever-changing discourse; one of the risks of any long-term content analysis is that the very meaning of the words being examined changes over time. Indeed, as the following chapters demonstrate, what people meant by 'Malthusian' or 'Malthusianism' did change dramatically over the course of the nineteenth century. The case studies of this thesis will explicitly address this question; querying how the use of economic evidence in the form of Malthus' population theory differed between not only the two debates being analysed (poor relief and birth control), but also between the different spheres of public debate, that is, different groups within society.

The above analysis should therefore be thought of as an illustrative rather than conclusive exercise; allowing us to understand to what extent nineteenth-century public discourse invoked the concepts of Malthus at various time, but not shedding much light on how or why this happened, or indeed what was meant by 'Malthus' or 'Malthusian' in these different discourses. This analysis also reinforces the hypothesis that the changing scope of the public debate did shape the development of Malthusianism at key moments in the nineteenth century. The periods when Malthus figures most prominently in the public discourse, that is, periods of public concern with population, see an increased use of the terms 'Malthusian' and 'Malthusianism'. This suggests that the extent of public debate had as much of a role in the changing doctrine of Malthusianism as the content of these debates. This supports Skinner's assertion that language is itself a form of action, and that the use of language has a performative impact on public debate. Once again, from this kind of analysis we are unable to infer exactly how the use of Malthusian language is altering the terms of the debate, this will require the close textual analysis of the following chapters.

Conclusions

Bibliometric analysis of published books, periodicals, newspapers, and political debate in nineteenth-century Britain gives us a new insight into the changing place of Malthus and Malthusianism within these different media, and through this the changing use of economic evidence within public debate. I find that despite the established wisdom that Malthus had little to no role in the economic debate of the late nineteenth century, supposedly displaced by the Ricardian School of thought, the public debate did in fact continue to invoke both Malthus and Malthusianism after his death, and that the revival of academic interest in Malthus happened earlier than previously thought.

This quantitative approach to the history of economic thought allows us to quantify the patterns of public discourse for the first time, identifying broad trends and key moments, or turning points, in this process. The following chapters will investigate two of these key moments in the changing discourse on population; the debates around poor relief in the 1830s and 40s, and birth control in the 1870s and 80s. The above analysis suggests that it is at these moments, when population, and its related themes, become salient in the public mind, that we see the clearest evidence for a purposeful and transformative use of economic evidence within the public debate.

Chapter 3 – The Ghost of Malthus: Popular use of Malthusian Rhetoric 1830-50

Introduction

As seen in Chapter 1, The nineteenth century witnessed the unprecedented development of what we now think of as the public sphere in Britain, both through an exponential increase in the quantity and range of media available to the public, as well as this public's increased ability (through higher literacy and lower prices) and willingness to engage with these media. While the discussions of philosophers and statesmen had previously taken place behind closed doors or within closed circles of intellectual elite, the emergence of a popular sphere (as distinct from the academic or political spheres) centred on a growing popular press blurred the boundaries of the political, the social and the private.

As will be seen in this chapter, the growing importance of the public sphere (as both locus of public engagement and medium for political and social discourse) in the early nineteenth century helps explain how Malthus went from almost unknown (outside of select intellectual circles) essayist at the turn of the century, to widely-known (and reviled) figure by the middle of the century. The timing of the increased relevance of Malthus in the newspapers of the 1830s and 40s, as identified in Chapter 2, can potentially be explained by this blossoming of public discourse in response to a remarkable confluence of economic, social and political concerns during these two decades. The period saw some of the worst harvest years of the century, culminating in deprivation in many parts, most tragically in the Great Irish famine of the late 1840s. Downward pressure on wages, combined with reductions in the rates of poor relief further compounded economic hardship, resulting in

widespread striking and riots,⁶⁶ growing support for unionisation and the rise of the Chartist movement. These two decades saw considerable and often controversial economic and social reform, notably during the 'Reform Parliament' of 1833-35. This short period saw numerous important pieces of legislation passed including the Reform Act of 1832, the Factory Act and Slavery Abolition Act of 1833, and most relevantly to this chapter the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834.

As will be seen, it is within the context of Poor Law reform that we will find the most fertile uses of Malthusian ideas, both in the popular discourse of newspapers and in the political sphere. From the very beginning of this debate Malthus was associated closely with the controversial proposal to limit poor relief, particularly for larger families, which within the paradigm of 'New Political Economy'⁶⁷ was seen as providing a perverse incentive keeping the poor in a state of deprivation. While Malthus himself was not an active participant in the debate of the early 1830s, it was his comments on the Poor Law in the many editions of the *Essay on the Principle of Population*, especially from the second edition of 1803 onwards, that inspired the rhetoric of the policy makers in framing this reform (Huzel 1969).

In order to understand the changing role of Malthusian ideas and language in the public sphere during these two crucial decades, this chapter makes use of a number of sources, representing different levels of public discourse. The most obvious location of this debate is parliament, where the Poor Law reform was initially

⁶⁶ Including the 1830 Swing riots of agricultural workers throughout South-East England, the 1831 Merthyr rising of coal-miners in South Wales, the 1838 'Battle of Bossenden Wood', the 1839-1843 Rebecca riots of agricultural workers in Wales, the 1839 Newport rising of coal-miners and Chartist sympathisers, and the Chartist led 1842 General Strike.

⁶⁷ As distinct from the political economy of the late eighteenth century associated with Adam Smith or David Hume. The term 'New Political Economy' was used to describe the Ricardian system, signifying a new direction for economic thought in the early nineteenth century; "The coming man who wanted to make a name for himself must start from Ricardo, and steer clear of what now became the heresies- those views, -which had no place in the shining temple of the New Political Economy." (Checkland 1949)

discussed, however this offers only one perspective on the public sphere. The use of economic theory in policy debate represents one kind of public engagement as described by Goodwin, but if we are interested not only in why Malthusian ideas became political, but how they became public (that is, how economic ideas travel between the nodes in Goodwin's model of diffusion). The use of Malthusian rhetoric in the popular press will therefore be the focus of this chapter, as it is here that the closest approximation to 'public opinion' can be gauged. To this end I examine a subsample of newspaper articles printed in Britain between 1830 and 1850 that make reference to Malthus. Of the 1,656 articles that refer to Malthus (or the terms 'Malthusian' or 'Malthusianism') during this period a subsample of 166 (10%) were chosen for closer analysis.⁶⁸ Before turning to the analysis of Malthusian rhetoric in the newspapers of the period, the following sections look at how this rhetoric was first introduced into the public sphere through the political debates of the early nineteenth century.

3.1 Political Economy, the Parliament and Poor Law Reform

In the first half of the nineteenth century economic thought became increasingly important to political debate and policy making in Britain. As noted by Fetter

⁶⁸ This sample is drawn from the digitised British Library/Gale Cengage *19th Century British Newspapers* archive as described in Chapter 2. Systematic sampling is used to select this 10% sample (that is, every 10th article in publication order is selected). This method is especially useful in the case of newspapers as articles are often reprinted in different newspapers within a short space of time. Systematic sampling therefore provide the largest variety of articles for subsequent analysis. The actual composition of this subsample is detailed in Appendix A, which demonstrates the scope of the newspaper archive. The articles being examined here have come from 41 different newspapers across the country, with each newspaper providing on average 2.4% of the sample (with a median of 1.2%). Three major newspapers provide more than 10% of the articles each, namely London's *Morning Post* (13.3%) and *Standard* (17.5%), and Leeds' *Northern Star* (totalling 20.5% across its two editions).

(1975), British parliaments of the middle part of the nineteenth century contained an unprecedented number of economists, for the most part associated with the Whigs or Radicals.⁶⁹ In fact it was the Reform Parliament of 1833-35 that had the highest representations of economists, with a total of 32 sitting during those years (with 23 in the House of Commons).

Colonel Robert Torrens, a founding member of the Political Economy Club and active parliamentarian, argued that the true role of economics and economists was to improve the lot of mankind through the better understanding of society's laws. Torrens used his speaking time in parliament to defend what he saw as the social utility of political economy:

Members might be found denouncing and disclaiming the principles of political economy, in the same breath with which they proposed measures for improving the condition of the people. The labouring classes composed the great bulk of every community; and a country must be considered miserable or happy in proportion as these classes were well or ill supplied with the necessaries, comforts, and enjoyments, of life. The study of political economy teaches us the way in which labour may obtain an adequate reward... Political economy is not, as has been erroneously stated, the appropriate or exclusive science of the Statesman and the legislator; *it is emphatically the science of the people.* (HC Deb 29 August 1831 vol 6 cc783-854; emphasis added)

As was seen in Figure 9 (p. 83) references to economic language in parliament were already increasing in the first decades of the nineteenth century. By 1807 Malthus was already an important enough intellectual figure to be mentioned in parliament,⁷⁰ with Whig MP Samuel Whitbread invoking Malthus' to frame a first attempt at reforming the Old Poor Laws:

⁶⁹ Of the 108 members of the Political Economy Club, 52 were members of parliament at some point in the century (Fetter 1975).

⁷⁰ Although as seen in Figure 7 (p. 69) there are still very few references in the newspapers, suggesting popular awareness of Malthus' work was still very limited at this time.

One philosopher in particular has arisen amongst us, who has gone deeply into the causes of our present situation. I mean Mr. Malthus. *His work upon Population has, I believe, been very generally read;* and it has completed that change of opinion with regard to the poor-laws, which had before been in some measure begun. (HC Deb 19 February 1807 vol 8 cc865-921; emphasis added)

Whitbread's proposed bill proved unsuccessful however, with parliament disbanded soon after in March 1807. However Malthus' involvement in this early debate ensured his permanent association with the controversial issue of Poor Law reform. Malthus himself replied to the proposed reform in *A Letter to Samuel Whitbread* (1807), in which he summarised his opposition to the Old Poor Law, which he argued encouraged early marriages and thus a higher birth-rate, one of the few instances in which Malthus publically engaged with debate on Poor Law reform.⁷¹

The issue of reform again raised its head in 1817, in the wake of the Napoleonic War and one of the worst agricultural and economic crises of the nineteenth century.⁷² Mandler (1987) argues that the various Poor Law reform efforts of the early nineteenth century demonstrate that incremental ideological change had been taking place within the governing and landed elite for some time. Mandler attributes the failure to enact reform in 1817 to a lack of political courage on the part

⁷¹ Although Malthus does admit that the lower proportion of births and marriages in England compared to other European countries suggests that "the poor laws do not encourage early marriages *so much* as might naturally be expected" (Malthus' italics, p 16). Malthus attributes this to the lack of housing built by landlords for agricultural workers. For a detailed account of Whitbread's interpretation of Malthus and the latter's reply, see James (1979, pp.136–141).

⁷² The crisis of 1816-17 followed a number of successive years of colder weather (1816 commonly referred to as the year without a summer), attributed in large part to the volcanic activity of 1812-15, culminating in the eruption of Tombooro in 1815. As a result of poor harvests, grain prices in England doubled between 1815 and 1817 and consumer demand suffered considerably (Post 1970).

of the Tories, who were unwilling to overturn the old paternalist Poor Law system in spite of ideological support for reform among the liberal middle classes:

The 1834 diagnosis of the poor-law crisis was available in 1817, and so was the prescription - the workhouse system – which followed logically from that diagnosis. What was not available in 1817 was the political will and means necessary to implement a new poor law. (Mandler 1987, p.147)

The lack of a coherent, unifying argument for reform no doubt played a role; unlike the eventual reform of 1834, the debates of 1816-17 did not rely strongly on Malthusian or economic rhetoric. However the ‘principle of Malthus’ was seen by some as a key part of the debate; speaking on the proposed reform in parliament in 1819, Lord Milton noted that:

There were three classes of persons who took different views on the subject of our poor laws; one class, agreeing with the principle of Mr. Malthus, was for their entire abolition; a second was for retaining them, and merely altering the administration; and the third, to which the right hon. gentleman professed to belong, would confine the benefit and operation of them to the old and impotent. (HC Deb 11 June 1819 vol 40 cc1125-30)

In many ways the eventual success of the Poor Law Amendment Act in 1834 was a foregone conclusion, with bipartisan agreement that the old system was failing amid growing social unrest in the wake of the 1830 Swing Riots. In 1832 the government appointed the *Royal Commission into the Operation of the Poor Laws*, sending commissioners and their assistants around the country to collect evidence on the workings of the Old Poor Law. The final report’s main argument, that the old Elizabethan Poor Law system had become bloated, expensive and inefficiently managed, justified reform in the eyes of most MPs, and more importantly provided a public justification for what it was feared would be an unpopular centralisation of government powers (Brundage 1978). However the report was heavily criticised both at the time and ever since for, at best, lacking scientific rigour and presenting biased evidence, and at worst suppressing conflicting evidence for political purposes. Blaug argues:

Where the Poor Law Report went wrong was in its assessment of the causes of agricultural unemployment; its recommendations might have been appropriate at a later date, but they were hopelessly

inappropriate to the conditions that prevailed in 1834. The evidence they collected in the town and rural queries should have taught the commissioners that they had misinterpreted the consequences of the Old Poor Law. But their minds were made up, and where they did not ignore the findings, they twisted them to suit their preconceived opinions. (Blaug 1964, p.243)⁷³

3.2 The Malthusian Framing of the New Poor Law

The report itself did not invoke any particularly strong Malthusian arguments, despite what might be assumed from the later public reaction to the reform.⁷⁴ A few short pages are dedicated to the question of whether the Old Poor Laws encouraged improvident marriages, based on anecdotes from a small number of parishes. The assistant overseer of Burghfield for example told the commission that he was:

...convinced that the discontinuance of the allowance system had saved the parish from destruction; it did this by the immediate check which it gave to population. (*The Poor Law Report of 1834*, p.350)

It would be Henry Brougham (Lord Chancellor 1830-1834, founder of the *Edinburgh Review* and the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge) who would introduce Malthusian language so successfully into the debates on poverty and poor relief in 1834. Brundage tells how leading up to the second reading of the poor Law bill, Brougham asked Senior to “prepare a statement on the role of magistrates under the new system” (Brundage 1978, p.69). Instead of reading this prepared

⁷³ Whether or not the Poor Law system was as badly administered as the commissioners argued, there was a strong argument for national reform. Before 1834 there was no unified national Poor Law, and systems for providing charity differed from parish to parish. From 1795 some counties (mostly agricultural) practised the Speenhamland system of welfare provision, whereby incomes that fell below subsistence were supplemented in relation to the current bread price (Blaug 1963). Because each parish was responsible for providing relief to its own poor, conflict over the official residence of paupers was common (Brundage 1978).

⁷⁴ The principle author of the report, Nassau Senior, was (as discussed in Chapter 1) an admirer of Malthus but by no means in agreement on the question of population.

statement however, on the 21st of July 1834, Brougham used his speech to rail against the Poor Laws, and against the public for ignorantly supporting this ‘pernicious system’. Brougham here relies heavily on Malthusian rhetoric (using terms like ‘preventive check’), arguing that political economy was uniquely placed to understand and solve the problem of poverty:

These learned persons argue, (if I so may speak) that the Poor-laws afford the only means we have of effectually checking or preventing an increase of population. They say, that whilst there is no possibility of preventing by law improvident marriages amongst the poor (and I admit there is none), the Poor-laws furnish a preventive check. (HL Deb 21 July 1834 vol 25 cc211-75)

Brougham makes it clear that it is specifically the Malthusian principle of population (what he calls the ‘true principle’) which should be guiding government policy:

My Lords, those who framed the Statute of Elizabeth were not adepts in political science—they were not acquainted with the true principle of population—they could not foresee that a Malthus would arise to enlighten mankind upon that important, but as yet ill-understood, branch of science. (HL Deb 21 July 1834 vol 25 cc211-75)

The ‘true principal of population’; that the poor would have as many children as they could afford, thus provided the crucial justification for removing the guarantee of relief to the poor.⁷⁵ Thus while the initial argument for Poor Law reform as

⁷⁵ It is still a matter of debate whether the Old Poor Law did in fact promote higher fertility among the poor. Huzel (1969), using Census returns for 1821 and 1831, finds that fertility rates were already decreasing in the decade before the Poor Law reform of 1834. While fertility does appear to be higher in counties with higher levels of poor relief, as argued by Krause (1958), this cannot necessarily be interpreted as causative, as higher fertility itself will lead to greater reliance on welfare, rather than simply being caused by it. Blaug (1963) also notes that the rate of population growth was not any slower in Scotland or Ireland where incomes were not supplemented by Poor Law policies. Furthermore, the issue of under-registration in the early decades of the nineteenth century make it hard to properly assess changing fertility patterns between different counties and before and after the Poor Law reform of 1834. For this reason there has been very little recent research on the link between the Poor Laws and fertility, at least at the national level. A recent case study of Bedfordshire, however, suggests that poor law allowances in that region were not a causal

outlined in the *Poor Law Report of 1834* was principally financial and administrative, the public face of the reform was decidedly Malthusian. The modern and ‘scientific’ theories of political economy gave reformers like Brougham a theoretical framework through which to understand the relationships between population and poverty, with the Malthusian theory very much at the heart of this framework. Blaug, describing this zeitgeist, writes “To a generation drunk on Malthusian wine, the population argument seemed irrefutable” (Blaug 1963, p.153)

The Malthusian framing of the Poor Law Amendment in 1834 would reverberate in both the political and public spheres for the following decades, and it is this phenomenon that will be the focus of the rest of this chapter. Looking back to the bibliometric analysis of Chapter 2, we can see that 1834 did indeed see a shift in the way Malthus figures in political debate. This shift is especially evident in the changing way that parliamentarians refer to Malthus in their speeches; after 1834 the term ‘Malthusian’ becomes increasingly common, peaking in the early 1840s (as seen in Figure 8, p. 81). Whereas before 1834 parliamentary references to Malthus tend to be more neutral, simply mentioning Malthus in connection to the essay on population, or referring to Malthusian ideas as a part of the wider political economy debate. For example; “referring to the opinions of Mr. Ricardo, Mr. Malthus, and others” (HC Deb 12 June 1827 vol 17 cc1256-8).

Turning briefly to the political debate on the Poor Law reform, opposition in parliament was often directed at the use (or perceived misuse) of political economy in government. In 1839 Thomas Atwood (an economist and MP with no party affiliation) painted the following picture of economic theory being used by the political class to deceive the poor as to the true cause of their misery:

The fact was, as he had often said, that the industrious classes resembled fishes in a pond, and the noble Lord, on the one side of the

factor in demographic change, as they were mostly restricted to times of severe hardship (Williams 2004).

