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# Malthus on social classes: higher, lower and middle

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Malthus's views on the relative roles and importance of the social classes—higher, lower and middle—are presented. The view commonly expressed in the secondary literature that he was prejudiced in favour of the upper classes is questioned. The view that he was uncaring or unsympathetic toward the labouring classes is said to lack textual support. It is argued that the economic importance he attributed to the middle classes and to a greater equality in the distribution of property, income and wealth is an essential, although frequently neglected, feature of his political economy.

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## 1. Introduction

A popular version of Malthus's views on social classes asserts that he was sycophantic towards the landlords, tolerant of merchants and manufacturers, and despairing of the working classes, whose poverty and misery were said to be the result of their improvident sexual behaviour; they are the arbiters of their own destiny, and the best that he or political economy could do for them was to issue a stern admonition. This version was prevalent among contemporary critics such as William Cobbett, though not shared by all of Malthus's fellow classical economists, and is still to be found regularly among modern critics. However, a close study of the textual evidence reveals that this popular version of Malthus's views on social classes is, to say the least, deficient.

## 2. The higher classes

The idea that Malthus was a biased promulgator of the interests of landlords[1] and the higher classes can be found throughout the secondary literature. The following are five

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[1] The term 'landlords' is extended in this article, following Malthus's usage, to include the landed gentry, the landed interest, landholders, country gentlemen, aristocratic class, ruling class, higher class, upper class, etc.

examples of some of the more prominent contributions, in roughly chronological order:

Malthus's younger colleague at the East India College, William Empson (1791–1852), thought that when Malthus in 1796 at the age of 30 wrote his unpublished pamphlet, 'The Crisis', he was favourably inclined towards the landed interests. Malthus spoke nostalgically of the 'old and noble character' of the country gentleman who had in former years been 'the jealous guardian of British freedom', and he looked to 'the returning sense and reason of the country gentleman, and the middle classes of society' to overcome the current political crisis. Empson said that Malthus may have had a bias towards the landed interest: 'If Mr Malthus had any predilections which it may be thought that he was disposed to extend further than reason would strictly justify, they would seem to be his views, whether in politics or in political economy, concerning what is called the landed interest. We see here what he expected from the squires in 1796. Unknown to himself, these partialities may have helped to bias a little the balancing powers of his mind, when, after the peace, he attempted to weigh in a scale of the greatest nicety the advantages and disadvantages of corn laws' (Empson, 1837, p. 479). Empson also suggested that this same bias influenced Malthus's defence of primogeniture.

Karl Marx thought that Malthus served the interest of the conservative and ruling classes, whom he 'adored like a true priest' (Marx, [1887] 1954, 495n). He described Malthus as 'a shameless sycophant of the ruling classes' (quoted McLellan, 1976, p. 336).

John Maynard Keynes, in his *Essays in Biography* and *General Theory*, praised Malthus for stressing the importance of effective demand in promoting economic growth, but had been critical of Malthus as a defender of the *status quo*: 'The work begun by Malthus and completed by Ricardo did, in fact, provide an immensely powerful intellectual foundation to justify the *status quo,* to ward off experiments, to damp enthusiasm, and to keep us all in order; and it was a just recompense that they should have thrown up Karl Marx as their misbegotten progeny' (Bonar *et al.*, 1935, pp. 230–31).

Ronald Meek saw in Malthus toleration and acceptance of the new commercial world, but also an underlying preference for landlord dominance: Malthus was 'quite prepared to enter into some sort of compromise with the parvenu capitalist class, but…always hankered after a society in which the landlords would once again pursue their rightful place as economic and political leaders of the community' (Meek, 1951, p. 266). Meek believed that Malthus's *Essay* was designed as a pessimistic prediction of the impossibility of general improvement in social conditions, as a justification for the existence of the poverty of the lower classes and the privileges of the upper classes, and as a treatise against social reform: 'in essence the Malthusian theory of population remained to the end what it had been at the beginning, an apology for the condition of the working people, and a warning against all attempts to ameliorate the condition of society' (Meek, 1954, p. 31).

A similar interpretation of the *Essay* as an apologia was taken up by Richard Simons who deemed Malthus's position to be a 'justification for inequality', who regarded Malthus as 'an apologist for the established order of his day', and who believed that 'Malthus's theory of British society…furnished a rationalisation for harsher treatment of the poor and an excuse for indifference to their welfare' (Simons, 1955, p. 71, 74, 75).

In addition to the above five examples, numerous other pro-landlord and pro-inequality interpretations abound in the secondary literature. For example, Malthus

regarded the presence of landowners in capitalist society as 'a godsend which saved the system from shipwreck' (Heimann, 1945, p. 91); 'Malthus accepts poverty as stimulus to the production of wealth and regarded it as a natural phenomenon not to be cured' (Zweig, 1950, p. 14); Malthus 'wanted to preserve the place of the landlords with all their status and traditional rights alongside the rising class of the English society' (Chowdhury, 1957, pp. 68–69); Malthus 'pleaded the case for the landed aristocracy' Blaug ([1958] 1973, p. 271); Malthus's 'sympathies lay with the well-to-do class' (Petersen, 1965, p. 39); he is said to have given 'an elaborate rationalisation of the interest of the class to which he belonged, namely the landed gentry' (Pavitt, 1973, p. 162), and to have possessed a 'dedicated concern with the economic and political interests of the feudal class' (Khosla, 1978, p. 136); Malthus 'favoured a higher income share for the landowner as an encouragement to growth' (Kregel, 1979, p. 933); Malthus was 'that insufferably retrograde apologist for the landed interest' (Kanth, 1988, p. 92); 'Malthus was soft on landlords' and 'always came down on the side of preserving existing class structure' (Canterbery, 1987, p. 69); Malthus 'linked his macroeconomics with an espousal of the landlord class' (Spiegel, 1991, p. 298).

Malthus clearly believed that landlords and the aristocracy would probably always be an essential part of the structure of society; the final paragraph of the second and later editions of the *Essay* stated: 'The structure of society, in its great features, will probably always remain unchanged. We have every reason to believe that it will always consist of a class of proprietors and a class of labourers'. These words, taken in isolation, seem to have convinced some commentators that Malthus was a patron saint of landowners, and a supporter of landlord-dominated society. However, it should be remembered that these words were immediately followed by words of reservation, casting doubt on the extent and inalterability of the domination by a landlord class: 'but the condition of each [class], and the proportion which they bear to each other, may be so altered as greatly to improve the harmony and beauty of the whole' (Malthus, 1989a, vol. 2, p. 203). This reservation was recognised by Eric Roll, according to whom Malthus had 'insisted that the proportions of the classes in society could change, and had suggested not an increase in landlords or the preservation of their political dominance, but an increase in the middle classes and Parliamentary reform' (Roll, 1938, p. 209; quoted in Simons, 1955, p. 75).

In saying that 'the structure of society, in its great features, will probably always remain unchanged', Malthus seems to have meant that there will always be three major classes—lower, middle and higher—which is equivalent to saying that humans come in three sizes—small, average and tall. It was not intended to mean that there will be no flexibility in the numbers in each class or in their relative wealth and importance. He explicitly recognised the possibility that the condition of society could be greatly improved by a change in the proportions between the classes. Far from being a prediction or plea for a rigid preservation of the existing distribution of wealth, or for the maintenance of the existing differences in the income and wealth of the three classes, it was an encouragement for reform.

The view that Malthus was ideologically biased in favour of landowners might have been stimulated by the way in which he justified, and indeed eulogised, land rent, describing it as 'a fund for the enjoyments and leisure of the society, sufficient to leaven and animate the whole mass' (Malthus, 1989b, vol. 1, p. 237). He argued that rent is a part of 'that surplus produce from the land, which has been justly stated to be the

source of all power and enjoyment; and without which, in fact, there would be no cities, no military or naval force, no arts, no learning, none of the finer manufactures, none of the conveniences and luxuries of foreign countries, and none of that cultivated and polished society, which not only elevates and dignifies individuals, but which extends its beneficial influence through the whole mass of the people' (Malthus, 1989b, vol. 1, pp. 149–50). He also said: 'Rents are the reward of present valour and wisdom, as well as past strength and cunning'—words which seem to imply a hagiographical esteem for rent owners. (Malthus, 1989b, vol. 1, p. 238).[2] However, although Malthus said that rent 'falls mainly to the landlord' (Malthus, 1989b, vol. 1, p. 226), he did not argue that rents should be restricted to one social class: 'happily, the benefit [of rent] is attached to the soil, not to any particular proprietors … Every day lands are purchased with the fruits of industry and talents. They afford the great prize, the 'otium cum dignitate' to every species of laudable exertion'. And he expressed the view that rents will be distributed more widely through society: 'in the progress of society, there is every reason to believe, that, as they become more valuable from the increase of capital and population, and improvements in agriculture, the benefits which they yield may be divided among a much greater number of persons' (Malthus, 1989b, vol. 1, p. 238).

Malthus conceived 'rent' in an absolute sense, not merely in the sense of differential rent, as popularised by Ricardo. In its differential sense, rent is the difference between the returns on land of superior quality compared with land of an inferior quality. In its absolute sense, as Malthus noted, rent can exist even if there are no differences in quality. Malthus described rent as 'a bountiful gift of Providence', and 'the gift of nature to man'; it is the 'surplus produce of the land' whose 'primary cause' is 'that quality of the earth, by which it can be made to yield a greater portion of the necessaries of life than is required for the maintenance of the persons employed on the land' (Malthus, 1989b, vol. 1, p. 139).

Thus, in Malthus's understanding of rent, the person who labours on the land could also be the owner, so that the rent would accrue to the labourer, or in other words the labourer would also be the landowner or landlord: 'It matters not to the society whether [the proprietors] are the same or different from the actual labourers of the land' (Malthus, 1989b, vol. 1, pp. 81–82).[3] In situations where rent occurs but is not paid to someone other than the farmer, the farmers or cultivators 'would evidently unite the characters of landlords and farmers—a union by no means uncommon, but which does not alter in any degree the nature of rent' (Malthus, 1989b, vol. 1, p. 153).

Although Malthus believed in the necessary existence of a landlord class, his sympathies were not entirely with the landlords. He was critical of the 'imprudence' of landlords who, in order to obtain 'an exorbitant rent, offered by farmers bidding against each other', let their land to tenants who lack sufficient capital to cultivate and improve it in the best way: 'The consequence of this error is a certain loss of all that future source of rent to the landlord, and wealth to the country, which arises from the increase of produce'.[4] He also criticised landlords who prematurely raise rents following temporary rises in prices, thus preventing farmers from taking advantage of short

[2] In the second edition of the *Principles*, 'cunning' was altered to 'abilities'. See Malthus (1989b, vol. 2, p. 195, pp. 396–97) for comments on Malthus's use of 'strength' and 'cunning'.

[3] In the second edition of the *Principles*, 'labourers' was altered to 'cultivators'. The significance of this alteration is discussed in Malthus (1989b, vol. 2, p. 58, pp. 328–29).

[4] Malthus (1989b, I, p. 200); in the second edition of the *Principles*, 'from increase of produce' was changed to 'from the good farming of substantial tenants'.

periods of high prices to generate capital. In this respect, Malthus's concern was as much with the farmer as with the landlord. Malthus was also critical of attempts by landlords after the Napoleonic wars to adjust contracts, in favour of themselves at the expense of fund holders, for the effects on corn prices of changes in the value of the currency. He accused the landlords of 'endeavouring to lift themselves up by using unfair and dishonourable means to pull others down'.[5] However, although critical of landlords who charge excessive rents, Malthus did not approve of landlords who transfer too much rent to tenants: 'The effect of transferring all rents to tenants, would be merely the turning them into gentlemen' (Malthus, 1989b, vol. 1, pp. 201–02).[6] Malthus thought that such a transfer of rents would encourage farmers to cultivate their farms 'under the superintendence of careless and uninterested bailiffs, instead of the vigilant eye of a master' (Malthus, 1989b, vol. 1, p. 202). He must have assumed that lax superintendence did not occur in the landlord–farmer relationship, even with absentee landlords.