House, and the right hon. Baronet, the Member for Tamworth, on the other, had been playing the part of fishermen for many years. At one period the fishermen pulled up the plug, and let off the water, and left the poor fishes floundering in the mud... At another period the fishermen returned the plug to its proper place, the streams of nature quickly filled the pond with water again... This was the whole secret of the "fluctuations" which had taken place in England for the last twenty-four years. It was all wretched nonsense to talk about "overtrading," and "overpopulating," and "overspeculating," and of twenty other Malthusian theories. (HC Deb 30 May 1839 vol 47 cc1139-56)

In a similar vein the Liberal-Conservative MP Alexander Baillie-Cochrane lamented:

What was the course pursued under the present system of Poor Laws? They took the poor man from his cottage, they forgot that his footsteps still lingered on the threshold, and that the roof, however humble, had sheltered him from the cold; they placed him in a large, commodious, roomy building—a workhouse—which was divided and subdivided according to the most approved economical scale, and regulated by a system of machinery and by rules which would delight a Malthus. (HC Deb 04 July 1844 vol 76 cc319-88)

When the terrible condition of many workhouses was exposed to the public through the 1830s and 40s by both the press and government inquiry, conservative MP William Ferrand accused the Poor Law guardians of “carrying out the cheap Malthusian doctrine of teaching the pauper to live on the coarsest sort of food, and that in the smallest possible quantity. (HC Deb 28 January 1847 vol 89 cc528-94)”.⁷⁶

For Ferrand it was clear who was responsible for the Poor Law of a decade earlier:

And who was the person then consulted, and who guided the parties who drew up the Bill? It was a man whose name was odious throughout the country—I mean Mr. Malthus; and Mr. Malthus, who was Lord Brougham's guide, as well as guide to the Commissioners who drew up the dark document to which I shall presently further allude. (HC Deb 17 May 1847 vol 92 cc965-1017)

⁷⁶ The guardian Ferrand was referring to was Charles Mott, who oversaw the asylum Haydock Lodge, and was in fact himself an Assistant Poor Law Commissioner until his dismissal in 1842 (Hirst 2005).

As shall be seen in the following sections, the reaction to Malthusian theory in political debate made use of the same discursive themes that were expressed in the popular media of the time.⁷⁷ Furthermore, the same rhetorical techniques are employed in both levels of discourse; deploying the Malthusian epithet as shorthand for all political economy, emphasising the unrealistic nature of the new paradigm of calculating man, and decrying its imposition on the lives of ordinary people.

3.3 The Malthusian Epithet in Popular Discourse

The importance and persistence of the pejorative term ‘Malthusian’ within political discourse has been frequently commented on by historians of the nineteenth century. In *Languages of Class*, Gareth Stedman Jones notes that:

‘Malthusian’ first became an abusive epithet, both among trade unionists and radicals in the 1820s, and a position which was to become standard - connecting excessive competition, abuse of machinery, overwork, declining wages and unemployment with the mushroom growth of large capitalists and the promotion of the export trade - was well established by the end of the decade. (Stedman Jones 1983, p.115)

This chapter shows that while the term ‘Malthusian’ played a role in the discourse of the early nineteenth century, it was not until after Malthus’ death and the

⁷⁷ The association between Malthus and government policy was not limited to the Poor Law reform, but remained an important part of political rhetoric. Speaking on the issue of forced emigration in 1843, William Sharman Crawford stated that:

“He believed the present proposition had sprung from that most hateful doctrine, the Malthusian doctrine, that it was proper to dispose of any amount of population in any manner that was possible, — that doctrine which had led to more cruelty, more bad feeling, and more injustice than any other doctrine that ever was broached, or that the friends of the people ever had to combat.” (HC Deb 06 April 1843 vol 68 cc484-599)

controversial Poor Law debates of the 1830s that this term gained the rhetorical power that came to be attributed to it by later historians of public discourse.

Looking at British newspapers in the period around Malthus' death in Figure 7 (p. 77), we observed that references to the term 'Malthusian' in fact peaked at around the time that the total number of references to Malthus peaked in the 1830s and 40s. This suggests an important shift in the use of Malthus and his ideas at these times of heightened debate; the adjective 'Malthusian' is obviously used to modify the words that follow for rhetorical purposes. Unsurprisingly upon a closer reading of the 1830-50 sample of newspaper articles it becomes clear that this Malthusian adjective serves a distinctly political or rhetorical purpose (rather than showing a genuine engagement with economic theory), although over the course of this period a more neutral meaning also emerges.

The most obvious way in which the term 'Malthusian' is used in the newspapers of the mid-nineteenth century is in its application to the group of political economists (and more widely, public intellectuals) who the public saw as responsible for a new kind of cruel, inhuman economics. This use is frequent enough to suggest that the average newspaper reader not only knew who Malthus was, but had well-formed beliefs about what was meant by such turns of phrase as "the deceased doctrine of some Malthusian bigot". This supports the argument that much of the public's engagement with Malthusian ideas, even in the early part of the century, was in the oral sphere.

As previously noted, the 1830s and 40s saw a heightened level of political and social agitation, including the Poor Law and Corn Law debates, and the rise of Chartism, all taking place against a backdrop of growing resentment among the labouring classes. This period also saw a blurring of the professional boundaries between economists and politicians. It is therefore unsurprising that the Malthusian epithet was applied liberally to the politicians of the day, and their projects. This is evident in the 1830-50 sample of newspaper articles which are filled with references to 'Malthusian Whigs' and the 'Malthusian government'. Some politicians were more frequently targeted because of their association with Malthus, especially the

'Malthusian Brougham'. The Poor Law reform attracted the most vitriol,⁷⁸ described variously as "the Malthusian project of treating poverty as a crime" (*The Standard*, 15 October 1834), the "Malthusian scheme of robbing labour" (*The Standard*, 3 December 1840), "the Malthusian bill to grind the faces of the poor" (*The Standard*, 17 November 1834), "the damnable, infernal, detestable, despotic Malthusian Poor Law Amendment Act" (*The Bradford Observer*, 18 May 1837), and poetically, "the black fang'd imp of Malthus" (*The Southern Star and London and Brighton Patriot*, 19 April 1840).⁷⁹

The politicisation of the term 'Malthusian' over the course of the nineteenth century is perhaps no great surprise given the controversial nature of Poor Law reform and Malthus' association with it. This analysis of popular discourse has, however, allowed us to locate the exact source and timing of this phenomenon. It is not during Malthus' lifetime that we see the rise of the term 'Malthusian', but rather in the two decades of political and social unrest after Malthus' death. It is perhaps even the case that his death allowed for this rapid appropriation of the term 'Malthusian' by the various political interests of the time. Though Malthus rarely engaged with the wider public debate while alive, and would have thus been unlikely to respond to such an appropriation anyhow, his death, much like Ricardo's, both simplified and solidified the public's perception of what was a complex and nuanced economic philosophy, into an easily digested doctrine, that of Malthusianism.

⁷⁸ The Corn Laws, also often described as 'Malthusian', attract similar criticism, although not to the same degree or in the same quantities.

⁷⁹ This use of the Malthusian epithet can be likened to Cuttica's definition of a 'derogatory ism'; "created to target people, groups, (e.g., sects, heretical fringes, rival parties, iconoclasts) and attitudes reputed to be abnormal or not in line with majority-thinking or dismissed as insignificant or disregarded as inferior" (Cuttica 2015, p.762).

This rhetorical act of categorising all economic theory and policy as cruel and Malthusian became a particularly useful weapon against any public figure who could be deemed a 'follower' or 'disciple' of Malthus after his death. While political figures like Henry Brougham were frequently the target of this kind of rhetoric in the popular press, it could be argued that framing their arguments as 'Malthusian' did not necessarily increase public anger against what were already extremely unpopular policies, but rather, provided a useful short-hand for this anger. For other public figures who engaged with the more popular level of debate on poverty and fertility, the 'Malthusian' epithet was used with calculated efficiency to discredit their work. Using this term, instead of more inflammatory language, also protected the newspapers from the common charge of libel, which greatly restricted the freedom of the press in the early part of the century (Mitchell 2008).

The treatment of social commentator and campaigner Harriet Martineau is a prime example of this anti-Malthusian campaign. At the level of discourse in which Martineau's most vicious critics acted, notably the pauper and unstamped press, this kind of pre-emptive attack was particularly effective. The editors for these publications knew that their large working-class readership would not necessarily read the actual writings of Martineau and other commentators in the more expensive periodicals. Caricaturising such figures as the misguided and evil disciples of a hated economist (who conveniently could no longer respond to criticism) was thus an effective strategy, and had a lasting impact on the British public's opinions of politicians, economists and public intellectuals more widely, as evidenced by the persistence of this language in popular discourse. Ironically the greatest vitriol was reserved for those public figures who, like Brougham and Martineau, argued that the labouring classes would be best served by understanding and engaging with economic theory themselves, instead of leaving it to the economists and politicians.

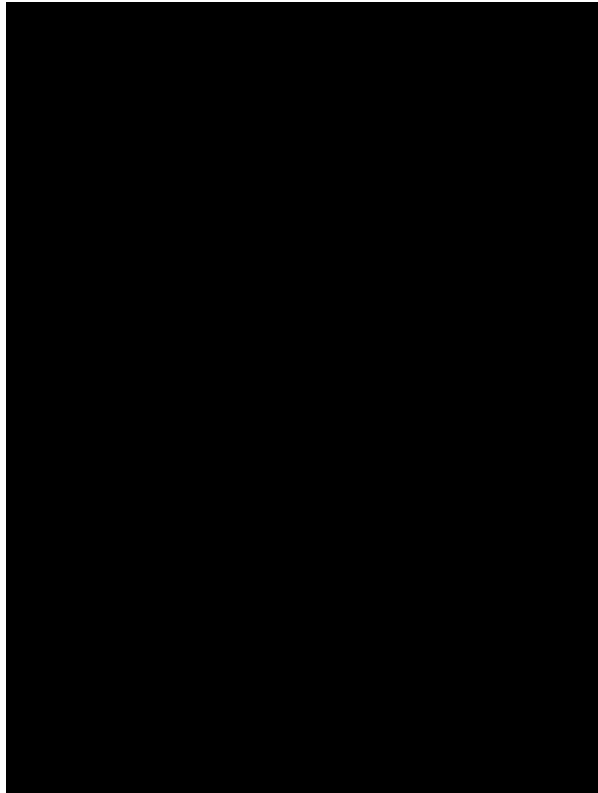


Figure 11: Sketch of Harriet Martineau by Daniel Maclise, source: Marks, 1986

Caricaturising figures like Martineau as 'Malthusian' also occurred in a literal, that is, visual, sense. Figure 11 above shows a caricature of Harriet Martineau drawn by Daniel Maclise in 1833 for *Fraser's Magazine for Town and Country* as part of a series entitled "Gallery of Illustrious Literary Characters". As Marks (1986), Fisher (2006) and Peart and Levy (2007) describe, this caricature of a lonely, almost witch-like spinster along with the accompanying 'biography' written by William Maginn, is clearly intended as an attack on Martineau's 'Malthusian' interest in the unfeminine topic of political economy, and specifically the question of population and 'the mystical topics of generation' (Maginn's words). He cruelly posits that:

It is no great wonder that the lady should be pro-Malthusian... not even [an] Irish beau... is likely to attempt the seduction of the fair philosopher from the doctrines of the no-population. (cited in Marks 1986, p.29)

3.4 The Malthusian and the Anti-Malthusian

The use of the ‘Malthusian’ adjective to create straw-men of the economists, politicians and policies of the day is however only one aspect of the changing place of Malthus in the popular discourse. Analysis of the newspaper subsample suggests a second, more rhetorically sophisticated use of the term, strongly linked to the discussion of fertility and poverty—the ‘Malthusian’ and the ‘Anti-Malthusian’. These are satirical or parodic Malthusian archetypes that speak to growing popular concerns that political economy posed a threat to the integrity of private life itself.

In order to understand the public response to the debates on poor relief, it is important to remember that the controversial reform of the Elizabethan Poor Laws that had prevailed for centuries represented to many ordinary people an unjustified imposition of economic principles on private life, specifically marriage and fertility choices. Under the old paradigm the issue of providing for the needy was framed in moral and religious terms; as long as it was believed that poverty was natural or inevitable, i.e. the result of bad luck or circumstance rather than bad behaviour, then it was natural that the poor should have the right to relief.⁸⁰ Likewise, decisions about marriage and having children which were previously seen as belonging to the moral or religious domain, now came under the influence of state concern.⁸¹

⁸⁰ The shift from a paternalistic view of welfare in the eighteenth century to one based on individual responsibility in the nineteenth, and the parallel ideological shift from ‘moral economy’ to ‘political economy’, is described by Himmelfarb (1984), Dunkley (1979), Somers and Block (2005) and E. P. Thompson (1971; 2015).

⁸¹ In the first book of his *History of Sexuality*, Foucault argues that the nineteenth century saw the creation of a new paradigm of sexuality, specifically in the relationship between the individual and the state: “Between the state and the individual, sex became an issue, and a public issue no less; a whole web of discourses, special knowledges, analyses, and injunctions settled upon it” (Foucault 1998, p.26).

The increasingly influential ideas of political economy provided new ways of thinking about social responsibility, both on the part of the labouring, and wealthy (capitalist and landed) classes. Where previously poverty was considered a problem of natural class distinction, and therefore the responsibility of society as a whole, New Political Economy, and Malthusian theory in particular put the emphasis instead on the individual and their choices. If the poor knowingly choose to bring children into a world whose wealth is already divided between the rich and the poor, then they must be considered somewhat responsible for the persistence of poverty. The emphasis on individual decisions thus marks the turning point between a social order in which it is considered the moral responsibility of all to care for the poor, and one in which it is the moral (and now economic) responsibility of the poor to ensure they do not reproduce themselves.

It is in this context of a vocal public rejection of the new economic paradigm through which all human behaviour could be examined and directed, that the figure of the Malthusian (and with him, the Anti-Malthusian) came to play a role in popular discourse. Unlike the Malthusian epithet described above, the 'Malthusian' (noun) is not necessarily a supporter of Malthus and his principle of population, but is instead a parody of this naïve follower.⁸² The use of the 'Malthusian' adjective discussed earlier does not fall into this category as it was not imitation, but merely insult. To be called Malthusian was to be accused of the cruelty and inhumanity that was associated (even if unfairly) with Malthus and the Poor Law reform. The 'Malthusian' that is examined here is a different kind of rhetorical figure, representing an exaggerated ideal; the ridiculous and unreal notion of *homo economicus*, or 'economic man' himself. This distinction is a subtle but important one; the Malthusian insult was intended to incite hatred of economists, politicians

⁸² In his *Anatomy of Satire* Gilbert Highet defines parody broadly as "imitation which, through distortion and exaggeration, evokes amusement, derision and sometimes scorn" (Highet 1962, p.69).

and other social ‘do-gooders’, but the ideal ‘Malthusian’ is instead used to incite ridicule.⁸³ Before turning to the use of this rhetorical device in the newspapers of the 1830s and 40s, it is worth noting a very early, visual example of the representative ‘Malthusian’, as identified by Donald Winch in his chapter on Malthus in *Riches and Poverty* (Winch 1996, p.222).

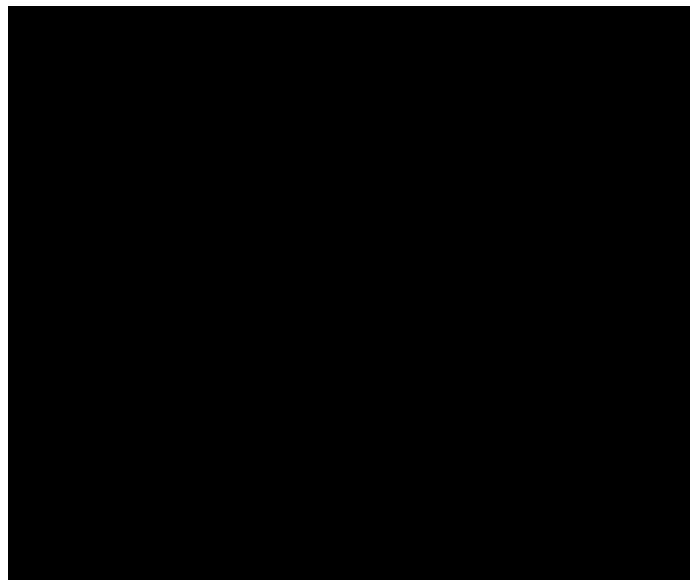


Figure 12: ‘A Malthusian’, detail from Robert Seymour (1829) *The March of Intellect*, source: British Library

The above image forms part of a larger satirical print of the ‘March of Intellect’ (or ‘March of Mind’) genre that became extremely popular in the 1820s and 30s.⁸⁴

⁸³ This is not to say that ‘a Malthusian’ cannot also refer to followers of Malthus, the term employed in much the same way as the Malthusian epithet seen in 3.3. See for example Engels in *The Condition of the Working Class in England*: “But these wise Malthusians were so thoroughly convinced of the infallibility of their theory that they did not for one moment hesitate to cast the poor into the Procrustean bed of their economic notions and treat them with the most revolting cruelty.” (Engels [1887] 2009)

⁸⁴ There is currently little written on the visual representation of economics in this period, Peart and Levy (2007) have discussed cartoons of economic thinkers like Harriet Martineau and Francis Place, arguing that “visual attacks on economic doctrine were pervasive throughout the 19th and early 20th century, and that the visual domain of economic controversy constituted a powerful method of attacking abstractions. Since the images appeared in the popular press and they were relatively straightforward to understand,

Maidment (2013), who has extensively documented the history of visual comedic culture in the mid-nineteenth century, describes *The March of Intellect* as:

a convenient shorthand for a whole range of social and cultural shifts in the first half of the nineteenth century, centrally concerned with evolving technology, the growth of mass literacy and widening access to print culture, through which class structure, as much as the economic order, was being redefined by education, invention and social aspiration. (2013, p.177)

Much of the comedic value of the genre comes from the incongruity of the poorer classes engaging in scientific or philosophical debates, despite the very real and mundane problems facing them daily. This particular vignette has a similar subject; the Malthusian in question is a humble butcher who, ignoring the reality of family life in the background, pours over a copy of 'Malthus' and a sheet of calculations, musing:

Let's see! I've eight Children, then if they each have 8 that's 64 they the same that's 512 again 4096 they the same 32768 again 262144 they 8 a piece that's 2097152 then if they should have all have 8 that's 16617210 my Conscience!!! there won't be bread enough for the Scraggs Family.