The conventional view that Malthus had a pro-landlord bias, and thought that landlords occupy a position of special importance in society, might have arisen from his statements linking the interests of landlords in the interests of the state. This was strongly asserted in the following three quotations from his *Grounds of an Opinion* (1815):

(1) 'We must not imagine that the interest of a body of men, so circumstanced as the landlords, can materially suffer without affecting the interests of the state' (Malthus, 1815b, p. 34).
(2) 'no loss, in proportion to its amount, affects the interests of the nation so deeply, and vitally, and is so difficult to recover, as the loss of agricultural capital and produce' (Malthus, 1815b, p. 7).
(3) the interests of landholders are 'more nearly and intimately connected with the prosperity of the state' than are the interests of any other class in society (Malthus, 1815b, p. 34).

The three following quotations show that this link between the interests of the landlords in the interests of the state was reiterated in the *Principles:*

(1) 'it seems scarcely possible to consider the interests of the landlord as separated from those of the state and people' (Malthus, 1989b, vol. 1, p. 205).[7]
(2) 'independently of the question of importations, the interest of the landlord is strictly and necessarily connected with that the state' (Malthus, 1989b, vol. 1, p. 217).
(3) 'it may be most safely asserted, that the interest of no other class in the state is so nearly and necessarily connected with its wealth and power, as the interest of the landlord' (Malthus, 1989b, vol. 1, p. 225).[8]

Taken in isolation from their context, such statements could be interpreted as an adulation and glorification of landlords, or at least as indicating a distinct element of landlord favouritism; but do they mean that he was biased in favour of landlords? As will be

[5] Malthus (1989b vol. 1, p. 81). See Hollander (1997, pp. 855–56) and Malthus (1986, vol. 7, pp. 220–21).
[6] In the second edition of the *Principles*, 'gentlemen' was altered to 'landlords'.
[7] In the second edition of the *Principles*, 'those of the state and people' was altered to 'the general interests of the society'. See Malthus (1989b, vol. 2, p. 194).
[8] In the second edition of the *Principles*, 'wealth and power' was altered to 'wealth, prosperity, and power', and 'landlord' was altered to 'landowner'.

shown below, he also regarded the interest of labourers and the interest of the middle classes (including merchants, manufacturers and those who provide personal services) as part of the interest of the state. He did not say that the interest of labourers is merely a part of the interest of society; he said it is the main part. Malthus's reason for saying that the interest of society is more closely connected with that of landlords than with other classes or sectors was not convincingly explained.[9]

Malthus's staunch support for the right or law of primogeniture must be another reason for the prevalence of the view that he was biased in favour of the upper classes. He argued that 'in the actual and peculiar state of this country, the abolition of the law of primogeniture would produce more evil than good' (Malthus, 1989b, vol. 1, p. 507). He believed that the British Constitution, and 'the liberties and privileges which have so long distinguished Englishmen' are 'mainly due to a landed aristocracy', and an aristocracy 'cannot certainly be supported in an effective state but by the law of primogeniture'. In his view, the British Constitution 'has practically given a better government, and more liberty to a greater mass of people for a longer time than any which history records' (Malthus, 1989b, vol. 1, p. 437). He attributed Britain's wealth to the existence of primogeniture and aristocracy: Britain 'in its actual state and under its actual laws, presents a picture of greater wealth, especially when compared with its natural resources, than any large territorial state of modern times' (Malthus, 1989b, vol. 1, p. 435).

His justification for the existence of an aristocracy was supported by a botanical metaphor; co-existence of the three classes of society—lower, middle and upper—is as natural and as essential as the roots, trunk and foliage of a tree. To do away with aristocracy would be as unnatural as depriving a tree of its foliage and fruit. His support for the existence of an aristocratic landed class also deployed the less-than-persuasive argument that they provide motives to merchants and master manufacturers to acquire comparable wealth (Malthus, 1989b, vol. 1, pp. 435–36).

However, he did not think that it would be necessary or desirable for the aristocracy to consist of a limited and unchanging number of members, or that the size of the landholdings of the aristocratic class should remain so large. He observed, and appeared to approve, that the immense landed properties that once prevailed had been in a great degree broken down, owing to the natural extinction of some families, the imprudence of some others and the growth of manufactures and commerce (Malthus, 1989b, vol. 1, p. 435).

The argument that Malthus was a lackey of the landlords must be severely weakened by his statements that 'it was by the growth of capital … that the pernicious power of landlords was destroyed', and 'the increase of capital … may be said to be the efficient cause of the emancipation of the great body of society from a dependence on the landlords'. In feudal times, landlords spent their incomes in maintaining a great number of idle followers, but with the growth of capital, the dependent followers became 'merchants, manufacturers, tradesmen, farmers, and independent labourers', which was a

[9] The question of the connection between the interest of the landlord and the interest of the state was discussed by Malthus in sections VIII (pp. 204–17) and IX (pp. 217–25) of chapter III, 'Of the rent of land', in the first edition of the *Principles*. His views on this topic were, to say the least, convoluted and disputable. In the second edition of the *Principles*, those two sections were subjected to considerable modifications and deletions. It would be beyond the scope of this paper to provide an adequate synthesis of the evolution of his thoughts on this question. Some tentative comments towards a synthesis are offered in Malthus (1989b, vol. 2, pp. 387–94).

change 'of prodigious advantage to the great body of society including the labouring classes' (Malthus, 1989a, vol. 2, p. 84). These are not words one would expect from a lackey. As Hollander (1997, p. 908) has said, this 'adds to the evidence that Malthus was not a sycophantic apologist of the landed class'.

On the basis of the available textual evidence, the idea that Malthus was a lackey of the landlords can only be described as a laughable travesty.

## 3. The lower classes

There are passages in Malthus's writings where his attitude to the poor and the lower classes seems to be harsh and unfeeling. The most memorable of these is perhaps the famous or infamous metaphor of 'nature's mighty feast', which appeared in the second edition of the *Essay*:

> A man who was born into a world already possessed, if he cannot get subsistence from his parents on whom he has a just demand, and if the society do not want his labour, has no claim of *right* to the smallest portion of food, and, in fact, has no business to be where he is. At nature's mighty feast there is no vacant cover for him. She tells him to be gone, and will quickly execute her own orders, if he do not work upon the compassion of some of her guests. If these guests get up and make room for him, other intruders immediately appear demanding the same favour. The report of a provision for all that come fills the hall with numerous claimants. The order and harmony of the feast is disturbed, the plenty that before reigned is changed into scarcity; and the happiness of the guests is destroyed by the spectacle of misery and dependence in every part of the hall, and by the clamorous importunity of those who are justly enraged at not finding the provision which they had been taught to expect. The guests learn too late their error, in counteracting those strict orders to all intruders, issued by the great mistress of the feast, who, wishing that all her guests should have plenty, and knowing that she could not provide for unlimited numbers, humanely refused to admit fresh comers when her table was already full. (Malthus, 1989a, vol. 2, pp. 127–28; omitted from later editions of the *Essay*)

Equally harsh is the 'lottery of life' metaphor that occurred in several places in Malthus's writings. For example, he said that if the 'labourer … in the lottery of human life has not drawn a prize of land', it by no means implies that he 'suffers any hardship or injustice in being obliged to give something in exchange for the use of what belongs to another'[10]; and 'It has appeared that, from the inevitable laws of human nature, some human beings will be exposed to want. These are the unhappy persons who in the great lottery of life have drawn a blank' (Malthus, 1989a, vol. 1, p. 325).

Malthus's view that the future prospects of the poor depends on their own prudence could be interpreted as an expression of genuine concern for their welfare, and as an attempt to increase their awareness of their own responsibilities, but it is more usually interpreted as being antipathetic to the poor, inasmuch as it in effect deprives many of an early marriage, or of any marriage, and does not recognise that their plight might at least be in part due to an unfair distribution of land and wealth.

Malthus's statements on the Poor Laws are sometimes taken, notably by William Cobbett, as evidence of an uncaring attitude towards the poor and the lower economic classes. In the first edition of the *Essay*, he advocated 'the total abolition of all the present parish-laws' (Malthus, [1798] 1926, p. 95). It has been argued that in this abolitionist attitude, he was influenced by, and was possibly plagiarising, the work of

[10] Malthus (1989b, vol. 1, p. 82); slightly altered in the second edition of the *Principles*.

Joseph Townsend [1786] 1971.[11] But in later writings, he presented his proposal as an improved administration of the actual laws, and as an ameliorative solution, rather than an abolition (Winch, 1987, p. 38, pp. 46–47).

This more moderate proposal has been described as 'a more shaded, even a guardedly optimistic view of what was possible for the labouring poor' and as 'a muted and conditional optimism on the prospects for the labouring poor'. The commonly held view that Malthus was deeply pessimistic regarding the prospects for the labouring poor is based on selective quotations, and misrepresents Malthus's view in his maturity (Wrigley, 1988, p. 824, 825, 829).

It should also be remembered that Malthus's opposition to the Poor Laws and his refusal to regard public relief for the poor as their right were based, at least in part, on his fear that it would cause an increase in the number of the poor, and so aggravate the total amount of poverty, but he also said that, if the number of the poor did not increase, 'I should be the first to propose that those who were actually in want should be most liberally relieved and they should receive it as a right and not as a bounty'. In other words, it seems that he was not opposed in principle to poor relief for those in want; his opposition was conditional on its causing *excessive* population growth—that is, growth of population beyond society's capacity of supporting the poor and their families in food, health and accommodation. If the resulting growth of population is not excessive, it seems that he would have had no objection to the Poor Laws on this account, although his writings indicate that he would have objected to the Poor Laws for other reasons, for example, they would cause lower wages for those not receiving poor relief, they might result in an interfering and oppressive attitude on the part of the parish administrators, they could generate an attitude of dependence and have other adverse psychological effects on the minds of the recipients, and place an increasing burden on the ratepayers, although he regarded the rate burden on the wealthy as 'a most subordinate consideration' (Malthus, 1807, p. 12; reprinted in Malthus, 1986, IV, p. 9).

In early writings, he expressed the fear that the Poor Laws would unduly encourage population, but after he had seen later census results, he acknowledged he had been mistaken in this regard. However, it is ironically possible that this acknowledgement of mistake was itself a mistake. In analysing economic problems in other contexts, he had placed great emphasis on the possibility of multiple and countervailing causes (see Pullen, 2016). It is strange therefore that in discussing the effect of the Poor Laws on population growth, he appears to have overlooked this possibility. If it is a fact that the Poor Laws at that time were not accompanied by significant increases in population, this fact does not refute the possibility that the Poor Laws did have a *tendency* to encourage population growth, but that this tendency had been counterbalanced by other forces discouraging population growth.