This image isn't suggesting that Malthusian ideas (meaning the cruel and inhumane 'Malthusianism' derided in the popular media) were in any way accepted by the labouring classes. The satirical humour comes from the fact that although fertility was increasingly seen as an economic issue, and widely discussed as the cause of poverty, no butcher ever truly sat down to calculate how many children (or grandchildren) they could afford to support. The imposition of economic theory on private life is the real target of the satire; the poor are blamed for failing to make calculated, economic choices about their fertility, when the very possibility of choice in such matters was unrealistic. The character of the 'Malthusian' captured this

compared to the increasingly technical models of economists throughout the post-classical period, they may well have had a great deal of influence on popular opinion." (Peart & Levy 2007, p.2)

unrealistic rationality and satirises it, while its counterpart, the 'Anti-Malthusian' more directly flaunts his disobedience of Malthus' principles.⁸⁵

Both the terms 'Malthusian' and 'Anti-Malthusian' thus came to signify a stubborn refusal on the part of the labouring classes to modify their reproductive behaviour in the face of economic arguments. Turning to the newspapers of 1830-50, we find that these terms are most commonly employed in short articles, often reprinted in multiple newspapers, about large families who are happily unaware of, or ignore Malthus' checks. For example large families of many children:

ANTI-MALTHUSIAN – The following remarkable inscription is engraved on a tombstone in Conway churchyard Carnarvonshire:-
 “Here lieth the body of Nicholas Brooks, of Conway, who was the *forty-first* child of William Brooks, esq., by Alice his wife, and father of twenty-seven children; who died March 20, A.D. 1637. (*Berrow's Worcester Journal*, 25 February 1836)

AN ANTI-MALTHUSIAN – Mr. O'Connell stated a few days since, that his grandmother was parent of 21 children but John Prentice...who is now 82 years of age, is the father of 23 children, his *cara sposa* having just presented him with twins. (*The Standard*, 14 September 1840)

Multiple births were also considered an Anti-Malthusian feat:

AN ANTI-MALTHUSIAN – The wife of a cannon-founder at Lugunski, in Russia, was brought to bed on the 22nd of May last, of *five daughters*, of whom four are still living and doing well. (*Hampshire Advertiser*, 30 July 1836)

As was ignoring Malthus' warning against marriage:

ANTI-MALTHUSIAN - There were no fewer than 113 couple [sic] appeared at the altar of Hymen, on Sunday, Monday and Tuesday last, at the Collegiate Church, Manchester, and who, on these

⁸⁵ These archetypes are closely related to Foucault's conception of the 'Malthusian couple', who is subjected to "an economic socialization via the incitements and restrictions, the "social" and fiscal measures brought to bear on the fertility of couples" (Foucault 1998, p.104).

occasions, took each other for "better and for worse". (*The Bristol Mercury*, 20 April 1844)

The title isn't reserved for humans either, as evidenced by a number of articles about Anti-Malthusian animals, for example:

Anti-Malthusian Pig - Mr. John Swannell, of Castle-Thorpe, Bucks, has a sow which has had 112 little grunTERS within three years, and all in six litters. (*The Lancaster Gazette and General Advertiser*, 22 September 1838)

And:

Hursley Fox Hounds - The first meeting for the season, of this pack, was held on Thursday last, for cub hunting, as a preliminary. Foxes are said to be abundant, the Mrs. Reynards having been rather anti-Malthusian. (*The Era*, 25 October 1846)

What is interesting is that these articles are most prominent in the 1830s and 40s, the term 'Anti-Malthusian' almost disappearing completely after 1850. The rise and fall of the 'Anti-Malthusian' thus suggests a rhetorical use for Malthus (as distinct from the purely antagonistic use described earlier) rooted in a very particular time and place, responding to the perceived encroachment of economic theory on what was previously the private sphere.

Again there was a particularly strong reaction against the teaching of economic theory by the various useful knowledge societies and popularisers of economics, which was seen as not only imposing the theories of political economy, but actively displacing the old social order which was seen (perhaps through rose-tinted glasses) as guaranteeing protection for the poor, both through traditional family and social structures. In a letter to the editor the Chartist Samuel Kydd writes:

There was, however, a cold selfishness and haughty "doctrinaire" philosophy distilled through the alembic of the useful knowledge teachers, which the more intelligent of our working men detested, and the less informed neither knew nor wanted to know. The Malthusianism of Brougham had but little in common with the warm heart of a generous parent. The mechanic loved his children and hated Malthus. (*The Northern Star and National Trades' Journal*, 26 May 1849)

The 'Malthusian' family, founded on the calculation and 'cold selfishness' of political economy, is here contrasted directly with the reality of working-class family life, based on mutual responsibility and love.

3.5 Malthus, Child Murderer

The final use of Malthus as a rhetorical device in popular media that shall be explored here is the creation of a new, imaginary and monstrous Malthus, linked with but still identifiably different from the two categories described above. As we saw, the Malthusian adjective was employed primarily to caricature the 'followers' of Malthus (that is, supporters of Poor Law reform), ascribing to them the worst traits of the cruel political economist. Likewise the subversive use of the Malthusian and Anti-Malthusian stereotypes relied on the absurdity of 'Malthusian' ideals of economic calculation taken to an extreme. Here we will see how Malthus himself makes a return to popular imagination in the late 1830s, in the monstrous form of child murderer.

The association of infanticide with Malthus combines the cruelty of the Malthusian epithet with the cold, calculating nature of the 'Malthusian' ideal, as discussed above, and as with these rhetorical tropes, seems to be predominantly a feature of mid-century popular discourse in the wake of the Poor Law reform. One newspaper, commenting on the political troubles of Lord Melbourne's cabinet in 1837, captures this combination of Malthusian cruelty and calculation:

Surely their most just, humane, and Christian amendment of the old poor-laws cannot have rendered them unpopular in England? Have they not calculated with infinitesimal precision the minimum amount of food, clothing, medicine, air and space, within which the *villainous* poor can continue to live - nay, have they not "carried out" the theory of their apostle, Malthus, in a very decisive manner, giving occasion for more cases of child-murder, within the two years that have passed since the enactment of their law, than had occurred in the *unenlightened* twenty years preceding? (*The Standard*, 5 June 1837)

Commenting on the 'flurry of interest' in child murder around the time of the poor law debates, McDonagh notes that "according to the radical press, the greatest

threat to infant life was not represented by these poor unwed mothers, but rather by the state itself" (McDonagh 2003, p.98).⁸⁶ From the 1830s it is Malthus (under the guise of 'Marcus') who comes to personify this murderous state in the public's mind.

This imaginary, murderous Malthus is best exemplified by the satirical creation 'Marcus' and his *Book of Murder*, which became a veritable media phenomenon of its time. Sometime in late 1838 a pamphlet was reported to be circulating, authored by a mysterious 'Marcus' on the benefits of infant euthanasia as a means of limiting population. Clearly written in the style of Swift's *A Modest Proposal*,⁸⁷ the pamphlet created a sensation, and was being widely discussed in the newspapers by early 1839. An ostensibly genuine article appeared in the *Northern Liberator* in March 1839, detailing a private demonstration given by the already infamous Marcus in "that celebrated room where the sage Malthus had so often demonstrated to admiring audiences" (*The Northern Liberator*, 2 March 1839). After proving the theoretical truth of Malthus' theory of population, Marcus demonstrates the use of odourless gas for the purposes of killing a small child to the wonder and delight of the onlookers. The article is accompanied by the image below (Figure 13).

⁸⁶ Contemporary writers did suggest that cases of child murder were on the rise (as in the above newspaper article), however the increasing reach of newspapers combined with a certain moral panic in this period could help explain part of this perception.

⁸⁷ Published in 1729 with the full title *A Modest Proposal for Preventing the Children of Poor People from Being a Burthen to Their Parents or Country, and for Making Them Beneficial to the Publick*, it proposed that the Irish poor sell their children as food to the wealthy.

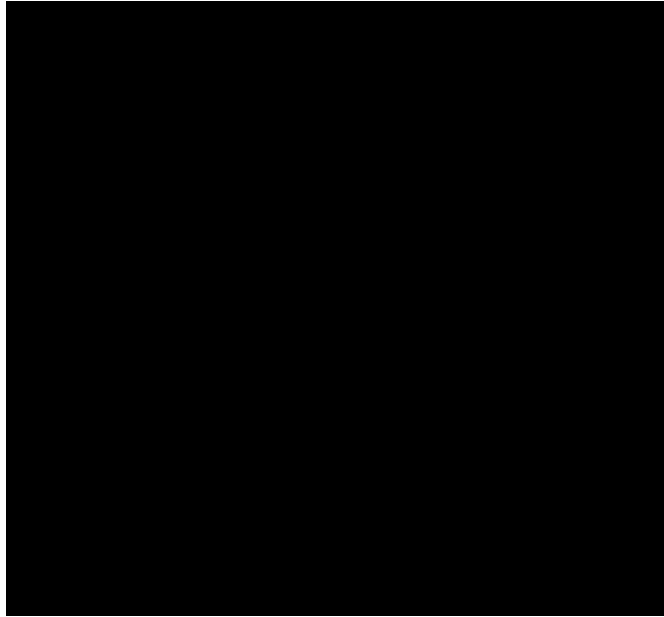


Figure 13: Marcus Unveiled, *Northern Liberator* 2nd March, 1839

There is no doubt that the author of the original pamphlet intended for an explicit parallel to be drawn between Marcus and Malthus, even in the choice of name which would have evoked memories of the Poor Law debates of the early 1830s. 'Marcus unveiled' is in some sense Malthus unveiled; killing the poor (and specifically their children) was not such an unbelievable outcome of the Malthusian doctrine, after all the old Political Economy had allowed the poor to starve for centuries, why shouldn't the New Political Economy make the process more efficient?

This intentional association between the real Malthus and imaginary Marcus certainly played a role in the confused public response to the Marcus pamphlet, with many apparently convinced of the authenticity of the murderous proposal, the newspapers of 1839 filled with horrified responses. At a meeting of Chartists in London in early 1839 (before the publication of the above article) at least one delegate apparently believed the rumours:

Oh! These philosophers would write about the Corn Laws as if they were practical farmers. Let the land be subdivided as it ought to be, and, instead of employing the labourer in artificial manufactures, let him partly till the land and indulge in healthy pursuits, and then they would hear no more of the ghost of Malthus or the damnable Marcus.
- (Loud cheers.) (*The Charter*, 17 February 1839)

This anger was further fuelled by the rumour that the author of the pamphlet was in fact one of the Poor Law commissioners themselves. McDonagh notes that “By early 1839, the infamy of ‘Marcus’ was so well known that ‘Anti-Marcus’ had become a name adopted by opponents of the New Poor Law” (2003, p.108).⁸⁸

If the popular response to the Marcus pamphlet was confused, this was most likely intentional on the part of the anonymous author(s), resulting in the blurring of the Malthus/Marcus identity.⁸⁹ For those who believed in the authenticity of the pamphlet, Marcus must have seemed to be one of the vile Malthusian disciples the newspapers mentioned so often. However even for those aware of the satire, the outrage surrounding Marcus only reinforced public opinion of the dead Malthus. McDonagh writes that “while some readers clearly did hold the pamphlets to be in ‘grim earnest’, as Carlyle claimed them to be... other readers colluded with their fictional status in much more knowing ways, engaging with ‘Marcus’ as political satire, and appropriating his deadly tales to other, subversive ends” (McDonagh 2003, p.100).

Friedrich Engels provides us with one such example of this satirical, subversive use of the Malthus/Marcus hybrid as a critique of economics. In his 1843 article *Outlines of a Critique of Political Economy* he attacks the Malthusian theory of population as the inhumane core of capitalist political economy:

Malthus, the originator of this doctrine, maintains that population is always pressing on the means of subsistence; that as soon as production increases, population increases in the same proportion; and that the inherent tendency of the population to multiply in excess

⁸⁸ Indeed, even the term ‘Marcusian’ is attached to the Poor Law debate, for example in a pamphlet by the prolific writer Samuel Roberts: “Now, my Lord Duke, is not this Malthusian - this Marcusian system of yours, a most damnable system?” (Roberts 1839, p.40).

⁸⁹ Hightet notes how “some of the best material parodies are those which might, by the unwary, be accepted as genuine work of the original author or style parodied” (Hightet 1962, p.72).

of the available means of subsistence is the root of all misery and all vice. For, when there are too many people, they have to be disposed of in one way or another: either they must be killed by violence or they must starve...

The implications of this line of thought are that since it is precisely the poor who are the surplus, nothing should be done for them except to make their dying of starvation as easy as possible, and to convince them that it cannot be helped and that there is no other salvation for their whole class than keeping propagation down to the absolute minimum. Or if this proves impossible, then it is after all better to establish a state institution for the painless killing of the children of the poor, such as "Marcus" has suggested, whereby each working-class family would be allowed to have two and a half children, any excess being painlessly killed. (Engels [1843] 1975)⁹⁰

The reference to 'two and a half children' and the use of quotation marks suggests that Engels is aware of the hoax and is using the character of Marcus satirically, attacking political economy for its arithmetic rationality in much the same way as the Malthusian/Anti-Malthusian types seen above. This example also demonstrates that the Malthus/Marcus rhetoric was still a part of public discourse five years after the infamous pamphlet first circulated, and furthermore crossed the boundary from popular discourse back into the academic sphere.

The most effective outcome of this confusion, and no doubt part of the intention, was to keep Malthus' name alive in the popular debate while simultaneously attaching to this name the horror of Marcus' proposal, ensuring that "the ghost of Malthus and the damnable Marcus" would remain firmly connected in the public mind. Nor was this ongoing association between Malthus and child murder limited to the politically active Chartists or contributors to the working class newspapers.

⁹⁰ Claeys argues that Engels owes his early thoughts on political economy to the British Owenite socialists, with whom he had come in contact as soon as he arrived in Manchester in 1832 (Claeys 1984). It is therefore probably that Engels first heard this Malthus/Marcus rhetoric at the weekly lectures of the Hall of Science, Tribe argues that the frequent lecturer John Watts is the most likely source for Engel's discussion of Malthus and population in the *Outlines* (Tribe 2015).

In Henry Mayhew's seminal work of social investigation, *London Labour and the London Poor* (1851), the ghost of Malthus was very much alive in the discourse of even the most destitute in society, as evidence in the following exchange with a costermonger (street seller), with Mayhew's comment in brackets:

Another costermonger, in answer to inquiries, said: "I 'spose you think us 'riginal coves that you ask. We're not like Methusalem, or some such swell's name (I presume that Malthus was meant) as wanted to murder children afore they were born, as I once heerd lectured about - we're nothing like that." (Mayhew 1851)

It is unlikely even with rising literacy of the period that this particular individual would have read about Malthus or the murderous Marcus in newspapers or elsewhere. This exchange demonstrated the existence of a spoken public discourse in which Malthus figures, even if under different names. The costermonger's reference to hearing about such ideas at a lecture is telling of the growing importance of public gatherings where even the illiterate could take part in, or at least hear about, the important debates of the day.

Unlike the case of the 'Anti-Malthusian' whose importance in public discourse seems to have waned fairly rapidly, the association of Malthus with child murder is a more persistent phenomenon, surviving into the final decades of the century and the controversial debate on birth control and creation of the Malthusian League (discussed in Chapter 4). The persistence of the association between Malthus and child murder is demonstrated by the following example from an 1876 article recounting the South Devon election campaign from 1868:

Lord Amberley had, some year or two before, taken part in a discussion at the London Dialectical Society (a mere private debating club) on "population," and in the course of the evening, in that absolutely free and fearless manner of his, he had taken into consideration the views of the curious political economist Malthus, as if they were doctrines which reasonable men should examine calmly and without prejudice. I believe, too, he said something in accordance with the opinion of his friend, the late John Stuart Mill, to the effect that the increase of population in an overcrowded country, and under conditions of poverty, should not be regarded as a thing altogether outside human control. What speculative and bold spirited young man has not thought over such subjects as those and examined them on both sides? But an enemy fished up an account of the discussion,

and introduced the story into the South Devon election, and all through that long contest he was pursued from town to town, and pelted every day in the Plymouth and Exeter papers, with advocating "child murder." (*Hampshire Telegraph and Sussex Chronicle*, 19 January 1876)⁹¹

The case of 15-year-old governess Agnes Norman, who was found guilty in 1871 of murdering five children in her care, also demonstrates how the lines between literal and figurative child-murder were so readily blurred in public discourse. *Freeman's Journal* described Agnes as a girl "whose study of the science of child murder would make her a valuable disciple of Malthus" (*Freeman's Journal and Daily Commercial Advertiser*, 20 July 1871). The case shocked the public and was reported widely in London and regional newspapers; not only was the crime brutal and the perpetrator a young, intelligent girl, this seemed to be a terrible realisation of the idealised Malthusian child-murderer. This crime also contrasts with the previous incarnations of the child-murderer in the public mind, representing the imposition of the immoral Poor Laws on the working class. Here was a Malthusian child-murderer within the working classes themselves, a monstrous realisation of the ideal 'Malthusian' discussed earlier.

3.6 Malthusian Rhetoric in the Popular Sphere 1830-1850

Examining both the popular and political discourse with regards to the British Poor Law debates of the 1830s and 40s allows us to better understand how Malthusian ideas gained such prominence in public consciousness in the short time after Malthus' death. Few other economists of the nineteenth century, or even the twentieth, would achieve a similar level of public recognition. What is more

⁹¹ Lord Amberley (father of philosopher Bertrand Russell and son of two-time prime-minister John Russell) went on to lose the election in question, arguably for his association with 'Neo-Malthusianism' (Micklewright 1961).

interesting is that this initial public recognition was not tied to Malthus' intellectual or academic success, although the theory of population would prove influential for the following two centuries. This chapter demonstrates that Malthus' place in public discourse of the early to mid-century is instead a rhetorical phenomenon. The association between Malthus and the new Poor Laws—only tangentially made by the actual Poor Law commissioners—would prove the impetus to a popular appropriation of Malthus' name, standing for broader public discontent with economic arguments and policy in this period.

An interesting conclusion from this analysis is that the use of Malthusian rhetoric in the 1830s and 40s is not indicative of any particular concern with population itself (in the sense of overpopulation) at the popular level. The reaction against the Poor Law reforms, and the Malthusian theory underpinning these, reflects a conflict between public intervention (in the form of economic policy) and private life (in the form of family size). This finding validates the analysis of published books in Chapter 2, which suggested that correlation between Malthus and the word 'population' was not particularly strong in the nineteenth century.

The Poor Law debates as discussed here represent a telling moment in intellectual history more broadly, speaking to the role of the public sphere in mediating the arguments and ideals of both the popular and political sphere. It is therefore unsurprising that so many intellectual historians (Hirschman, Polanyi and McCloskey for example) have emphasised the relevance of the English Poor Law debates in the evolving nature of both the public sphere and the relationship between the individual, state and economy. The use of Malthusian rhetoric in this contested public sphere sheds light on how economic, political and moral ideas were actually used within these debates.

Looking back to Goodwin's framework of knowledge transfer (Figure 1, p 28), recall that economic ideas can be thought of as travelling in three distinct ways from the 'formulation of pure economic theory' to 'the expression of nonprofessional opinion on economic policy'; either directly, through the discussion and use of economic theory by non-professionals, or indirectly, via the formulation of economic policy or

via the performative channel of change in the economic system itself. The above analysis suggests that the primary mode of transmission of Malthusian ideas into public consciousness in mid-century Britain was the indirect route via the formulation of new economic policy. That is, Malthusian ideas were transmitted into popular discourse only after they had been invoked in the political sphere. This can be argued firstly from the point of view of timing; the surge of interest in Malthus in the newspapers did not occur until the political debates on how to reform the Poor Laws in the 1830s. However this hypothesis is confirmed by a closer reading of both the popular and political debates, in which the same rhetoric was used to decry the use of Malthusian economics in policy making, and we see this rhetoric transmitted from the political to the popular sphere, and possible back again.

What the analysis of the newspaper articles of this period shows, however, is that while the connection between Malthus and the Poor Law debate has its origin in the political sphere, the rhetoric of Malthusianism in the popular sphere evolved considerably over the two decades of this debate. The use of the term 'Malthusian' as a catch-all for the new political economy represents the origin of this discourse; used in parliament, by middle and upper-class writers and on the streets. This is the least rhetorically sophisticated, but still most fruitful use of Malthusian rhetoric. The more nuanced concept of the idealised 'Malthusian' (and 'Anti-Malthusian') is less frequently used, but represents a more sophisticated critique of economics, and remained a persistent feature of popular discourse until the middle of the century. Finally the revival of Malthus as child-murderer represents a final stage to the evolution of this discourse, combining the cruelty and rationality of Malthusianism.

This case study also demonstrates Skinner's theory of the rhetorical usefulness (rather than descriptive use) of language in public discourse. That the name 'Malthus' and the term 'Malthusian' came to have multiple meanings in this period should not be interpreted as a mere confusion about the meaning of terms within public discourse, but instead as a reflection of how different public spheres (at different times) appropriated these terms and made them rhetorically useful.