Malthus's opposition to the Poor Laws is probably the main reason—or at least one of the main reasons—for the prevalence in the secondary literature of the belief that he had little regard for the welfare of the lower economic classes and of the poor in particular. In the secondary literature, a simple equation seems to be assumed between

[11] The possible connection between Malthus and Townsend has been carefully analysed by Philip Lepenies (2014), as a referee has kindly noted. That analysis concentrates mainly on Malthus's ideas on the Poor laws in the first edition (1798) of his *Essay on Population.* In this present article, it is being argued that an extension of the analysis to include Malthus's later writings, especially in his *Principles of Political Economy*, shows that he later departed from a strict abolitionist stance.

support for the Poor Laws and support of the poor, and between opposition to the Poor Laws and neglect of the poor. Such an equation in Malthus's case would be supremely ironic. His writings leave us in no doubt that he was sincerely concerned with the state of the poor, but he was also convinced—perhaps rightly, perhaps wrongly—that in opposing the Poor Laws he was acting in the best interests of the poor. He believed that the Poor Laws were creating the poor they pretend to maintain, and that a radical change in the Poor Laws would be essential if the condition of the poor were ever to be improved. He was accused of being an enemy of the poor, but in Malthus's view, the real enemies of the poor were those who could not see how much harm the Poor Laws were doing to the poor.

Malthus's 1798 *Essay on Population* was as much concerned with the problem of the Poor Laws as with the population problem; the number of chapters dealing with the Poor laws in the *Essay* indicates the depth of his concern. It was written at a time when vigorous public debate was taking place in England on the increasing levels of poverty, and of the possibility of social unrest spreading to England, inspired by the French Revolution, and fostered by the revolutionary ideas of Condorcet and Godwin. In his *Essay* and other early works, his aim was to show the causes of poverty, but in his later works, such as his *Principles of Political Economy*, he turned his attention to the causes which can increase production and wealth.[12] He was attempting to show that his proposed economic reforms, particularly a reduction in the degree of inequality, and an increase of an affluent middle class generating an abundant level of effective demand, would obviate the need for Poor laws.

His choice of the phrase 'total abolition' was an unfortunate hyperbolic exaggeration of his intentions as compared to the reality of his proposal. He called it 'total abolition', but it would involve relief for those in extreme distress, for families with more than six children, for those suffering from hardships beyond their control, for emigrants, and was even extended to immigrants—a proposal that was not repeated in later editions, but was not one that he explicitly recanted.

As seen in his correspondence with Thomas Chalmers, he agreed that the provision of food and shelter was not the only way of helping the poor, and he firmly believed that by counselling and exhortation, the poor could be persuaded to do much to help themselves.

The movement in Malthus's position in relation to the Poor Laws could be seen as a reflection or logical implication of the movement in his position in relation to the principle of laissez-faire, which he strongly supported in his early writings, and where he regarded the Poor Laws as a major intervention by government in the free market.[13] But in his later writings, we see an increasing recognition of the need for exceptions to laissez-faire—for example, in his arguments in favour of the corn laws and the national debt—running in parallel with his acceptance of some measures of administrative reform of processes for ameliorating the condition of the poor.

Another statement that appears to be harsh and unfeeling, or even callous, towards the labouring classes is the following reference to the inevitability and implacability of the laws of supply and demand: 'It may naturally appear hard to the labouring classes

[12] 'The practical question then for our consideration is, what are the most immediate and effective stimulants to the continued creation and progress of wealth' (Malthus, 1989b, I, p. 347).

[13] Malthus's opposition in the *Essay on Population* to government intervention in the form of the Poor Laws has been seen as the onset of 'market fundamentalism' in political economy (Lepenies, 2014, p. 446).

that, of the vast mass of productions obtained from the land, the capital, and the labour of the country, so small a portion should individually fall to their share. But the division is at present determined, and must always in future be determined, by the inevitable laws of supply and demand'.[14] This is followed by a warning to the lower classes that, because of their lack of prudential restraint in marrying and child bearing, their poverty is self-inflicted; they are responsible for their own poverty, and the rich are in no way to be blamed: 'It is quite obvious, therefore, that the knowledge and prudence of the poor themselves, are absolutely the *only* means by which any general improvement in their condition can be effected. They are really the arbiters of their own destiny; and what others can do for them, is like the dust of the balance compared with what they can do for themselves' (Malthus, 1989b, vol. 1, p. 306).

However, the apparent harshness of these words is somewhat mitigated in the second edition of the *Principles* where 'any general improvement' is altered to 'any general and permanent improvement' (Malthus, 1989b, vol. 2, p. 231, 418), which could be interpreted as a recognition that some *temporary* improvements might be achieved by means other than prudential restraint. A similar view is expressed in the *Essay* where it is said that the 'constant effort of population to increase beyond the means of subsistence' will prevent 'any *great permanent* amelioration' in the condition of the poor (Malthus, 1989a, vol. 1, 20; italics added).

Malthus insisted that there will always be lower classes, and that not all members of the lower classes would become middle class: 'it is evident that all cannot be in the middle. Superior and inferior parts are, in the nature of things, absolutely necessary; and not only necessary, but strikingly beneficial' (Malthus, 1989a, vol. 2, 194). He was possibly referring here to his metaphor comparing society to a tree; the tree cannot survive without its roots, trunk and foliage. However, despite his belief in the inevitability and desirability of a hierarchical division of society into lower, middle and upper classes, he did not maintain that the membership and relative sizes of the different classes, and the width of the divisions between them, must remain constant.

Malthus envisioned the possibility that at least some of the lower classes would move up into the middle classes, leading to an adjustment of the relative proportions of lower and middle classes, and an augmentation of social happiness: 'If the lowest classes of society were thus diminished and the middle classes increased, each labourer might indulge a more rational hope of rising by diligence and exertion into a better station; the rewards of industry and virtue would be increased in number; human society would appear to consist of fewer blanks and more prizes; and the sum of social happiness would be evidently augmented'.[15]

The possibility of some members of the lower classes rising into the middle class was also discussed in the *Principles:* 'if the more intelligent among the working classes were raised into overseers of works, clerks of various kinds, and retail dealers… what an improved structure of society would this state of things present' (Malthus, 1989b, vol. 1, pp. 482–83). He cautioned that it would not be possible for those engaged in manual labour to secure much more leisure, but he envisioned that there could be a 'very great increase in the number of prizes which would then be attainable by

[14] Malthus (1989b, vol. 1, pp. 305–06); slightly altered in the second edition of the *Principles*. See Malthus (1989b, vol. 2, p. 231, 418).