Malthus can be used as a strawman to attack political economists and their followers, as a satirical figure to ridicule economics itself, and as a monstrous figure to provoke anger and fear in the face of social and economic change. What stands out in each of these ‘uses’ of Malthusian language is that more than simply offering new vocabulary with which to debate the limits of political economy, the words ‘Malthusian’ or ‘Anti-Malthusian’ themselves do ‘rhetorical work’. That is, these words are not simply useful for engaging with political debate, they are in themselves inherently political, and represent arguments about political economy in their own right.

Finally, returning to the bibliometric analysis of Chapter 2, it is possible to tentatively comment on the geographic nature of the anti-Poor Law movement through the use of Malthusian language by looking at the differing regional use of Malthusian language. Figure 14 below shows newspaper references to Malthus for the period 1830 to 1850, comparing the southern and northern regions of Britain on the left, and the southern and the northern regions, with North-West Riding of Yorkshire removed, on the right. The graph on the left suggests that over the period the use of Malthusian language increased more in the north than in the south (northern newspapers representing an average of 30% of the sample in the 1830s and around 55% in the 1840s).

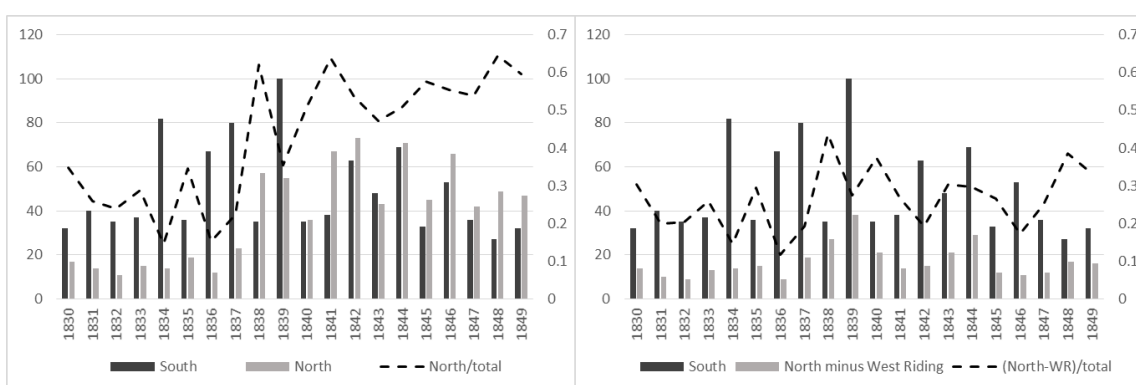


Figure 14: References to Malthus in newspapers of the south compared with the north of Britain (left), and removing North-West Riding of Yorkshire (right)

Anti-Poor Law sentiment was often described at the time as more heated in the north of the country than in the south (and in fact the roll-out of the New Poor Law

in northern regions was delayed until the end of the 1830s), however as has been suggested, this agitation was highly concentrated in the manufacturing towns of West-Riding of Lancashire (Rose 1970; Brundage 1978). Indeed comparing the south of the country with the north, but removing the newspapers of West-Riding (the graph on the right-hand-side of Figure 14), confirms that there is little difference in the use of Malthusian language between the regions.⁹²

Conclusions

Analysis of the changing use of Malthusian language in the popular and political discourse of 1830s and 40s Britain sheds some light on the ‘missing Malthus’ paradox discussed in chapters 1 and 2, that is, the apparent disappearance of Malthus from the formal economic debate for most of the century. The use of Malthusian language in the popular sphere (as evidenced by the newspaper sample) suggests that it was precisely in the decades after his death that Malthusian rhetoric became useful within the context of the Poor Law debates. This rhetoric involved the appropriation of the term ‘Malthusian’ to denote everything cruel and inhumane about the New Political Economy, the subversive use of the archetypal ‘Malthusian’ and ‘Anti-Malthusian’ as a protest against the interference of economics in the private sphere, and the creation of a monstrous Marcus/Malthus hybrid that embodied the fears of the poorer classes in the face of radical social, economic and political change. This analysis has therefore shed crucial light on how the public made use of economic rhetoric and language at this moment of rapid social upheaval. The following chapter will turn to the other side of the

⁹² This difference is in large part due to the founding of the Leeds newspaper *The Northern Star* by chartist activist Feargus O'Connor in 1837.

paradox; why Malthusian language made a comeback in popular discourse during the 1870s and 80s.

Chapter 4 – Family Limitation, Birth-control and the Malthusian League in Late Nineteenth-Century Public Discourse

Introduction

As we have just seen, a central argument during the Poor Law debates of the first half of the century was the Malthusian inevitability of poverty, blamed on the uneconomic behaviour of the poor and their ever-growing families. The second ‘Malthusian’ controversy that we now turn to in this chapter represents a radical shift in this debate. The late nineteenth century saw a renaissance of the utopian visions of the Enlightenment, coupled with a new, scientific appreciation of man and society. Poverty was again a problem that could be solved, and it would be through the mechanism of population that this could be achieved. As had happened during the Poor Law debates, the fertility of the working classes again became a topic of public conversation and academic interest, and coincidentally or not, it was at this time that fertility rates in Britain began their steady decline.

Many scholars have dated Britain’s fertility transition to the late nineteenth century⁹³, with explanations including increases in women’s wages and education,

⁹³ A country’s transition from a ‘Malthusian’ demographic state to lower levels of fertility and mortality is recognised as a key feature of economic and social modernisation (Szreter 1993; Guinnane 2011). The British fertility transition was already noted during the final decades of the 19th century, and was considered a statistical fact by the turn of the century. Edwin Cannan was one of the first to comment on the decrease in birth rates in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, bravely predicting a stalling of population growth by the middle of the 20th century (Cannan 1895). Cannan later dated the decrease in marital fertility to the early 1880s (Cannan 1902). Sidney Webb also described the phenomenon in the Fabian Society pamphlet *The Decline in the Birth-Rate* (Webb 1913). In 1910 German economist Lujo Brentano also noted the falling number of births per marriage in Britain and more broadly (Brentano 1910). More recently the onset of Britain’s demographic transition has variously been dated around 1890 (Clark & Cummins 2015). For a comprehensive overview of the debate on fertility decline in the early twentieth century see Soloway (1982).

changes in the role of social class and primogeniture laws in determining marriage patterns, and on the social level a dramatic shift in the conception of family and sexuality in the late Victorian period (Harris 1993). While the role of birth control in reducing fertility is often briefly discussed, the lack of direct evidence (either quantitative or qualitative) on the extent of contraceptive knowledge and use has limited exploration of this important factor.

The aim of this chapter is to provide new evidence on the British public's burgeoning awareness of family limitation in the 1870s and 80s by examining the strategies of the Malthusian League founders, Charles Bradlaugh and Annie Besant, whose mission was to encourage free public discussion of the 'population problem' and the means with which to address it. The publication of literature promoting birth control was the main activity by which this would be achieved, and it was for doing so that Bradlaugh and Besant were famously prosecuted in 1877. I argue that the founding of the League, and notably its appropriation of Malthusian rhetoric and language, as well as the decision of its founders to risk certain prosecution, represented a purposeful and considered strategy on the part of Bradlaugh and Besant, with the goal of reaching the working classes through a new and powerful medium, the popular press. I conclude that this strategy had a twofold impact on public discourse; firstly increased awareness of family limitation practices, but equally importantly the development of a new public discourse on family limitation based on 'Malthusian' rhetoric and language.

This chapter also addresses an ongoing debate about the role of birth control in the rapid drop in fertility in late nineteenth-century Britain, and the role that the Bradlaugh-Besant trial played in increasing awareness of birth control. Himes for instance argues that the trial of Bradlaugh and Besant did increase public awareness of birth control, and while it may not have caused the fertility transition it helped accelerate it (Himes 1932). A similar argument is made by Banks and Banks, who describe the 'widespread publicity' of the trial as an "accelerator of a process already begun" rather than as "an initiator of social change" (Banks & Banks 1954, p.33). In the most comprehensive study of family limitation in this period; *Birth*

Control in Nineteenth Century England (1978), Angus McLaren is more critical of the Malthusian League's contribution to increased awareness of birth control, arguing that "the League hindered as much as helped the acceptance of contraception by the British masses" (McLaren 1978, p.107). McLaren contends that the Malthusian League founders were inherently economic conservatives, who made little effort to engage with the working classes where the large decrease in fertility is observed. Furthermore McLaren argues that knowledge of birth control was already widespread at the start of the century, and therefore dissemination campaigns were unnecessary:

because means of contraception were available by 1800, the spread of family limitation has to be seen as not so much the result of the diffusion of an innovative technique as an adjustment of the working class family to new economic and social conditions. (McLaren 1978, p.13)

This chapter will contest both of these points, arguing that Bradlaugh and Besant were indeed motivated by the plight of the working classes and not solely by economic ideology, evidenced by their preoccupation with reaching the working class through the popular press, as well as the great personal cost they risked in publishing Knowlton's pamphlet. Furthermore the letters received by Bradlaugh and Besant (discussed in 4.5) demonstrate an uneven awareness of birth control in late nineteenth-century Britain that conflicts with McLaren's argument of adjustment vs innovation. In *The Making of Victorian Sexuality* (1994) Michael Mason argues that sexual behaviour and beliefs varied widely by region, between city and town and between the different social classes. Mason's research paints a picture of nineteenth-century Britain in which premarital sex was common (as evidenced by the high rates of nuptial pregnancy, up to half of all marriages in some areas). In fact Britain was perceived as having a greater acceptance of premarital intimacy than other European countries at the time (Mason 1994). With 'affectionate casual sex' becoming the norm rather than the exception over the course of the century, it

is perhaps not surprising that demand for some form of birth control was high, even if this topic remained taboo in polite company, and knowledge unevenly spread.⁹⁴

While there is an ongoing debate about what factors drove the rapid fertility decline of the late nineteenth century, a number of facts are certain; that the technical means of limiting fertility were already available in Britain at the start of the century, that some sections of society clearly made use of birth control earlier than others (by the start of the century for the upper classes, and by mid-century for the middle-classes), and finally, that by the end of the nineteenth century there was an unmet demand for birth control among the working classes. Linking the existing techniques of birth control with this unmet demand required a change in both knowledge of and beliefs about family limitation, and this became the mission of the Malthusian League. However, unlike other nineteenth-century programmes of social change that attempted to persuade via public debate (for example, the Anti-Corn Law League, or the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade), the cause of family limitation was uniquely restricted for social and legal reasons. Publishing any literature on the topic risked prosecution under obscenity laws, and while the Victorians may not have been as prudish as some think, discussing birth control publically was certainly a line few would cross. It is my contention that a transformation in the language of family limitation was also required, as both a catalyst and complement to the transformation in knowledge and ideology. Throughout the nineteenth century the topic of birth control had only ever been discussed via euphemism and innuendo. Public discussion of the topic would therefore require a new language, legitimised by the scientific and moral connotations of Malthusianism.

⁹⁴ Mason also goes a long way in dispelling the stereotypes of Victorians as prudes who avoided any discussion or even allusion of sexuality. For example, the commonly mentioned but untrue cliché that the Victorians covered their piano legs for the sake of decency.

While this chapter argues that public discourse of birth control was influenced significantly by the Bradlaugh Besant trial (impacting public debate as far as Australia), it is not my intention to show that the actions of the Malthusian League were themselves the prime causal factor in explaining Britain's falling birth rates in the late nineteenth century. As will be discussed below, fertility behaviour should not be viewed simply as a predictable outcome of social and economic conditions, but rather represents an ever-changing relationship between private and public knowledge and beliefs about sexual and social norms. Private knowledge and public discussion of birth control in this period are however an underexplored factor in the fertility transition debate, and the case of Bradlaugh and Besant provides valuable insights on this turning point in British social history.

4.1 The Founding of the Malthusian League and the Bradlaugh-Besant Trial of 1877

The early history of the Malthusian League is somewhat convoluted, due to the concurrent events of the Bradlaugh-Besant trial and its founding.⁹⁵ While the founding of the League is officially dated to 1877, the year of the Bradlaugh-Besant trial, there had been an earlier attempt to found a 'Malthusian League' in 1861 by Charles Bradlaugh, who proposed the founding of the League in his newspaper the *National Reformer* on May 11th 1861. Bradlaugh described the goals of the League as follows:

In order to promote the discussion and recognition of the Malthusian doctrine, it is thought that if a Society or League could be formed among those who are favourable to them it might be of much service.

...

⁹⁵ A full account of the Malthusian League's history is given in Ledbetter (1976). This chapter, however, focusses on the less well understood years before its official founding, as well as the crucial period of the trial in 1877. The League was active from 1877 until 1927 when it was finally dissolved (operating as the New Generation League from 1922 to 1925).

The Society would be of somewhat of the same character as the Temperance League or similar associations - *that is, it would have for its object to influence public opinion, and not, like the Anti-Corn-Law League or others, to effect the passing of repeal of a statute.* (*National Reformer*, 11 May 1861, emphasis added)

Little is known about this early incarnation of the League, but it seems to have been abandoned after a few years having made little impact, other the occasional letter of support sent to the *National Reformer*.⁹⁶ What is known is that it was George Drysdale, anonymous author of *The Elements of Social Science* (1861) and writer for the *National Reformer* from 1860 under the pseudonym 'G.R.', who brought the question of 'Malthusian' family limitation to Bradlaugh's attention, and was instrumental in the founding of this earlier League.⁹⁷ Bradlaugh's interest in the population question and endorsement of George Drysdale's (anonymous) writing on the topic soon caused a personal and professional rupture between Bradlaugh and his co-editor, Joseph Barker, resulting in Barker leaving the newspaper.⁹⁸ Bradlaugh had been promoting Drysdale's work for some time, but the nature of these pamphlets was not immediately apparent to Barker. Barker passionately disavowed Bradlaugh's Malthusianism in his editorial of July 26, 1861, soon before leaving the paper:

⁹⁶ References to the Malthusian League appear in the *National Reformer* until at least 1863.

⁹⁷ In an editorial on the 8th of March 1862, which Bradlaugh feared would be his last (as the editorship of the *National Reformer* was not yet fully resolved), he writes of being "personally, deeply indebted to G.R." for having "opened to us a wide field of possible usefulness from which no vulgar insinuations shall turn us away" (*National Reformer*, 8 March 1862). In a later editorial, also thought to be his last (Bradlaugh left the *National Reformer* for a brief period), Bradlaugh again thanked Drysdale "because he - despite the base open slander of Joseph Barker, and the still more base because secret dastardliness of another - has continued to instruct me and my readers on a question of primary importance to the people" (*National Reformer*, 28 February 1863).

⁹⁸ Because of the differing political views of the two editors, the *National Reformer* was for all intents and purposes two newspapers, with Barker editing the first half and Bradlaugh (under the pseudonym 'Iconoclast') editing the second half.

We know no occupation which we should more prefer, if our wish was to do the greatest amount of evil in the world, than to form Malthusian Leagues for the purpose of promoting the circulation of such books as this, and spreading abroad among unsuspecting youths the demoralising sentiments and odious vices which it inculcates.
(*National Reformer*, 26 July 1861)

The impetus for the eventual and successful re-founding of the Malthusian League in 1877 was the trial of Annie Besant and Charles Bradlaugh for the publication of Charles Knowlton's *Fruits of Philosophy*, a tract promoting and describing various forms of birth control. The decision to publish Knowlton's pamphlet came as a result of a prosecution in January 1877 against publisher Charles Watts (subeditor for the *National Reformer*) for his publication of the pamphlet. To Bradlaugh's dismay, Watts had decided not to defend his right to publish the work, instead pleading guilty to the charges and claiming he was not aware of the nature of the pamphlet. By February 1877 Bradlaugh and Besant (now subeditor for the *National Reformer*) had founded their own small publishing house, the Freethought Publishing Company, and were advertising the sale of Knowlton's pamphlet.⁹⁹

On the 5th of April 1877 Charles Bradlaugh and Annie Besant were arrested and charged. The trial ran from June 18th for five days, and Bradlaugh and Besant were found guilty on June 28, 1877. The creation of the new Malthusian League was announced in the *National Reformer* of July 15 1877, Annie Besant explicitly appealing to the 'force of public opinion' in her call to arms:

"Reserves to the front," is a natural cry, when the regiments engaged in the struggle are being pressed back by the enemy, and it is on the great reserve force of public opinion that we call to help us in our struggle against the enemies of a free press.

...

In order that public opinion may be organized against the tyranny which is being attempted, some few of us, earnest for freedom, have

⁹⁹ In the *National Reformer* of March 4th 1877 the new publishing house was advertised, Bradlaugh and Besant declaring "We intend to publish nothing that we do not think we can morally defend. All that we do publish we shall defend" (*National Reformer*, 4 March 1877).

resolved to start a society, with the following objects:-

“To spread among the people - by lectures, cheap books, leaflets, and by all practicable means - a knowledge of the law of population, and of its practical application.

“To agitate for the abolition of all penalties on the public discussion of the Population Question. (*National Reformer*, 15 July 1877)

Besant acknowledges that the idea for a ‘Malthusian’ League came from Bradlaugh’s earlier attempt, but it seems that the idea for its reformation is principally Besant’s (or at least she claims this much in her article). The first meeting of the Malthusian League was held on July 26th 1877, with the doctor Charles Drysdale (brother of George Drysdale) chosen as its president. Meanwhile Bradlaugh and Besant proceeded to appeal the verdict, appearing again in court in January 1878, and on the 12th of February 1878 the verdict was repealed on the grounds that the offending passages from Knowlton’s pamphlet explicitly detailing birth control techniques had not been read in court and could thus not form part of a prosecution.¹⁰⁰

4.2 Birth Control – Knowledge, Behaviour, Ideology and Language

Before proceeding, it is worth noting the role of Knowlton’s *Fruits of Philosophy* in the wider nineteenth-century discourse of family limitation. The pamphlet dealt with the topics of anatomy, fertility, and to a lesser extent, birth control (which although not illegal in itself, was deemed ‘obscene’ due to graphic discussion of

¹⁰⁰ The Solicitor General had argued he should not have to read directly from the pamphlet, telling the jury: “Now, gentlemen, I do not wish to read you extracts from the work. I would rather refer you to the passages in the copies of the work you have before you, which we, the prosecution, rely upon as being obscene” (Besant & Bradlaugh 1877, p.17). There is a certain irony in the fact that this decision, no doubt a considered attempt by the Solicitor General to take the higher moral ground, would result in the defendants’ eventual acquittal.

anatomy and was thus covered by the Obscene Publications Act of 1857).¹⁰¹ Knowlton's pamphlet itself was first published in New York in 1832, and had been circulating in England (in pirated and republished versions) from at least 1834 (McLaren 1976). The actual birth control techniques described by Knowlton were coitus interruptus (withdrawal) which is "effectual, if practiced with sufficient care." (Knowlton 1891, p.72), the "baudruche, which consists in a covering used by the male, made of very delicate skin, it is by no means calculated to come into general use. It has been used to secure immunity from syphilitic affections" (1891, p.73), the use of "a very delicate piece of sponge, moistened with water, to be immediately afterward withdrawn by means of a very narrow ribbon attached to it" although Knowlton cautions "this check has not proved a sure preventive" (1891, p.73), and finally "syrring the vagina immediately after connection with a solution of sulphate of zinc, of alum, pearl-ash, or any salt that acts chemically on the semen" (1891, p.74). This final method was the one favoured by Knowlton, who notes "it costs nearly nothing ; it is sure; it requires no sacrifice of pleasure; it is in the hand of the female; it is to be used after, instead of before the connection" (1891, p.74).

Knowlton's *Fruits of Philosophy* was by no means the only literature on birth control available in Britain at the time. From as early as the 1820s a number of essays and pamphlets on the topic were being produced and circulated. In 1822 Francis Place had published his *Illustrations and Proofs of the Principle of Population*, describing 'precautionary means' to prevent conception while not offering specific advice (a

¹⁰¹ The wording of the act, which covered works "written for the single purpose of corrupting the morals of youth and of a nature calculated to shock the common feelings of decency in any well-regulated mind". As will be seen later, this would be central to the defence mounted by Bradlaugh and Besant, who would argue that Knowlton's pamphlet was primarily a discussion of the population problem and its remedies from the point of view of political economy, and was thus not written for the *sole* purpose of corrupting morals.

year later publishing *To the Married of Both Sexes* which did provide more practical advice). In 1826 Richard Carlile published the infamous *Every Woman's Book, or What is Love?*, in 1830 Robert Dale Owen published his collection of pamphlets on the topic, titled *Moral Physiology* (Langer 1975). While it is impossible to know the availability of this information to the general public, Mason describes the routine presence of "literature in chemists' shops, announcements in urinals, lectures by travelling salesmen, fly posters, advertisements in papers, and (with interesting frequency) circulars sent to couples who had announced a birth in the press" (Mason 1994, p.63).

First-hand accounts also suggest widespread knowledge and use of various contraceptive techniques (including the sponge, sheath and *coitus interruptus*), at least within the upper classes by the end of the eighteenth century (Langer 1975) and within the middle class by the second half of the nineteenth century (Mason 1994). What is less well understood is how and when this knowledge became more widespread among the working classes and in rural areas. The technologies available in order to prevent conception did not see any marked improvement during the nineteenth century (indeed, the simplest and reasonably effective technique of withdrawal didn't depend on any technological improvement), therefore the rapid decline in birth rates sometime before the end of the nineteenth century suggests either an increased awareness of these techniques, or a significant shift in social attitudes towards family limitation and birth control, or both.

Evidence from working class diaries throughout the nineteenth century suggests that women especially felt burdened by the physical and financial costs of large families (Humphries 2007). This suggests that a shift in ideology at the social, rather than individual, level was perhaps more important for legitimising family limitation, since at the individual level there was already a desire for fewer children. Mason usefully distinguishes between these two levels of ideology, noting that the category of 'beliefs' about birth control can be divided into 'private' and 'professed' beliefs (Mason 1994, p.40). The prevalence of birth control use among the middle and upper classes suggest inconsistency between these private and professed beliefs, indeed the perceived hypocrisy of doctors and clergymen with suspiciously

small families who publically decried family limitation was often commented on (Seccombe 1990).

The unmet demand for birth control is also evidenced by the high prevalence of abortion among working women in the nineteenth century, a practice decried (at least publically) by the middle classes.¹⁰² McLaren argues that abortion was the more "traditional female form of fertility control", emphasising the female agency of the method: "It provided [the woman] with a degree of control over what happened to her. It did not require the regular, sober assistance of her spouse. It did not take place during intercourse" (McLaren 1977, p.71). The issue of female agency was clearly important to Knowlton in writing the *Fruits of Philosophy*; as seen above his favoured method of birth control was the syringe, as it gave the woman greater control over her fertility.

There is clearly a complex relationship between knowledge and ideology when it comes to family limitation behaviour. Knowledge of birth control techniques is not by itself enough to establish a new fertility controlling behaviour, as private and public views on the practice are often contradictory, resulting in social disapproval even where there is private acceptance. Likewise, ideological acceptance of birth control cannot lead to behavioural change without adequate dissemination of knowledge, as seen in the working class' unmet demand for family limitation by the end of the nineteenth century. It is the contention of this chapter that in order to understand the relationship between knowledge and ideology, and how these influence behaviour, a better understanding of the language, or rhetoric, of family limitation is needed. Language mediates between the private and the public, playing an important role in the legitimising of ideology in the public sphere:

¹⁰² "Whereas the middle class was in the process of adopting the concept of the sanctity of embryonic life from the moment of conception, the working class remained true to the traditional notion that life was not present until forty to eighty days had passed." (McLaren 1977, p.75)

We employ our language not merely to communicate information but at the same time to claim authority for our utterances, to arouse the emotions of our interlocutors, to create boundaries of inclusion and exclusion and to engage in many other exercises of social control. (Skinner 2002, p.5)

The language (meaning both vocabulary and rhetoric) of family limitation is thus an essential part of the story of fertility control in the late nineteenth century, and Skinner's theory of the performative nature of language will be an important tool in understanding the rhetorical strategy of Bradlaugh and Besant in what follows.

4.3 Bradlaugh, Besant and Malthusianism

One of the main contentions of this chapter is that the use of Malthusian language was a deliberate rhetorical strategy to advance public knowledge of family limitation in late nineteenth-century Britain. To this end I argue that Malthusianism was not the main ideological foundation for either Charles Bradlaugh or Annie Besant, but rather it was Malthusian *rhetoric* that became central to both the trial and formation of the Malthusian League in 1877. This argument goes against much of the historiography of the birth control movement, for whom Bradlaugh and Besant are the quintessential 'Neo-Malthusians',¹⁰³ that is, that they were primarily influenced by the Malthusian theory of population and classical political economy more widely. Micklewright, for example argues, but provides little evidence, for Bradlaugh's early Neo-Malthusian beliefs:

¹⁰³ The term 'Neo-Malthusian' is the one most attributed to the birth-control movement, later taken on by a number of other birth control movements. It describes a philosophy of family limitation inspired by Malthus (that is, attributing poverty and misery to large families) through means that were not themselves morally acceptable to Malthus, that is, artificial birth-control. Bradlaugh and Besant did not use this term however, describing themselves as 'Malthusian', despite the inherent contradiction of this position, which is discussed in 4.4 below.

It is significant that Bradlaugh adopted views of a neo-Malthusian kind early in his life, although he was on the whole extremely conservative in his views on marriage and on sexual relationships. But it is clear that Bradlaugh's neo-Malthusianism arose from the generally radical background which he had adopted as the basis for a secularism which was in his view of necessity atheistic, republican and neo-Malthusian. (Micklewright 1961, p.35)

The association of Bradlaugh and Besant with Malthusianism, I argue, is the result of the Malthusian League's successful strategy of public awareness, and not evidence of a fundamental Malthusian ideology for either Bradlaugh or Besant. Before 1877 Bradlaugh was not clearly an ardent Malthusian, or even particularly interested in political economy, his main causes being secularism and republicanism. This mission was outlined in the Bradlaugh's opening remarks in the first edition of the *National Reformer* of April 14, 1860, which mentions neither Malthus nor the question of population.¹⁰⁴

This first issue of the *National Reformer* does however demonstrate that Bradlaugh was already aware of and interested in the question of family limitation, as he provides a short review of a new pamphlet written by George Drysdale with whom he had become acquainted, and hints that more discussion of this question will appear in the *National Reformer*:

Population Fallacies. By the author of "The Elements of Social Science." - (E. Truelove, 240, Strand, London)

This is a pamphlet written in reply to the reviewers of that most comprehensive and extraordinary work, "The Elements of Social Science." As we intend in after numbers to deal with this subject at some length, we in this notice simply draw our readers' attention to the matter as one of the gravest importance, and to the fact, that the anonymous author is evidently one whose abilities are fully equal to the task he has in hand. Those who have not read the third edition of

¹⁰⁴ When Bradlaugh briefly stepped down from the editorship of the *National Reformer* in 1863 his parting words also showed no particular concern for the Malthusian cause in his hopes for the future of the paper, instead returning to his familiar themes of secularism and social justice.

the "Elements of Social Science" should at once procure it. No man should neglect its perusal. (*National Reformer*, 14 April 1860)

As discussed above, Bradlaugh's introduction to Malthusian ideas is almost certainly to have come from George Drysdale.¹⁰⁵ Throughout the 1860s discussion of the 'population question' in the *National Reformer* fell principally to Drysdale along with the various correspondents with whom he debated the 'population question'. The earliest direct appeal to Malthusian theory in the *National Reformer* is an article of June 9th, 1860, written by a 'G.L.R'.¹⁰⁶ The main purpose of this article was to argue for a free and open public discussion of the population problem and its remedies. The author laments that in a time when "almost every shade of opinion has its public organ", the Malthusian theory has "not a single advocate or representative in the periodical press of this country" and no "organised party" (*National Reformer*, 9 June 1860). It is in this article that the earliest proposal for the creation of the Malthusian League seems to be made:

Moreover, if a Malthusian party or league could be formed among those who are already thoroughly convinced of the truth of the population doctrines, with the view of diffusing them, and bringing them prominently forward by means of lectures, discussion, and public meetings, it would be of the very greatest benefit. (*National Reformer*, 9 June 1860)

¹⁰⁵ Drysdale's own interpretation of Malthus was by no means orthodox: "It is from this terrible *want of love*, and not from the direct want of food, that the richer classes among us suffer; but the two wants represent each other, being the only two alternatives, as Mr. Malthus has shown, which the law of population leaves us. It is just a choice between two modes of death; by poverty, or by sexual misery; by want of food and leisure, or by want of love. This terrible choice may be called the *Malthusian dilemma*" (Drysdale 1861, p.335)

See Benn (1992) for an overview of the Drysdale family and their contribution to the birth control debate in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

¹⁰⁶ 'G.L.R' is also highly likely to be George Drysdale as no other close associate of Bradlaugh's is known to have been interested in the topic at that time. Bradlaugh was also highly consistent with his use of the penname 'Iconoclast', while George Drysdale is known to have used a number of pseudonyms, including 'Q' in the journal of the Malthusian League (Ledbetter 1976, p.11).

Bradlaugh's first explicit discussion of Malthus is his 1861 pamphlet *Jesus, Shelley and Malthus* (Bradlaugh 1861). This pamphlet doesn't address birth-control directly, focussing instead the conflicting views on population and poverty within Christian teaching, the Romantic poet Shelley and of course Malthus, the latter Bradlaugh describing as "one whose writings scarcely anyone reads, and whom many occupy themselves in abusing" (Bradlaugh 1861). Bradlaugh, much like the popularisers of economics of the earlier part of the century, argues that the causes of poverty are best understood through the lessons of political economy, and that armed with this knowledge the working class might could become responsible for improving their situation;

Having summoned the people out, I would earnestly implore them to inquire whether possibly the cure of their evil condition did not rest with themselves, whereas before, they had been constrained to believe that all was in the hands of God. (Bradlaugh 1861, p.8)

Bradlaugh's defence of political economy in this pamphlet in many ways echoes the debates of the 1830s and 40s on the role of the state and the individual, making use of the same tropes of a cold and calculating political economy we saw in Chapter 3:

Political Economy has been regarded by many of the people as being an abstruse matter, in which they had no interest, when, in truth, it is the science of the laws which determine the happiness or misery of their lives... That is, political economy is regarded as a sort of cold-blooded, iron-handed, stony-hearted monster, which crushes the man to make the state. (Bradlaugh 1861, p.11)

This pamphlet also demonstrates Bradlaugh's own novel interpretation of Malthus, arguing that Malthus' theory of population represents an 'atheistic position' on the question of poverty (despite Malthus' strong religious beliefs). Bradlaugh asserts that the Malthusian theory, specifically the argument that the causes of poverty lay in the divergence between the linear growth of food production and potentially exponential growth of population, refutes the possibility of an omniscient and omnipotent God. As Bradlaugh explains; "The assertion of the existence of such causes is a denial either of infinite goodness or of infinite wisdom, or of infinite power" (Bradlaugh 1861).

A final small, but important, point to make about the *Jesus, Shelley and Malthus* pamphlet is that at some point after 1877 Bradlaugh changed the subtitle of the work from '*Pious poverty and Heterodox Happiness*' to the more obviously Malthusian '*An Essay on the Population Question*'. This example of shifting language is not unique. When Bradlaugh and Besant decide to republish the Knowlton pamphlet they also change the subtitle from Knowlton's original '*The Private Companion of Young Married People*' to '*An Essay on the Population Question*' (Ledbetter 1976, p.33). A similar linguistic transformation occurs in the popular descriptions of the *National Reformer*; after 1877 Bradlaugh's philosophy, and the newspaper he had founded, would forever be caricaturised as 'Atheist, Republican and Malthusian', both in the press and in parliament where he became member for Northampton in 1880.¹⁰⁷ At the trial, Charles Bradlaugh states "I have been a journalist for the last nineteen years, and in my first prospectus I put forward the Malthusian view as part of the editorial intention of that journal" (Besant & Bradlaugh 1877, p.156). Annie Besant gives a similar account in her essay *The Law of Population* (1878), stating that Bradlaugh had advertised "that the *National Reformer* was to be ""Malthusian" in its political economy" (p. 4). However as has been seen there is no evidence that the *National Reformer* was founded as a mouthpiece of Malthusianism. Indeed at some point, the *National Reformer* was advertised as follows; "In Theology its editorial policy is Atheistic; in Politics, Republican; in Political Economy it maintains *the views of the late J. S. Mill*" (undated pamphlet, LSE archives).¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ As early as 1881 we see the description of Bradlaugh in Hansard, where the issue of an atheist swearing the oath would become a major obstacle to Bradlaugh entering parliament, with one MP stating "He had listened with admiration to the speech of the hon. Member for Berkshire (Mr. Walter), whose remarks had suggested to him that if Mr. Bradlaugh were examined he would ask that Gentleman—"Are you not the publisher and editor of a paper which has these words on its title page—"The principles of this paper are Republican, Atheistic, and Malthusian?" (HC Deb 27 April 1881 vol 260 cc1252-96).

¹⁰⁸ The importance of J. S. Mill in the rhetoric of the Malthusian League is discussed in 4.4. In Mill's own autobiography he describes Bradlaugh as follows: "I knew him to be a man of ability, and he had proved that he was the reverse of a demagogue, by placing himself in

Annie Besant's early years also betray no strong leanings towards Malthusianism nor any particular concern with political economy. Having separated from her clergyman husband in 1873 and moved to London, Besant quickly became attracted to the National Secular Society (NSS) founded by Bradlaugh in 1866. Besant describes her discovery of Bradlaugh's *National Reformer* in July 1874, which makes clear how avant-garde (and unafraid of controversy) Annie Besant was for her time:

I had been working at some Comtist literature, and had found a reference to Mr Truelove's shop as one at which Comtist publications might be bought. Lying on the counter was a copy of the *National Reformer*, and attracted by the title I bought it. I had never before heard of nor seen the paper, and I read it placidly in the omnibus; looking up, I was at first puzzled and then amused to see an old gentleman gazing at me with indignation and horror printed on his countenance; I realised the sight of a young woman respectably dressed in crape, reading an Atheistic journal in an omnibus was a shock too great to be endured by the ordinary Philistine without sign of discomposure. He looked so hard at the paper that I was inclined to offer it to him for his perusal, but repressed the mischievous inclination, and read on demurely. (Besant 1885, p.88)¹⁰⁹

It was through the *National Reformer* that Besant became aware of the NSS, which she quickly joined, attending her first lecture on the 2nd of August 1874 at which she met Bradlaugh for the first time. Within a week Bradlaugh had offered Besant a position writing for the *National Reformer*, and in the same month Besant delivered her first lecture to the Cooperative Society on August 25th, 1874. By January 1875 Besant was a regular speaker for the NSS, and began her first lecturing tour in February.

strong opposition to the prevailing opinion of the democratic party on two such important subjects as Malthusianism and Personal Representation." (Besant 1885, p.93)

¹⁰⁹ Besant's account of her omnibus ride is especially interesting considering that the 'man on the omnibus' was a common mid-Victorian representation of 'public opinion' in the way that 'man on the street' would become so in the late nineteenth century (Thompson 2013, p.36). In this sense the anecdote can be read as Besant knowingly (and mischievously) introducing radical ideas to the conservative public.

The speed at which Besant became involved with Bradlaugh's activities can potentially be explained by Besant's apparently natural inclination to public speaking, and Bradlaugh's ongoing preoccupation with the public 'platform'. In her *Autobiographical Sketches* Besant describes her first experience giving a lecture, albeit to an empty church:

I was learning to play the organ, and was in the habit of practising in the church by myself, without a blower. One day, being securely locked in, I thought I would like to try how "it felt" to speak from the pulpit. Some vague fancies were stirring in me, that I could speak if I had the chance; very vague they were, for the notion that I might ever speak on the platform had never dawned on me; only the longing to find outlet in words was in me; the feeling that I had something to say, and the yearning to say it. So, queer as it may seem, I ascended the pulpit in the big, empty, lonely church and there and then I delivered my first lecture! I shall never forget the feeling of power and of delight which came upon me as my voice rolled down the aisles, and the passion in me broke into balanced sentences and never paused for rhythmical expression, while I felt that all I wanted was to see the church full of upturned faces, instead of the emptiness of the silent pews. (Besant 1885, p.72)

Besant's (self-proclaimed)¹¹⁰ talent for public speaking, and thus potential usefulness to his causes, seems to have become immediately apparent to Bradlaugh, who describes her in a letter to his daughters:

Mme Besant is a very intelligent woman whom I hope to see on our platform in the future. She is one of the [illegible] for Thomas Scott's series. Well raised and of good enough health, capable of making a great sensation as an author and orator. She is Ajax, but that is very confidential. (Bradlaugh, 1874?)

¹¹⁰ Besant's oratorical skills were also widely praised by her contemporaries, a reviewer in *The Spectator* writing in 1929:

"Her eloquence at one time was unrivalled, and even of late years to anyone who has heard her (as this reviewer has) either at Benares or under the banyan at Adyar speaking for an hour on end on some philosophic abstraction without once referring to a note, it must be clear that she still retains faculties which have probably never been surpassed in any age by any woman." (1929, p.599)

The letter is undated, but as Bradlaugh is expressing here his hope that Besant will appear on his platform in the future, it was most probably written in the short period of time after Bradlaugh and Besant's first meeting in August 1874, and certainly before January 1875 at which point Besant began lecturing regularly and was publically outed as 'Ajax'. That Bradlaugh would so quickly write of this meeting to his daughters (who were living in France but both interested in the NSS and its activities) speaks of his eagerness to find 'like minds' who would make the kind of public impact that Bradlaugh desired.

Besant's activities in the years after meeting Bradlaugh and leading up to the trial show no sign of an underlying interest in Malthusianism. The topics of her public lectures in these years include 'The Political Status of Women', 'The True Basis of Morality' and a series on the French Revolution. As well as lecturing and other commitments with the National Secular Society, Besant was occupied with Bradlaugh's two unsuccessful campaigns for the seat of Northampton in 1874, and in presenting a petition on the use of public money to fund a visit to India by the Prince of Wales (Besant 1885, pp.99–112). Besant seems to have first become aware of the 'Malthusian' argument for birth control in 1875 when she was falsely accused of being the author of Drysdale's *Elements of Social Science*, of which she claimed to have no knowledge at that time. Of the book, Besant declared "Personally, I cordially dislike a large part of it, and dissent utterly from its views on the marital relation" (Besant 1885, p.101), but she felt that the author was well intentioned, and defended Bradlaugh for having earlier recommended the book in the *National Reformer*.