[15] Malthus (1989a, vol. 2, pp. 194–95). In the third edition, 1806, of the *Essay*, 'human society' was changed to 'the lottery of human society'. In this instance, the 'lottery' of life is associated with optimistic outcomes.

industrious and intelligent exertion' and 'a great accession of comfort and happiness'. He acknowledged that it would not be easy to effect such a change, but insisted that if it were effected it would confer a 'prodigious benefit on the society' (Malthus, 1989b, vol. 1, p. 483).[16]

Compassion for the labouring classes is expressed in the statement: 'it is most desirable that the labouring classes should be well paid, for a much more important reason than any that can relate to wealth; namely, the happiness of the great mass of society' (Malthus, 1989b, vol. 1, p. 472). Further evidence of his concern for the welfare of the labouring classes can be seen in his comments on low wages and on the benefits of higher wages. He described 'the cry of the master manufacturers and merchants for low wages, to enable them to find a market for their exports' as 'that most distressing and disheartening of all cries to every man of humanity'. He added, 'If a country can only be rich by running a successful race for low wages, I should be disposed to say at once, perish such riches!' (Malthus, 1989b, vol. 1, pp. 235–36). His belief in the benefits of higher wages can be seen in his views on the advantage of an increase in wages compared with the advantage of a fall in the price of necessaries. He argued that, although their effects may appear similar, 'they may be, and in general are, most essentially different', because of their different effects on employment. The result of an increase in the 'wages of labour, both nominal and real' will be 'to ensure full employment to all the labouring classes, and to create a demand for further produce, and for the capital which is to obtain it. In short, it is the infallible sign of health and prosperity'. By contrast, a fall in the price of necessaries would result in a 'a permanent want of employment, and the most distressing poverty'.[17]

As would be expected from the frequent application of his doctrine of proportions, he also warned against excessive increases in wages: 'as a great increase of consumption among the working classes must greatly increase the cost of production, it must lower profits, and diminish or destroy the motive to accumulate, before agriculture, manufactures, and commerce have reached any considerable degree of prosperity' (Malthus, 1989b, vol. 1, p. 472); but he added that there is 'very little danger of a diminution of wealth from this cause. Owing to the principle of population, all the tendencies are the other way; and there is much more reason to fear that the working classes will consume too little for their own happiness, than that they will consume too much to allow of an adequate increase of wealth'.[18] His recognition of the need for a balance between consumption and profits is an illustration of his doctrine of proportions.

Although Malthus deplored attempts to reduce wages, he recognised that there is a tendency for wages to fall, and for the prospect for wages to be bleak: 'the physical wants of the labourer remain always the same; and though in the progress of society, from the increasing scarcity of provisions compared with labour, these wants are in

[16] These quoted statements from pages 482 and 483 in the first edition of the *Principles* were part of a long paragraph omitted from the second edition. The reason for the omission of the statements was probably not that he had changed his mind, but that they were repeating what he had already said, as he himself acknowledged—'As I have said before' (p. 483). The omissions are discussed in Malthus (1989b, vol. 2, p. 462).

[17] Malthus (1989b, vol. 1, p. 456). In the second edition of the *Principles*, 'wages of labour both nominal and real' was changed to 'money wages of labour'. A slightly different version of the same argument was given in Malthus (1989b, vol. 1, p. 289).

[18] Malthus (1989b, vol. 1, p. 473); omitted from the second edition of the *Principles*, as part of a block of three omitted paragraphs that express further working-class sympathies. Reasons for the omission of these paragraphs are discussed in Malthus (1989b, vol. 2, 459–60).

general less fully supplied, and the real wages of labour gradually fall; yet it is clear that there is a limit, and probably at no great distance, which cannot be passed'.[19]

Yet, while recognising and deploring the current misery of the lower classes, Malthus in the *Essay* held hopes of an improvement in their condition—provided they acquired the habit of regulating the supply of their labour in proportion to the demand: 'we might even venture to indulge a hope that at some future period the processes for abridging human labour, the progress of which has of late years been so rapid, might ultimately supply all the wants of the most wealthy society with less personal labour than at present; and if they did not diminish the severity of individual exertion, might, at least, diminish the number of those employed in severe toil' (Malthus, 1989a, vol. 2, p. 194). Another relatively optimistic forecast for the condition of the lower classes was expressed in the *Principles:* 'under the prevalence of habits of prudence, the whole of this vast mass might be nearly as happy as the individuals of the other two classes, and probably a greater number of them, though not a greater proportion of them, happier' (Malthus, 1989b, vol. 1, p. 423).

Despite his recognition of the difficulties involved, Malthus emphasised the importance of ameliorating the condition of the labouring classes: 'Those who live on the wages of labour, unproductive as well as productive,[20] receive and expend much the greatest part of the annual produce, pay a very considerable sum in taxes for the maintenance of the government, and form by far the largest portion of its physical force' (Malthus, 1989b, vol. 1, p. 423; vol. 2, p. 267).

The wages, health and happiness of the labouring classes are important because they are 'the most important portion' of society: 'In every point of view therefore, both in reference to the part of the annual produce which falls to their share, and the means of health and happiness which it may be presumed to communicate, those who live on the wages of labour must be considered as the most important portion of the society' (Malthus, 1989b, vol. 1, p. 423, 580). Similar comments on the importance of the labouring classes are found in his 1815 pamphlet, *Grounds of an Opinion*, where they are described as 'the foundation on which the whole fabric rests; and, from their numbers, unquestionably of the greatest weight, in any estimate of national happiness', adding that he would argue for free import of corn if he were convinced that it would permanently improve the condition of labour (Malthus, 1815b, p. 23); and in a letter to Nassau Senior on 31 March 1829, he wrote that the interests of the labouring classes 'ought to be considered as the main interests of society' (Senior, 1829, p. 86). Malthus's judgement that the interest of the labouring classes is the main interest of society contrasts starkly with a view that he was a lackey of the landowners.