In conclusion, it is hard to find any overriding concern with Malthusian political economy in either the work of Charles Bradlaugh or Annie Besant before their decision to publish the Knowlton pamphlet and re-establish the Malthusian League in 1877. Bradlaugh was certainly aware and supportive of George Drysdale's interests in birth control, but this was never a prominent issue compared with his many other campaigns. Likewise, Annie Besant was drawn to the Charles Bradlaugh through her own interest in secularism. That Bradlaugh and Besant are

now caricatured as ‘Malthusians’ or ‘Neo-Malthusians’ demonstrates the success of their campaign to raise awareness of birth control from 1877. In the following section I show why the two activists chose to forever associate themselves with Malthus for the sake of their cause.

4.4 The Rhetorical Appropriation of Malthus by the ‘Neo-Malthusians’

From today’s perspective, the decision to attach the epithet ‘Malthusian’ to an organisation promoting birth control seems fairly straightforward.¹¹¹ However at the time this was by no means an obvious association. Malthus, as a religious man, was famously against any artificial means of contraception, only advocating the ‘moral’ or ‘preventative’ check of late marriage (as well as the long-term beneficial impact of education). Furthermore, the term ‘Malthusian’ was already in popular use even during Malthus’ life and continued to be so into the 1840s and 50s. But as was seen in Chapter 3, this association was almost entirely negative, at least among the working classes, deeply associated with the controversial Poor Law debates of the 1830s. To be a ‘Malthusian’ was to be on the side of the political economists and an interfering government, and against the interests of the working class and individual autonomy, making it even stranger that Bradlaugh and Besant would attach the already loaded term to their movement.

The association between Malthus and birth control does predate Bradlaugh and Besant however, dating back to at least the 1820s in the working class press (McLaren 1978, p.69). However this association remained obscure within popular discourse until the events of 1877. To publicly discuss family limitation in the early

¹¹¹ Thanks in part to the popularisation of the term in popular culture, for example Aldous Huxley’s ‘Malthusian belts’ in *Brave New World* (1931).

part of the century was not easy, requiring a subtle use of euphemism and relying on a knowing audience who could discern the true meaning of what was written. This euphemistic language could often be so subtle that readers would not agree on whether the author was in fact advocating family limitation through 'artificial' means, or simply advising prudence. J. S. Mill is perhaps the clearest example of this contentious interpretation. Many now regard Mill as one of the first English authors to publicly advocate birth control; as a youth a case was brought against him for distributing Place's *Diabolical Handbills* but later dismissed (Himes 1928). However in his written work Mill was careful not to explicitly associate himself with such advocacy. The section most quoted by later supporters of birth control is from his *Principles of Political Economy* of 1848:

That it is possible to delay marriage, and to live in abstinence while unmarried, most people are willing to allow; but when persons are once married, the idea, in this country, never seems to enter any one's mind that having or not having a family, or the number of which it shall consist, is amenable to their own control. One would imagine that children were rained down upon married people, direct from heaven, without their being art or part in the matter; that it was really, as the common phrases have it, God's will, and not their own, which decided the numbers of their offspring. (II.13.3)¹¹²

It is my contention that that decision of Bradlaugh and Besant to republish Knowlton's pamphlet (using the new subtitle '*An Essay on the Population Question*') and to revive the Malthusian League, was an intentional effort to give the previously secretive and euphemistic discourse of birth control a new language or vocabulary with which it could be more explicitly discussed. Furthermore this was not just a theoretical exercise; for birth control knowledge to be practically available to all who desire it, the vocabulary used to describe and promote the techniques

¹¹² This ambiguity would even play a role in the dramatic public split between Bradlaugh and his co-editor of the *National Reformer*, Joseph Barker, who could see no support for artificial family limitation in Mill, and resented Bradlaugh using Mill's name in support of this cause.

and technologies available had to be widely understood and recognised. I argue here that 1877 saw a transformation of family limitation discourse from one of subtle euphemism (only understood by a small elite) to one of a common vocabulary accessible to the middle and working classes.

This rhetorical strategy can be likened to the one proposed by Skinner, who describes the problem for ‘innovating ideologists’ who:

face a hard but obvious rhetorical task. Their goal is to legitimise questionable forms of social behaviour. Their aim must therefore be to show that a number of favourable terms can somehow be applied to their seemingly questionable actions. If they can bring off this rhetorical trick, they can hope to argue that the condemnatory descriptions otherwise liable to be applied to their behaviour can be overridden or set aside. (Skinner 2002, p.149) (149)

In early twentieth-century America, Margaret Sanger faced a similar challenge in bringing birth control information to the public, the dissemination of which was forbidden under the ‘Comstock Laws’, similar in intent to Britain’s Obscene Publications Act of 1857. Bone (2010) describes how Sanger recognised the importance of creating a ‘rhetorical space’ in which reproductive health could be discussed, and that central to this objective was creating a new language of family limitation. In fact it was Sanger and her friends who first coined the term ‘birth control’, Bone arguing that “The phrase provided the vocabulary necessary to challenge the dominant authorities and opinions that were opposed to the idea of birth control and ultimately move the conversation to a public platform” (2010, p.27).¹¹³

¹¹³ The fact that Sanger did not consider the ‘Malthusian’ language of Bradlaugh and Besant acceptable vocabulary for her own movement demonstrates the contentious and provocative nature of this rhetoric, even in the twentieth century. Sanger explains why she avoided the term in her autobiography, concerned that the name ‘Malthus’ would evoke the ‘moth-eaten’ and ‘stereotyped’ arguments of the past, especially among the working classes (Ledbetter 1976, p.89).

Like Sanger, Bradlaugh and Besant certainly saw themselves as ‘innovating ideologists’, and were very much aware of the rhetorical task before them; to convince a wide public that ‘Malthusian’ family limitation was morally and scientifically justified, and that it should be perfectly acceptable to discuss in public. Going back to Skinner’s strategy, the ‘seemingly questionable action’ they sought to normalise was the use and discussion of birth control. The ‘favourable terms’ they hoped to apply to this action would include some specific positive terms like ‘moral’ and ‘scientific’, but the key to their rhetorical strategy is the catchall term that Bradlaugh and Besant use to represent these attributes; ‘Malthusian’.¹¹⁴

However as has been seen this term also came with its own ideological baggage, an issue Skinner also addresses:

The aim is to describe your actions in such a way as to make it clear to your ideological opponents that, although you may be employing a vocabulary generally used to express disapproval, you are using it to express approval or at least neutrality. The point of the strategy is to challenge your opponents to reconsider the feelings of disapproval they normally express when they use the terms concerned. (Skinner 2002, p.151)

The challenge Bradlaugh and Besant faced was therefore twofold; to legitimise family limitation by introducing a new vocabulary of ‘favourable terms’, as well as neutralising the negative connotations of Malthusianism. As we shall see there were good reasons for Bradlaugh and Besant to take this challenging rhetorical strategy. Whether or not they were successful in their rhetorical task will be discussed in section 4.6 below.

One of the most compelling reasons for associating the birth control movement with Malthus was to distance it from the radical atheism of Bradlaugh’s earlier years, which was even less palatable to a public audience than the argument for family

¹¹⁴ In communication theory this is called ‘value-framing’, based on the approach of frame analysis pioneered by Erving Goffman (1974).

limitation. While Malthus' name might still have carried some negative associations, he was widely respected as a member of the classical school of political economy, and known as a religious (and thus moral) man. This association with morality would prove especially useful to Bradlaugh and Besant throughout their trial, and in the years following. For example, a pamphlet published by the Malthusian League on '*Christianity and Parental Prudence*'¹¹⁵ makes clever use of this appeal to religious authority, claiming that:

To prove that the doctrines of Malthus are not un-Christian it should really be almost enough to remind objectors that Malthus was himself a clergyman of the Church of England whose orthodoxy was never challenged.¹¹⁶

However the appropriation of Malthusianism was not only rhetorical, the League adopting and modifying Malthus' theory to fit with their philosophy of family limitation. For example, Malthus' well known dictum; that population would always press against the natural limits of food production, is refashioned into an argument at the level of the family by Besant in her tract '*The Law of Population*';

A child is born, and its coming is welcomed, and the narrow wage is stretched to cover the new claimant. A second year passes, and brings another child; the rejoicing is less, *for the mouths are growing while the food remains stationary.* (Besant, n.d., p. 6, emphasis added)

Within the writing of Besant, the term 'Malthusianism' itself is eventually fully appropriated to signify support for birth control: "Not only does Malthusianism make early marriage possible, but it also makes it healthier and happier" (Besant n.d., p.6). Here the term 'Malthusianism' cannot be interpreted as referring to anything but artificial birth control. This represents a marked change from the

¹¹⁵ Malthusian League [London, 1885?-1915?]. Pamphlets and Leaflets. (General Reference Collection 8288.ee.39.). British Library, London

¹¹⁶ Bradlaugh had also highlighted the moral legitimacy of Malthus in his early pamphlet *Jesus, Shelley and Malthus*, saying he "personally, was a man who, by his kindliness and goodness, won the admiration of all who knew him" (Bradlaugh 1861, p.14).

rhetoric of earlier supporters of family limitation (like Mill), instead of euphemism that can be misinterpreted, the term 'Malthusian' now clearly stands for artificial birth control.

From a theoretical standpoint the Malthusian League are able to successfully claim Malthusianism as consistent with their framework by depicting birth control as a new 'scientific' check to population, distinct from (but not inconsistent with) Malthus' preventative and positive checks. While many tracts on family limitation existed and were in circulation (including George Drysdale's *Elements*), Bradlaugh and Besant chose to republish Knowlton's pamphlet, and defended it on the ground that it was a scientific work. The Solicitor General himself was forced to admit that "The book, I think it may be said, is carefully guarded from any vulgarity of expression; the whole tone of it is, as I say, under the guise of philosophy and medical science" (Besant & Bradlaugh 1877, p.9). In the trial Annie Besant in particular defended the use of 'scientific checks' to population, not only as a rhetorical strategy to legitimise birth control, but as a key part of their defence, arguing that the medical language described by the prosecution as obscene were a necessary part of what was simply a scientific debate:

...if I can prove to you that you must have some checks on population — that you have only got the choice between the checks of vice and misery and the scientific checks for which we plead — if I can prove that to you, you cannot bring in a verdict of guilty against us... you can no more discuss the population question without physiology than you can solve an arithmetical problem without figures. (Besant & Bradlaugh 1877, p.66)

Besant's two-day long address to the court emphasised the scientific nature of the 'Malthusian' check to population, arguing that this new check was necessary precisely because advances in medicine and hygiene had made the old 'natural' checks to population less effective:

Since these checks are now so much diminished by science, it is necessary to bring in some scientific checks to take their place. Nature, left to herself, balances herself; but if we interfere with nature by curing the sickly whom she is killing, and preserving the life which she has doomed, it becomes necessary to substitute scientific for natural checks — for you must not interfere on one side without

interfering on the other; the increase of science otherwise means only the increase of human misery. (Besant & Bradlaugh 1877, p.80)

This argument shifts the rhetoric of fertility control from the moral sphere of the individual and the family to the social or state sphere, and even to the broader issue of Eugenics. Framing family limitation as a scientific issue, rather than a moral or religious one, provides Bradlaugh and Besant with their main defence against the charges of obscenity (which relies on showing that they intended to pervert public morality), but crucially it also allows them to bring this debate into the public sphere under this guise of scientific discourse.

Bradlaugh and Besant's rhetorical appropriation of Malthusianism enabled them to distance the family limitation movement from the immoral associations of atheism, while appearing not to contradict Malthus' own moral position on family limitation. Because Malthusianism brought with it negative connotations (especially for the working classes) this was a risky strategy. Bradlaugh and Besant were likely aware of this risk, having close connections with the working classes through their activism with the National Secular Society. They must have calculated that these risks were outweighed by the benefits of 'appropriating' Malthus for their cause; his moral and intellectual authority, and the ease with which the 'scientific' check can be assimilated into the Malthusian schema.

4.5 The Bradlaugh-Besant Trial as Media Strategy

It is almost certain that both Bradlaugh and Besant expected (if not hoped) to be prosecuted for the publication of Knowlton's *Fruits of Philosophy*, given the prosecution of their colleague for the same action. In the *National Reformer's* report of their arrest on April 15th, it is clear to what extent preparations had been made for this eventuality (although possibly not for the arrest of Annie Besant as well as Bradlaugh), the Chief Clerk having been earlier informed of their intention to sell the pamphlet:

Mr. MARTIN [The Chief Clerk] here read the extract as follows:-
"Charles Bradlaugh and Annie Besant will attend at 28, Stonecutter

Street, E.C., from four o'clock in the afternoon until five o'clock tomorrow for the purpose of selling the pamphlet of which a copy is enclosed, March 23rd 1877."

...

Mr. MARTIN: There is also this from the *National Reformer*, that "In the event of Mr. Bradlaugh being arrested, householders willing to become bail are requested to send in their names." (*National Reformer*, 15 April 1877).

Further evidence of Bradlaugh's careful preparation can be found in the private papers of his daughter, Hypatia¹¹⁷, to whom he entrusted a small notebook detailing the actions she must take in the event of her father and Annie Besant's arrest. The notebook contains the following instruction:

If both CB & AB be imprisoned no fruits at all to be sold to any one whatsoever under any pretence & Mr Ramsey at once to bring the remainder of fruits to 10 Portland Place.

However this instruction, seemingly written by Bradlaugh, was at some point crossed out, and indeed the sale of the *Fruits of Philosophy* did continue in the months leading up to the trial, first via the post, and then through Mr Ramsay after the post office began confiscating the pamphlet.

The purpose of the trial for Bradlaugh and Besant was twofold; testing the legality of publishing future works on birth control, and attracting public attention for the cause of family limitation through the popular press.¹¹⁸ From the day of their arrest both Bradlaugh and Besant appeared as much interested in the public discussion of the trial, as in actually winning the trial itself. Indeed on the very day of their arrest

¹¹⁷ Held at the Bishopsgate Institute Library.

¹¹⁸ "It was for the sake of free discussion that we published the assailed pamphlet when its former seller yielded to the pressure put upon him by the police; it was not so much in defence of this pamphlet, as to make the way possible for others dealing with the same topic, that we risked the penalty which has fallen upon us. The accounts of the trial which have appeared in the daily and weekly papers have brought to the knowledge of thousands a great social question of whose existence they had no idea before this prosecution took place" (Bradlaugh & Besant, 1877, p. i).

Annie Besant recounts how, on leaving the courtroom they purchased the evening newspapers, which “all contained reports of the proceedings, as did also the papers of the following morning” (Besant 1877, p.227). Banks and Banks describe the impact of the trial in the newspapers:

As the *Daily News* of 22nd June, 1877, expressed it, the whole subject was put with the morning and evening newspapers on the breakfast table and the drawing-room table in thousands of homes. Never before had the arguments in favour of limiting the size of the family been presented to so large a public. (Banks & Banks 1954, p.22)

The longer-term impact of the newspaper coverage will be discussed more below, what mattered most to Bradlaugh and Besant in the days following their arrest and trial however was whether the reports in the newspapers were reaching the wider public and especially the working class. In the months leading up to the trial Besant dedicated a large amount of space in the *National Reformer* to letters of support from around the country, many suggesting that it was the trial and its coverage in the media that had brought their attention to the issue of family limitation.¹¹⁹ As well as emphasising the wide geographical reach of the Malthusian league’s activities, Besant in particular highlighted letters than were from members of the working class;

J. Robinson writes of a Durham mining district:-

"I am glad to inform you that the case is causing a deep interest among the working classes in this quarter, and all who I have spoken to, that have read the Pamphlet, agree that Mr. Bradlaugh and Mrs. Besant are taking the right and proper course. It is pleasing to observe that nearly all who condemn the work have never read it, and consequently do not understand it." (*National Reformer*, May 13 1877)

¹¹⁹ Besant describes this in her autobiography:

“Letters of approval and encouragement came from the most diverse quarters, including among their writers General Garibaldi, the well-known economist, Yves Guyot, the great French constitutional lawyer, Emile Acolas, together with letters literally by the hundred from poor men and women thanking and blessing us for the stand taken. Noticeable were the numbers of letters from clergymen's wives, and wives of ministers of all denominations.” (Besant n.d., p.209)

A poor man writes:-

"I married at the age of 22; my wife lived 12 years, During that time she had 4 births, 2 deaths, and 9 miscarriages. I was in Dunfermline, working 14 hours a day for 8s. or 10s. a week. If I and my wife had been acquainted with the 'Fruits of Philosophy' then, what a value it would have been to us!" (*National Reformer*, June 17 1877)

From women (or from husbands on their behalf);

Mrs Chetham concludes a most kindly note by saying:-

"It is no giddy girl that writes to you, as I am grandmother to twenty-four young ones; receive my best wishes for you and Mr. Bradlaugh." (*National Reformer*, May 6 1877)

Mr. Button writes us from York:-

"My wife desires me to add her warmest thanks to you and Mrs. Besant for your noble and courageous conduct in regard to the defence of the 'Knowlton Pamphlet,' and it is also very gratifying to me to see how thoroughly your action is approved of by the intelligent public at large." (*National Reformer*, June 10 1877)

And finally those from clergymen and doctors:¹²⁰

An M.D. writes:-

"The large crowds of sickly women and children who come to the hospitals and dispensaries suffering from the effects of over-lactation, due to the desire of the mothers to postpone impregnation, are sufficient to prove that less dangerous preventative checks to large families should be taught to the lower classes." (*National Reformer*, April 29 1877)

The following needs no preface:-

Dear Sir,- I write to sympathise with you and Mrs. Besant in the prosecution you are both undergoing for the published pamphlet of Dr. Knowlton's...

I am, &c., "A Clergyman of the Church of England." (*National Reformer*, May 6 1877)

It was important for Annie Besant to demonstrate the real impact publicity of the trial was having on these various groups. At the trial itself both Besant and

¹²⁰ Hostility towards birth control in the medical sphere was certainly one of the largest barriers to disseminating family limitation ideas, as shall be seen in 4.6.

Bradlaugh often referenced these letters, evidence of what they argued was the unmet demand for information on family limitation among the working classes, and support for the dissemination of such knowledge among men of religion or medicine.¹²¹ These letters helped Bradlaugh and Besant stress the disproportionate impact of large families for the working class, and especially for women, who suffered most obviously from bearing and raising many children, but less often discussed for reasons of delicacy, the health effects of frequent miscarriages, and of breastfeeding for long periods in the effort of avoiding pregnancy.

These letters are a valuable (if limited) insight into the inconsistent nature of birth-control awareness in late nineteenth-century Britain.¹²² As well as the many letters thanking Bradlaugh and Besant for bringing this important issue to public attention, there are a number that instead describe long years of practicing family limitation as a result of reading pamphlets like *Fruits of Philosophy*:

A poor man, whose name we withhold, says:-
 "Having had the good fortune to see 'Fruits of Philosophy' before I was married, and my wife, family and myself having greatly benefited by its teachings, make this humble acknowledgment to you and Mrs. Besant for the noble stand you have taken that others may share its benefits also." (*National Reformer*, April 29 1877)

A working man writes:-
 "A page of my life might be of some service to you. I am a miner; I was

¹²¹ "The circulation of this book, if I may judge in any fashion from my own personal experience, is valued by poor men and women in all parts of the country (and I can't help remembering that the editor of the Times newspaper said that he judged the feeling of the country by the state of his letter bag in the morning)." (Besant & Bradlaugh 1877, p.134)

¹²² Assuming they are in fact genuine, which is impossible to verify. Supporters of Bradlaugh and Besant could have sent fake letters purporting to be written by working class men and women, as well as clergymen, or they could have been written by Bradlaugh and Besant themselves. As Royle notes on the use of such sources; "Letters to the editor can be valuable if used with caution. Some letters were not only to, but pseudonymously from, the editor; and genuine letters were selected in accordance with editorial opinion" (Royle 1990, p.54). This possibility cannot be discounted, but if forged the letters are still a useful insight into the rhetorical strategy of Bradlaugh and Besant.

married when twenty years old, and my wife the same age. The result of our marriage was, very soon, three children. Reading Joseph Barker's works I found, in an advertisement of his, Dr Knowlton and Robert Dale Owen on the Population Question... We have had peace and plenty all our married lives; and I wish that every working man would do the same." (*National Reformer*, May 20 1877)

These letters, and the obvious importance Bradlaugh and Besant placed on them, counters the argument some have made, that the Malthusian League was an essentially bourgeois project with little interest in engaging with the working class or women's agency. McLaren for example describes the advocates of 'Malthusian' family limitation as "middle-class propagandists... seeking to manipulate working-class attitudes towards procreation for political purposes" (McLaren 1978, p.12), and claims that the Malthusian League made no real attempts to engage with the working classes in their advocacy. While McLaren rightly points out that the journal published by the league, *The Malthusian* was "written by and for members of the middle class" (McLaren 1978, p.110) this ignores the impact on wider public discourse through the popular press.¹²³

4.6 The Influence of the Bradlaugh-Besant Trial on Public Discourse of Family Limitation

I have argued here that the principal goal of Bradlaugh and Besant in publishing Knowlton's pamphlet and forming the Malthusian League was to force public

¹²³ D'Arcy for example argues that the impact of the Malthusian League went far beyond its journal:

"Limited though it appears to have been in membership, and hampered though it certainly was by shortage of funds, the League conducted a vigorous propaganda campaign and made a significant contribution to the discussion of the social question in Victorian England. The three main instruments used by the League to promote neo-Malthusianism were the public lecture, the tract and the press." (D'arcy 1977, p.430)

discussion of family limitation and specifically artificial (or 'scientific') birth control. While it is not possible to definitively prove one way or another whether the events of 1877 contributed to the fertility decline in England around this time (as many have suggested), we can evaluate to some extent how successful Bradlaugh and Besant were in increasing public awareness and acceptance of family limitation through a new discourse of 'Malthusian' limitation.

During the trial it was repeatedly claimed that sales of the Knowlton pamphlet had increased from around 700 copies a year to 125,000 copies in the three months between the arrest of Bradlaugh and Besant and the trial.¹²⁴ While we would expect Bradlaugh and Besant to stress and perhaps exaggerate the impact the trial had on public discourse, there is substantial anecdotal evidence that supports their claim. The public lectures given by Bradlaugh and Besant became increasingly popular, Besant describing how when she lectured the Sunday after the arrest "The hall was filled both morning and afternoon, but in the evening it was crammed to suffocation, and scores went away unable to obtain admission" (Besant 1877, p.227). The popularity of the lectures is also commented on in other newspapers, and again does not seem to be an exaggeration on Besant's part.¹²⁵

¹²⁴ "An amusing but none the less significant sidelight on the popular interest taken in the case is thrown by a number of prosecutions of street hawkers who were taking advantage of the publicity given to *Fruits of Philosophy* to make a profit for themselves. According to the Standard the streets of London were flooded with imitations and piracies of the original pamphlet" (Banks & Banks 1954, p.25).

¹²⁵ Again from Banks and Banks:

"The Times of 25th June, 1877, reported: "Last night the new Hall of Science, Old Street, was densely crowded, it having been announced that Mr. Bradlaugh and Mrs. Besant were to deliver addresses. Of the 600 persons who filled the hall, one-third were women, many very young. Prices of admission ranged from 2d. to 2s. 6d. In the streets were some 400 people who were unable to obtain admission. Copies of the *Fruits of Philosophy* were sold by the hundred, young women and lads purchasing largely. When Mr. Bradlaugh and Mrs. Besant and Mr. Truelove of Holborn entered the hall, they were received with great cheering" (Banks & Banks 1954, p.32)

Using the British Library corpus of nineteenth-century newspapers described in Chapter 2, we can go some way in assessing how the trial impacted public awareness of the pamphlet that Bradlaugh and Besant published, Knowlton's *Fruits of Philosophy*. Before 1877 the pamphlet was occasionally advertised in newspapers, in particular the radical or Chartist press including *The Northern Star and National Trades' Journal*, *The Poor Man's Guardian* and *Reynolds's Newspaper*. While this indicates a certain engagement with the idea of family limitation among the working class, this was limited to the audiences of these newspapers in London and Leeds, and the majority of these advertisements appear in the 1840s, before the decline of Chartism in Britain. By the middle of the century there are virtually no mentions of *Fruits of Philosophy* in British newspapers, even though it continued to be published. This supports the idea that availability of birth control information was less an issue than public awareness about the existence and availability of this information.

Figure 15 shows the impact of the trial on the number of references to *Fruits of Philosophy* in the newspapers of the day, with almost no references before 1877 other than the small number of advertisements mentioned above.

During the trial Besant insists the number of people in the hall was actually much greater, stating that 1,418 people had paid for attendance (Besant & Bradlaugh 1877, p.149).

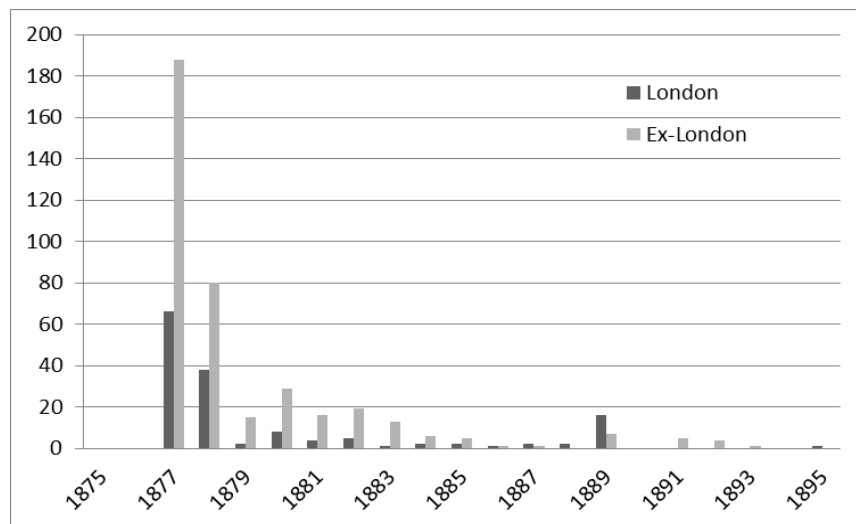


Figure 15: References to 'Fruits of Philosophy' in newspapers, source: British Library/Gale Cengage

Unsurprisingly, given the press' interest in the trial, there is a peak in total references in 1877, which quickly drops off in the years after the trial. This suggests that after the initial reporting of the trial, newspapers did not play an important role in promoting this particular pamphlet. This is perhaps to be expected given the reluctance of the press to continue discussing what they saw as an unpalatable topic. Banks and Banks (1954), for instance, describe the conflict felt by many newspaper editors between reporting and promoting the new 'Malthusianism' of family limitation;

Fearful of the popular reaction to Bradlaugh's revolutionary doctrines, the guardians of middle class morality brought the full weight of their disapproval against him. However distasteful they might personally find the subject of birth control, such was the present state of public interest in it that they could not ignore it altogether... We can only conclude that the violent hostility of the newspapers is illustrative of a very real anxiety about a quite different state of mind among their readers. The press was at the rear and not the van of public opinion change. (Banks & Banks 1954, p.33)

However, increased public awareness of the *Fruits of Philosophy* pamphlet is only one outcome that can be attributed to the trial of Bradlaugh and Besant. The publicity generated by the trial, I suggest, lead to a wider shift in the way family limitation was discussed in Britain. While the Knowlton pamphlet might have only had a short-lived impact on this discourse, the trial, and the activities of the

Malthusian League forced birth control into public consciousness under the guise of Malthusian rhetoric.

Motivated by Skinner's theory of rhetorical persuasion described earlier, I look at references to 'Malthusian' language in the press in the wake of the trial to assess whether a new 'vocabulary' of family limitation is evidenced in the newspapers of the day. According to Skinner:

The surest sign that a group or society has entered into the self-conscious possession of a new concept is that a corresponding vocabulary will be developed, a vocabulary which can then be used to pick out and discuss the concept in question with consistency. (Skinner 2002, p.160)

As I have argued above, the cause of family limitation required this new vocabulary, or language, in order to legitimise a behaviour that was already privately accepted in many parts of society, and desperately desired by others.

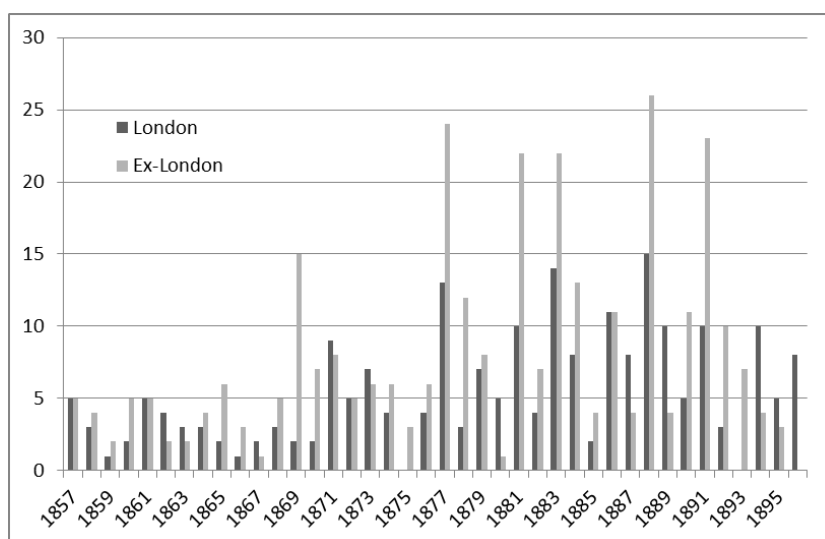


Figure 16: References to 'Malthusian' and 'Malthusianism' in British newspapers 1857-1897 (see Appendix B for summary table), source: British Library/Gale Cengage

Figure 16 above shows the number of articles in the sample that reference the term 'Malthusian' or 'Malthusianism', separated into newspapers in and outside of

London.¹²⁶ The year of the trial, 1877, unsurprisingly shows a particularly large increase in articles using these terms. However in the decades after the trial the use of the term was consistently higher, going from a yearly average of 8.35 references from 1856-76, to an average of 18.35 for the years 1877-97, representing an increase of 120%. It is also interesting to note the regional impact of the trial on the use of 'Malthusian' language, with a comparable increase in the number of articles referencing Malthusian ideas both in and outside of London (125% and 116% increase respectively for the two decades after 1877). Considering the London-centric publicity the trial received, this result is testament to both the press' power to disseminate ideas at this time, but also the efforts of Bradlaugh and Besant in engaging with regional centres and rural areas in their many lecture tours and pamphlet distribution.

Turning to the content of these newspaper articles, unsurprisingly in the years after 1877 most of the references are directly related to the trial or the Malthusian League. As the controversy dies down and the public lose interest in Bradlaugh and Besant we see more general references to Malthusian ideas, distinct from the issue of family limitation.¹²⁷ For example in reference to the anti-Poor Law movement described in Chapter 3:

Mr. O'Conner, Richard Oastler, and Mr. Stephens made the dogmas of Dr. Malthus - a clergyman whose wife was the mother of 24 children¹²⁸ - so unpopular that few working men would own them, in England, Scotland, or Wales, and it looks odd that in well-known quarters - persons who profess to speak in the name of the working classes, should make such persistent efforts to renew a theory which, if not

¹²⁶ This sample is chosen in a similar manner to the one in Chapter 3, but here we only look at newspaper references to the terms 'Malthusian' and 'Malthusianism'.

¹²⁷ Looking only at references to the term 'Malthusianism', a term much less likely to be used in the coverage of the trial, we still see the total number of references increase from 13 to 68 after 1877.

¹²⁸ A commonly cited misconception.

abandoned for many years, has certainly remained dormant. (*The Preston Guardian*, September 8 1877)

And more explicitly about population restriction:

When the Indian authorities address themselves to the problem, they will have some disadvantages as compared with the English Statesman who have to legislate for Ireland, but they will also have a few advantages. Their disadvantage will lie in the absence of natural forces to help them. There can be no Malthusian restrictions on population in India, under penalty of eternal punishment to those who connive at them. (*The Pall Mall Gazette*, May 9 1881)

Over the course of the 1880s however, we see an increasing number of direct references to family limitation, using Malthusian language to avoid explicit discussion of this still taboo topic, for example:

...it is also growing clearer that, so far as the present generation is concerned, the worst cases - the case of the residuum - must be left almost untouched. You cannot reach them. If you preach Malthusianism to them, the practical result will be even worse immorality. (*Liverpool Mercury*, November 17 1883)

There are a great many men about, and very sensible men they are too, who adopt the "Malthusian" principle, and limit the number of their children to the capabilities of maintaining them easy and comfortable. (*The Pall Mall Gazette*, September 18 1885)

It is, in fact, easy enough to suggest over-population as the cause, and Malthusian principles - in vogue, says Lord Rosebery, in certain working-class centres - as the cure, for present lack of work, and consequent lack of food and happiness. (*Leicester Chronicle and the Leicestershire Mercury*, October 24 1885)

In France and America small families are the rule. In Britain Malthusian doctrines and Malthusian practices may not be professedly popular, but it would seem as if they were being adopted. (*The Belfast News-Letter*, November 10 1887).

By the 1880s the use of the name 'Malthus' and the term 'Malthusian' seem to have re-entered colloquial language in a manner very similar to the 1830s and 40s (as described in Chapter 3), the terms often used in a humorous or ironic manner. Describing his annoyance at receiving a growing number of badly written novels, the publisher Andrew Chatto considers "a charming proposal for applying to novel-writers the Malthusian method; but unfortunately novel writing does not

conform to the strict rules of heredity” (*Birmingham Daily Post*, 10 March 1887). A councillor arguing for more education funds “had to again remind the Council that unless they could enforce upon the people the doctrines of Malthus and check the certain growth of the population, the expenditure for elementary education could not go back” (*The Bristol Mercury and Daily Post*, March 19 1888). In a particularly amusing incident, when an anonymous author complained about the use of perambulators (prams) on crowded footpaths in the *Liverpool Mercury*, two separate readers wrote letters invoking Malthus in their ridicule of the article’s author. One of the letters proposed that the author “must have been reading up Malthus and afterwards hearing an “oration” by Mrs. Besant” (*Liverpool Mercury*, June 8 1885).

The increasing number of references to Malthus, and the changing use of this Malthusian language in newspapers after 1877, suggest that the Bradlaugh-Besant trial did indeed have a lasting impact on popular discourse until at least the end of the century. The examples above are of particular note, as they demonstrate an explicit association between birth control and Malthusianism in public discourse. It is interesting that this change in discourse has taken place over the space of a single decade, particularly considering the conservative bent of so many newspapers at this time.

While the priority of Bradlaugh and Besant was to introduce the ideas of family limitation to a wider, more working-class audience, we can also see the impact of the trial on the academic discourse of the day. Figure 17 below shows references to Malthus, or Malthusian language in the journals of the Royal Statistical Society and the British Medical Association¹²⁹. The paucity of references in the early part of the century confirms the argument made in Chapter 3 that Malthusian language

¹²⁹ These include the *Journal of the Statistical Society of London* (1838-1886), the *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society* (1887-), the *Provincial Medical and Surgical Journal* (1840-1852), the *Association Medical Journal* (1853-1856) and the *British Medical Journal* (1857-).

remained important only in the popular level of discourse after his death, and did not play a significant role in academic debates. After 1877 however there is a considerable increase in the number of references to Malthus in these journals (200% in the two decades after 1877).

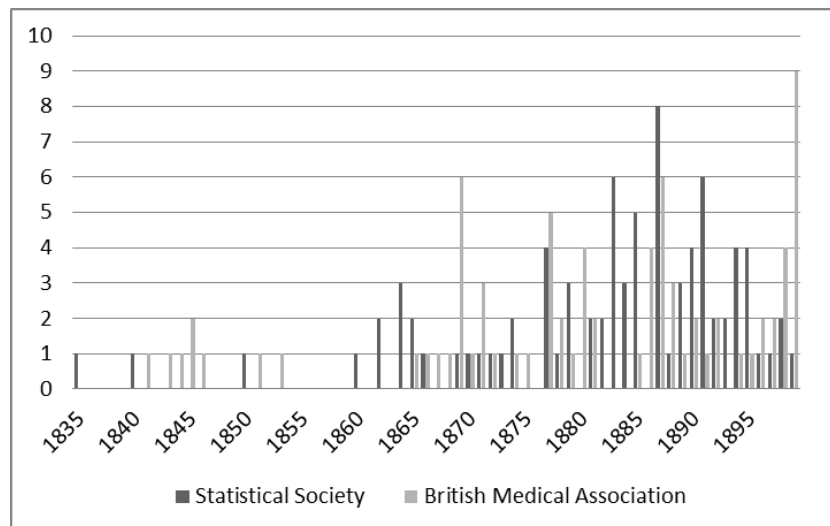


Figure 17: References to Malthus, 'Malthusian' and 'Malthusianism' in the journals of the Royal Statistical Society and British Medical Association

In the clearest example of the impact the trial had on academic discourse, as early as August 1877 (only four months after the initial arrest of Bradlaugh and Besant, and two months after the trial) William Farr read a paper at the British Association Section F meeting entitled *On Some Doctrines of Population*. As well as refuting Malthus' principle of population, and making an early argument for eugenics, Farr also makes direct reference to birth control:

It has been shown that the birth-rate can be reduced. Will it be wise in this country to accept that policy, which has been advocated by Malthus, by John Stuart Mill, by Dr. Drysdale; and has been practised by the French peasant? (Farr 1877, p.576)¹³⁰

¹³⁰ Here the Dr. Drysdale being referred to is most likely Charles Robert Drysdale, the first president of the Malthusian League, and not his brother, anonymous author of *The Elements of Social Science*, George Drysdale.

Likewise writers in the British Medical Journal made increasingly explicit references to the Malthusian techniques of birth control, as well as to the ideas of population control more generally. In an address to the British Medical Association in August 1877, Arthur Ransome noted the increasing interest in Malthusian theory within the association, and like many commentators of the time argued that repressing debate on such issues was the surest way to encourage public interest in them:

There have been of late certain utterances by men high on authority in the sanitary and scientific world, which, though they may provoke a smile, should on an occasion such as this be treated seriously. More than one of the presidential addresses recently delivered have contained ominous references to so called Malthusian theories, and the humorous opinion of Montaigne has been seriously adopted that "it is of little use to attempt to abridge the course of evils - whoso attempts to shorten them by force, only lengthens and multiples them, and irritates in place of appeasing them. (Ransome 1877, p.214)

A year later, in an address to the Obstetrical section in August 1878¹³¹ Charles Routh decried what he saw as the increasing prevalence of family limitation in Britain, clearly aiming his criticism at the Malthusian League for promoting "vice, clothed in a misnamed Malthusian garb, and so transformed as to deceive many" (Routh 1879, p.iiv). One doctor commenting on the address noted that "Since the publication of the cheap edition of the notorious work 'The Fruits of Philosophy', many cases had come under his notice, in which he had reason to believe that the morbid conditions resulted from following the instructions given in that book" (Routh 1879, p.28). He goes on to describe a number of these cases, involving the use of contraceptive sponges or douches of saline solution as recommended in Knowlton's pamphlet.