Malthus's concern for the wages and employment of workers included concern for their working conditions. In a footnote in his pamphlet, *Enquiry into… Rent*, he said: 'To work really hard during twelve or fourteen hours in the day, for any length of time, is too much for a human being. Some intervals of ease are necessary to health and happiness: and the occasional abuse of such intervals is not valid argument against their use' (Malthus, 1815a, p. 49). This footnote was not carried forward into Chapter III, 'Of the Rent of Land', in the *Principles*, but a later chapter in the first edition of the

[19] Malthus (1989b, vol. 1, 298–99). In the second edition of the *Principles*, 'real wages' was altered to 'corn wages'.

[20] In the second edition of the *Principles*, 'unproductive as well as productive' was altered to 'including of course those engaged in personal services'.

*Principles* contained a similar expression of sympathy for reduced working hours, even if it meant a reduction in national wealth: 'I have always thought and felt that many among the labouring classes in this country work too hard for their health, happiness, and intellectual improvement; and if a greater degree of relaxation from severe toil could be given to them with a tolerably fair prospect of its being employed in innocent amusements and useful instruction, I should consider it as very cheaply purchased, by the sacrifice of a portion of the national wealth and populousness' (Malthus, 1989b, I, pp. 473–74).

However, these comments in the first edition of the *Principles* were accompanied by a rejection of legislative interference to achieve the goal of shorter working hours, because of his adherence to the creed of laissez-faire: 'to interfere generally with persons who are arrived at years of discretion in the command of the main property which they possess, namely their labour, would be an act of gross injustice'.[21]

He further argued that legislative interventions would not be feasible: 'I see no probability, or even possibility, of accomplishing this object… and the attempt to legislate directly in the teeth of one of the most general principles by which the business of society is carried on, namely, the principle of competition, must inevitably and necessarily fail' (Malthus, 1989b, I, p. 474).These remarks seem to have been intended not as an overall assessment of the possibility of improvement for labourers, but merely as an opinion on the possibility of improvement by legislative means.

The paragraphs containing these passages on pages 474 and 475 of the first edition of *Principles* were omitted from the second edition. It is not known whether their omission can be interpreted as a change of opinion by Malthus on legislative involvement in the hours of work of labour in general, or of the labour of children in particular; it is also not known whether these omissions were made by Malthus himself or by the editor of the posthumous second edition. The omission might possibly have been a reaction to the reports of the Select Committee of 1832 and the passing of the Factory Act of 1833, which regulated the hours of child labour and set up a full-time, salaried inspectorate to enforce the regulations. Did he become in later years more resigned to the need for legislative action to reduce the hours of work? (see Malthus, 1989b, vol. I, pp. 473–75; vol. II, p. 278, pp. 459–60).

## 4. The middle classes

A distinctive feature of Malthus's economics was the prominence given to the economic importance of the middle classes, a prominence rarely found to the same degree, if at all, among his contemporary economists.

Malthus's theories of growth and depression placed great emphasis on the role of effective demand, and he regarded the middle classes as the most favourable source of effective demand: 'There is nothing so favourable to effectual demand as a large proportion of the middle classes of society' (Malthus, 1989b, vol. 2, p. 261, pp. 444–45).

In Malthus's opinion, admirable human qualities are likely to be developed among the middle classes: 'It has been generally found that the middle parts of society are

[21] Malthus (1989b, I, p. 474); the reference to 'persons who are arrived at years of discretion' was presumably intended to mean adults, rather than children, and it leaves unanswered the question of whether in this context Malthus was opposing or not opposing legislative intervention to regulate the hours of work of children.

most favourable to virtuous and industrious habits, and to the growth all kinds of talents' (Malthus, 1989a, vol. 2, p. 194).

He thought that a social structure consisting of upper, lower and middle classes was not only necessary, but also beneficial, in providing incentives for human development: 'Superior and inferior parts are, in the nature of things, absolutely necessary; and not only necessary, but strikingly beneficial. If no man could hope to rise or fear to fall in society; if industry did not bring with it its reward, and indolence its punishment; we could not expect to see that animated activity in bettering our condition which now forms the master-spring of public prosperity' (Malthus, 1989a, vol. 2, p. 194). But he did not approve of the 'very considerable difference in the relative proportions of the upper, the middle and inferior parts' and believed that 'the happiness of the mass of human society' would be best founded on 'an increase in the relative proportions of the middle parts' (Malthus, 1989a, vol. 2, p. 194). He regretted any increase in 'the seperation [sic] of the higher and middle classes, as well as lower' (Letter to Ricardo, 27 November 1820, in Ricardo, 1951–73, vol. 8, p. 308) and commended measures that would reduce the gap between the classes.

He saw the existence and increase in the middle classes of society as necessary for the extensive development of natural resources, and for the promotion of manufacturing and mercantile industry: 'no instance has ever been known of the country which has pushed its natural resources to a great extent, with a small proportionate body of persons of property, however rich and luxurious they might be'; and 'A large body of manufacturers and merchants can only find a market for their commodities among a numerous class of consumers above the rank of mere workmen and labourers'.[22] The connection between the middle classes and 'the structure of society' was emphasised in a new paragraph added to the second edition of the *Principles*: 'the increase of the middle classes of society' results in 'a gradual improvement in the structure of the society', although he also recognised that it would be 'of slow and difficult accomplishment' (Malthus, 1989b, vol. 2, p. 267); and in another alteration in the second edition, in proposing remedies for improving economic conditions in Ireland, he looked forward to 'such an improvement in the structure of the whole society as would give both the lower and middle classes a greater will and power to purchase domestic manufactures and foreign commodities' (Malthus, 1989b, vol. 1, p. 401; vol. 2, p. 261, pp. 444–45).