¹³¹ Entitled *The Moral and Physical Evils Likely to follow if Checks to Population be not Strongly Discouraged and Condemned*.

Conclusions

I have argued here that Charles Bradlaugh and Annie Besant employed a considered rhetorical campaign in order to raise public awareness and acceptance of family limitation. This campaign relied on two distinct but complementary strategies; firstly appropriating the language of Malthusianism in order to legitimise family limitation as the obvious 'scientific check' to population, and secondly, ensuring the greatest possible media coverage for their cause via their arrest and trial. Without the audience afforded by the burgeoning popular press of the late nineteenth century, the Malthusian League could not hope to influence public debate. The issue of family limitation, however, was unlike almost any other social cause of the nineteenth century, in that any discussion of sexual topics in the public sphere was almost impossible. The solution to this problem for Bradlaugh and Besant was to associate family limitation with the new language and vocabulary of Malthusianism.

There is considerable evidence that Bradlaugh and Besant's twofold strategy was successful in forcing a public discussion of family limitation in the years after the trial; as well as the much commented on increased interest in Knowlton's pamphlet, and the over-subscribed public lectures of Bradlaugh and Besant, supporters from all walks of life and from all around the country wrote in gratitude to Bradlaugh and Besant for bringing this cause to the public's attention. The long-term success of Bradlaugh and Besant's rhetorical strategy is also attested to by the increased use of 'Malthusian' language in the popular press in the decade after the trial, as well as in academic discourse. Uses of 'Malthusian' language in popular newspapers show that by the last decades of the century Malthus' name had clearly become associated with birth control in the public mind. Discussion of 'Malthusian' family limitation in the statistical and medical journals also demonstrates that the use of (or demand for) birth control by the working classes was an issue that could no longer be ignored by the middle and upper classes. We will likely never have quantitative data on the actual use of birth control in the late nineteenth century, and thus cannot say for certain what role this played in the drop in birth rates around this

period. However, the evidence seen in this chapter suggests that the increasingly open discussion of family limitation did increase public awareness, and possibly also acceptance, of birth control.

Chapter 5 - Conclusions

This thesis aimed to answer two main questions about the relationship between the public sphere and economics. The first of these is about understanding the trajectory of an economic idea in the public consciousness; Malthus is today one of the most recognised of the classical economists, indeed, one of the nineteenth century's most well-known thinkers from any field. This longevity cannot be explained by the conclusion that Malthus was in some simple sense 'right' about the question of population, indeed much of the debate about Malthus' ideas over the past two centuries has emphasised how incorrect he was, or that his ideas only applied to a world already past. Previous work on the intellectual history of Malthus has emphasised his role in economic debate at the start of the nineteenth century, and then his subsequent revival by economists like Keynes in the early twentieth century. However it is clear that Malthus' ideas did not disappear entirely from the public mind between these two junctures. It is therefore one of the main arguments of this thesis that public appropriation and reimagining of Malthus throughout the nineteenth century helps explain his persistence in public debate, and eventual revival in academic debate. Understanding this process, through the two case studies seen here, helps us answer the second, broader question of this thesis; how the public 'makes use' of economics.

5.1 Malthus in the Nineteenth Century Public Sphere

In the twenty-first century the name Malthus is almost completely synonymous with his principle of population, that is, the idea that population growth will always press against the bounds of natural resources. In the wake of rapid population growth throughout the twentieth century, accompanied by an ever more accessible consumer lifestyle with its attendant pressures on non-renewable resources and the climate, it is unsurprising that this association would be so salient today. This

thesis claims, however, that this present identification of Malthus as population pessimist is not characteristic of the nineteenth century public's understanding of and engagement with Malthusian ideas, at least not in Britain.

The bibliometric analysis of Chapter 2, while only exploratory, suggests that there was no strong correlation between discussion of Malthus and discussion of population in nineteenth-century Britain. Furthermore, there is a trend over the century towards greater use of terms like 'Malthusian' and 'Malthusianism', particularly in periods when total references to Malthus are higher, suggesting a more nuanced, rhetorical use of the terms (rather than simple discussion of Malthus). We can also make an important distinction between different discourses within the wider public sphere. Usage of Malthusian language in the more formal spheres of academic and intellectual publishing paints a different picture to that of the informal, popular sphere of newspapers. While so much intellectual history relies on the former, it is my contention that public engagement with economics cannot be understood without a critical analysis of the ways economic language is used within the popular sphere. The two case studies chosen highlight this phenomenon; not the popularisation of economics from above, but the appropriation of economics (or at least its language) from below.

Malthus' association with the Poor Law debates is well established, the act of 1834 being framed by various politicians and commentators as a necessity in light of the Malthusian reproductive tendencies of the poor. Less well understood, however, is how the public responded to and participated in this debate, and what role economic ideas and language played at this level. Analysing the language of the popular sphere through its newspapers provides us with a unique vision of how the public not only reacted against the new economic rhetoric of the Poor Laws, but appropriated and reinterpreted this language, giving form to a growing public distrust of the inhumane laws of the political economists (and their followers in parliament). The popular use of Malthusian rhetoric in the two decades after 1834 was far more nuanced than previously recognised in the literature; the perceived cruelty of economics was subsumed under the 'Malthusian' epithet, while at the

same time the birth of the 'Malthusian' and 'Anti-Malthusian', an early caricature of *homo economicus*, signified a satirical attack on the claims of economics to encompass the human experience within its schema of rationality and calculation. Finally, the reimagining of Malthus as the child murdering 'Marcus' demonstrates how soon after his death the public had fallen sway to (or went along with) this monstrous vision of economic law as the arbitrator of life and death itself.

This spontaneous, almost organic development of Malthusian rhetoric in the popular discourse of the 1830s and 40s contrasts with the purposeful, strategic rhetoric of Charles Bradlaugh and Annie Besant examined in chapter 4. Faced with reframing the issue of birth control as scientifically and morally legitimate, Bradlaugh and Besant developed a new kind of Malthusian rhetoric, directing it at the widest possible audience via newspaper coverage of their trial. This undertaking was complicated by the negative associations of the earlier Poor Law debates, as well as the hostility of other activists towards Malthusian ideas. What this thesis tries to elucidate is why Bradlaugh and Besant chose to use this Malthusian rhetoric despite these complications, and how they went about this rhetorical task. Much like the policy makers of the Poor Law decades, Bradlaugh and Besant emphasised the intellectual pedigree of Malthusian thought, thus lending legitimacy to the issue of birth control. However in contrast with the Poor Law promoters, this rhetoric was used to advocate for individual agency in family life, especially for the poor and for women. While it is impossible to confirm that the trial of 1877 marked a definite turning point in the fertility trends of Britain, the new Malthusian discourse of family limitation after this year (evidenced in the newspapers and academic debate) suggests that there was an impact on public consciousness, if not necessarily behaviour.

While these case studies reflect very different, even contradictory uses of Malthusian language in popular discourse, there are some key features that inform our understanding of how the public makes use of economic language for rhetorical purposes. In the Poor Law debates, Malthusian language was used in a critical or negative sense in order to reject economic coercion of the individual, while in the

birth control debate it was used positively, but with the same goal of defending individual agency. In both cases a new, Malthusian vocabulary is created to enable a discourse of social resistance, of the individual against the state or economy.

5.2 Economic Language as Public Engagement

As well as shedding light on how Malthusian ideas and language played a role in the public sphere of nineteenth century Britain, these case studies also speak to the broader issue of public engagement with economics, both in the past and today, and indicate some avenues for future research in the history of economics ideas. A consideration that has been repeatedly touched upon here is the fragmented or fluid nature of the 'public sphere' as a space in which the history of economic ideas is studied. Previous literature on the relationship between economic thought and the public has tended to conceptualise this public sphere as a monolith, distinguishing between an informed, academic sphere of economists and the lay public for whom economic ideas must be popularised, mostly via the media. The movement of economic ideas is therefore mostly treated as unidirectional, from the academic to the public sphere, with the popular media acting as mediator in this transmission. This thesis makes the case that the public sphere should not be thought of as this uniform discursive space, characterised by a single type of discourse in which the public is a passive actor. Instead, multiple kinds of public sphere (or sub-spheres) can be distinguished, within which different economic discourses compete and coexist. Furthermore the boundaries of these multiple public spheres are by no means fixed or impermeable, if there is competition between different economic discourses, then there is also contagion.

Recognising that the public sphere is made up of a multitude of overlapping, yet distinct sub-spheres allows us a more nuanced understanding of how economic ideas are made useful by the public. For example, the timing of an idea's diffusion has usually been characterised by the simple causality of discussion by an elite sphere followed by diffusion to a popular sphere. In the case of Malthus this

process has frequently been characterised by the popularisation of Malthusian theory, mostly in the early nineteenth century by writers like Harriet Martineau. This thesis, on the other hand, has shown how the relative popularity of Malthusian ideas depended not on the success of popularisers in explaining economics to the masses, but instead on how useful these ideas were to various groups within the public sphere. Generalising from this conclusion to the history of economics more widely, we can see how important historical and political contexts are in explaining the diffusion of economic ideas.

Another key conclusion that can be drawn from these case studies is that public engagement with economics relies more heavily on language and rhetoric than has previously been recognised. The diffusion of economics ideas into public consciousness is more usually thought of as the popularisation of economic models (for example, supply and demand), paradigms or ideologies (Keynesian, Monetarist) and key concepts (opportunity cost, marginal cost...). This thesis proposes a new way of thinking about public engagement with economics, through rhetoric and vocabulary. The case studies of Malthusian language suggest that economic rhetoric is particularly useful within public discourse because it is both authoritative, which suggests stability of meaning, but also because it is easily appropriated, which requires a certain fluidity. While it is not within the scope of this thesis, further research could shed light on why certain kinds of language possess rhetorical force, and this tension between these two contrasting characteristics of economic language.

Another wider conclusion for the study of the history of economics (and intellectual history more broadly) is that public appropriation of academic ideas does not simply entail simplification or vulgarisation. The case of the Poor Law debates demonstrates that popular use of economic language can be rhetorically sophisticated, and will not necessarily conform to the aims of economic popularisers. Likewise, a naïve reading of Bradlaugh and Besant's appropriation of Malthusian language might suggest a simple misreading of Malthus, as has been widely suggested by historians of contraception. However a more careful analysis

of their work disproves this assessment; far from misinterpreting the term 'Malthusian', their goal was to change its very meaning in the public discourse. Historians of economics should be more careful in assessing popular use of economics ideas and language; misappropriation can be purposeful, and is worthy of study in its own right if we want to better understand how economics is used within public discourse.

Appendices

Appendix A: Summary of newspaper articles mentioning Malthus in the 19th Century British Library Newspapers archive, 10% subsample 1830-50, source: Gale Cengage/British Library

Newspaper	Articles	Percent
Brighton Patriot and South of England Free Press (Brighton, England)	2	1.2
Caledonian Mercury (Edinburgh, Scotland)	1	0.6
Cobbett's Weekly Political Register (London, England)	4	2.4
Freeman's Journal and Daily Commercial Advertiser (Dublin, Ireland)	3	1.8
Hampshire Advertiser & Salisbury Guardian Royal Yacht Club Gazette, Southampton Town and County Herald, Isle of Wight Journal, Winchester Chronicle, and General Reporter (Southampton, England)	3	1.8
Hampshire Advertiser & Salisbury Guardian (Southampton, England)	1	0.6
Jackson's Oxford Journal (Oxford, England)	1	0.6
Liverpool Mercury etc (Liverpool, England)	5	3.0
Lloyd's Weekly London Newspaper (London, England)	2	1.2
North Wales Chronicle (Bangor, Wales)	1	0.6
Preston Chronicle (Preston, England)	2	1.2
The Aberdeen Journal (Aberdeen, Scotland)	1	0.6
The Blackburn Standard (Blackburn, England)	1	0.6
The Bradford Observer (Bradford, England)	1	0.6
The Bradford Observer; and Halifax, Huddersfield, and Keighley Reporter (Bradford, England)	3	1.8
The Bristol Mercury (Bristol, England)	4	2.4
The Champion and Weekly Herald (London, England)	3	1.8
The Charter (London, England)	2	1.2
The Chartist (London, England)	1	0.6
The Cornwall Royal Gazette, Falmouth Packet and Plymouth Journal (Truro, England)	3	1.8
The Derby Mercury (Derby, England)	1	0.6
The Essex Standard, and Colchester, Chelmsford, Maldon, Harwich, and General County Advertiser (Colchester, England)	2	1.2
The Essex Standard, and General Advertiser for the Eastern Counties (Colchester, England)	1	0.6
The Examiner (London, England)	2	1.2
The Hull Packet and East Riding Times (Hull, England)	1	0.6
The Hull Packet (Hull, England)	1	0.6
The Leicester Chronicle: or, Commercial and Agricultural Advertiser (Leicester, England)	2	1.2

The London Dispatch and People's Political and Social Reformer (London, England)	5	3.0
The Manchester Times and Gazette (Manchester, England)	2	1.2
The Morning Chronicle (London, England)	6	3.6
The Morning Post (London, England)	22	13.3
The Northern Liberator (Newcastle-upon-Tyne, England)	4	2.4
The Northern Star and Leeds General Advertiser (Leeds, England)	13	7.8
The Northern Star and National Trades' Journal (Leeds, England)	21	12.7
The Nottinghamshire Guardian and Midland Advertiser (London, England)	1	0.6
The Operative (London, England)	2	1.2
The Poor Man's Guardian (London, England)	2	1.2
The Sheffield Independent, and Yorkshire and Derbyshire Advertiser (Sheffield, England)	3	1.8
The Southern Star and London and Brighton Patriot (London, England)	1	0.6
The Standard (London, England)	29	17.5
The York Herald, and General Advertiser (York, England)	1	0.6
Total	166	100.0

**Appendix B: Summary of newspaper articles referencing
Malthusian/Malthusianism in the 19th Century British Library
Newspapers archive, full sample 1857-97, source: Gale
Cengage/British Library**

Newspaper	Articles	Percent
Aberdeen Weekly Journal (Aberdeen, Scotland)	9	1.7
Birmingham Daily Post (Birmingham, England)	17	3.2
Cheshire Observer (Chester, England)	4	0.7
Cheshire Observer and Chester, Birkenhead, Crewe and North Wales Times (Chester, England)	2	0.4
Daily News (London, England)	24	4.5
Dundee Courier (Dundee, Scotland)	1	0.2
Dundee Courier and Daily Argus (Dundee, Scotland)	1	0.2
Freeman's Journal and Daily Commercial Advertiser (Dublin, Ireland)	13	2.4
Glasgow Herald (Glasgow, Scotland)	27	5.1
Hampshire Telegraph and Sussex Chronicle etc (Portsmouth, England)	2	0.4
Jackson's Oxford Journal (Oxford, England)	3	0.6
Leicester Chronicle and the Leicestershire Mercury (Leicester, England)	8	1.5
Liverpool Mercury etc (Liverpool, England)	10	1.9
Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper (London, England)	5	0.9
Manchester Times (Manchester, England)	5	0.9
North Wales Chronicle (Bangor, Wales)	1	0.2
Northern Echo (Darlington, England)	6	1.1
Nottinghamshire Guardian (London, England)	10	1.9
Reynolds's Newspaper (London, England)	29	5.4
The Aberdeen Journal (Aberdeen, Scotland)	1	0.2
The Belfast News-Letter (Belfast, Ireland)	10	1.9
The Blackburn Standard (Blackburn, England)	1	0.2
The Blackburn Standard and Weekly Express (Blackburn, England)	2	0.4
The Blackburn Standard: Darwen Observer, and North-East Lancashire Advertiser (Blackburn, England)	1	0.2
The Bradford Observer (Bradford, England)	10	1.9
The Bristol Mercury (Bristol, England)	2	0.4
The Bristol Mercury and Daily Post (Bristol, England)	9	1.7
The Bury and Norwich Post, and Suffolk Herald (Bury Saint Edmunds, England)	6	1.1
The Bury and Norwich Post, and Suffolk Standard (Bury Saint Edmunds, England)	1	0.2
The Caledonian Mercury (Edinburgh, Scotland)	4	0.7

The Derby Mercury (Derby, England)	3	0.6
The Dundee Courier & Argus (Dundee, Scotland)	15	2.8
The Dundee Courier & Argus and Northern Warder (Dundee, Scotland)	5	0.9
The Era (London, England)	1	0.2
The Essex Standard, West Suffolk Gazette, and Eastern Counties' Advertiser (Colchester, England)	4	0.7
The Examiner (London, England)	9	1.7
The Graphic (London, England)	6	1.1
The Hampshire Advertiser (Southampton, England)	5	0.9
The Huddersfield Chronicle and West Yorkshire Advertiser (West Yorkshire, England)	6	1.1
The Huddersfield Daily Chronicle (West Yorkshire, England)	6	1.1
The Hull Packet and East Riding Times (Hull, England)	2	0.4
The Illustrated Police News etc (London, England)	9	1.7
The Ipswich Journal (Ipswich, England)	7	1.3
The Isle of Man Times and General Advertiser (Douglas, England)	3	0.6
The Lancaster Gazette and General Advertiser for Lancashire, Westmorland, and Yorkshire (Lancaster, England)	3	0.6
The Lancaster Gazette, and General Advertiser for Lancashire, Westmorland, Yorkshire, &c. (Lancaster, England)	4	0.7
The Leeds Mercury (Leeds, England)	20	3.7
The Morning Chronicle (London, England)	3	0.6
The Morning Post (London, England)	32	6.0
The Newcastle Courant etc (Newcastle-upon-Tyne, England)	2	0.4
The Newcastle Weekly Courant (Newcastle-upon-Tyne, England)	2	0.4
The North-Eastern Daily Gazette (Middlesbrough, England)	5	0.9
The Pall Mall Gazette (London, England)	52	9.7
The Penny Illustrated Paper and Illustrated Times (London, England)	1	0.2
The Preston Guardian etc (Preston, England)	6	1.1
The Royal Cornwall Gazette Falmouth Packet, Cornish Weekly News, & General Advertiser (Truro, England)	7	1.3
The Royal Cornwall Gazette, Falmouth Packet, and General Advertiser (Truro, England)	4	0.7
The Sheffield & Rotherham Independent (Sheffield, England)	21	3.9
The Sheffield & Rotherham Independent. Supplement. (Sheffield, England)	1	0.2
The Standard (London, England)	37	6.9
The Weekly Standard and Express (Blackburn, England)	1	0.2

The York Herald (York, England)	7	1.3
The Yorkshire Herald, and The York Herald (York, England)	5	0.9
Trewman's Exeter Flying Post or Plymouth and Cornish Advertiser (Exeter, England)	10	1.9
Western Mail (Cardiff, Wales)	6	1.1
Total	534	100

Archives

The British Library

19th Century Newspaper British Library Newspapers Database

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