In referring to the fact that 'the great proprietors of the middle ages' were 'bad cultivators' and 'deficient in a proper taste for manufactured products', he said it is necessary 'to create a greater number of demanders in the middle ranks of life who were able and willing to purchase the results of productive labour'.[23] He also envisaged and welcomed a situation in which a 'middle class of persons, living upon the profits of stock, rises into wealth and consequence'; from this it seems to follow that he thought the growth of a flourishing middle class would depend on a wider distribution of capital. However, his vision of a prosperous middle class was not identified as a capitalist class, or a class restricted to capitalists. As well as merchants and manufacturers, it would include 'wholesale dealers and retail dealers' (Malthus, 1989b, vol. 1, p. 35; vol. 2, p. 305) and, as noted above, tradesmen, farmers and independent labourers.

[22] Malthus (1989b, vol. 1, p. 431; vol. 2, p. 269). In the second edition of the *Principles*, 'above the rank of mere workmen and laborers' was altered to 'below the rank of the great proprietors of land'.

[23] Malthus (1989b, vol. 1, p. 429; vol. 2, p. 268). The words 'in the middle ranks of life' were added in the second edition of the *Principles*.

The link between effective demand and the middle class is reiterated in the statement: 'A large body of middle classes has been formed [in Britain] from commerce, manufactures, &c. who are likely to be more effective demanders than small proprietors of land' (Malthus, 1989b, vol. 1, p. 581).

A further argument for the existence of a strong middle class, though not stated explicitly, is implied in statements about the undesirability of a society divided into only two classes—rich and poor. For example, he said, agreeing with Adam Smith, that if the taste for personal services prevails instead of a taste for 'material conveniences and luxuries', society will be divided 'into two classes, the proprietors of land and their servants, the rich and the poor, one of which is in a state of abject dependance[sic] upon the other'.[24]

The importance attached by Malthus to the middle classes, along with the lower classes and higher classes, in the structure of society has been noted by some commentators—for example, Malthus 'had glimpsed the possibilities opened up by the growth of the middle classes' (Winch, 1996, p. 419)—but is not always recognised—for example, 'Malthus tended to work with a simple view of society as divided into two classes: a small group controlling enough wealth to escape the general misery, and the great mass of the laboring poor' (Bowler, 1976, p. 640). Several important quotations from Malthus on the importance of the middle classes are also given in Hollander (1997, p. 562, 583, pp. 590–91, 619). In this present article, an attempt is being made to supplement and reinforce such earlier recognitions, by presenting and analysing further textual evidence, and thus to convey the full force of Malthus's preoccupation with the role of the middle classes, in a way that does not appear to have been undertaken previously in the secondary literature.

In one of his arguments for not reducing the national debt, Malthus said that the national debt 'must necessarily create' an increase of the middle classes of society (Malthus, 1989b, vol. 1, p. 507). Ricardo objected, arguing that the national debt did not create the middle class, because the stock holders would have possessed the necessary funds before purchasing the stock, and were therefore already members of the middle class; furthermore, if the national debt is paid off, the size of the middle class remains unaffected, because the stock holders remain in possession of the same amount of capital. (Ricardo, 1951–73, vol. 2, pp. 444–45). However, Ricardo in this argument appears to have considered only the microeconomics of exchanges between stock holders and stock issuers, and not to have considered the macroeconomic or distributive implications of Malthus's argument. When Malthus said 'saving, in order to pay off the national debt… will leave us with a much less favourable distribution of wealth', he appears to have been referring to the idea that the national debt, by mobilising idle or redundant savings, promotes a wider distribution of wealth, and hence an increase in wealth.

The economic role given by Malthus to the middle classes reflects their political role. In his early unpublished pamphlet, 'The Crisis', he expressed confidence in the sense and reason of the middle classes, in conjunction with the country gentlemen, and their beneficial political influence. And in a footnote added to the second edition of the *Principles*, presumably in response to the Reform Bill of 1832, he appears to welcome

[24] Malthus (1989b, vol. 1, p. 35; vol. 2, p. 31, 305); the phrase 'the proprietors of land and their servants' was omitted from the second edition of the *Principles*.

the extension of the franchise to the middle classes, although regretting the timing and degree of the extension, describing it as 'a reform of a more sudden and extensive nature than prudence would have perhaps suggested', but expressing the belief, or perhaps the hope, that the reform will not 'tend to encourage turbulence and shake the security of property' (Malthus, 1989b, vol. 1, p. 438; vol. 2, p. 270, pp. 453–54). Malthus described the middle classes as 'that body on which the liberty, public spirit, and good government of every country, mainly depend', and he believed that a growth in the proportion of the middle classes would give 'a new and happier structure to society' (Malthus, 1814, p. 31). As Donald Winch has observed, by the time Malthus wrote the *Principles* the middle classes 'were allowed to be a major source of effective demand as well as a safeguard against executive tyranny', and Malthus's reactions to the Reform Bill show that he 'would hardly have been a firm supporter before the event … though he was content to endorse it afterwards' (Winch, 1983, in Collini et al., 1983, p. 84), and that he welcomed 'albeit timidly and retrospectively, the incorporation of the middle classes into the political nation' (Winch, 1996, p. 345).

This expression of moderate confidence in the political role of the middle classes could be contrasted with the view of John Stuart Mill: it is wrong to assume that the 'middle classes of this country possess the eminent qualities that are wanting in the higher. I am convinced that any public matter whatever, under the management of the middle classes, would be as grossly, if not more grossly mismanaged than public affairs are now' (cited in Checkland, 1959–60, p. 55.)

Malthus's insistence on the function of the middle classes can be seen as yet another application of his 'doctrine of proportions' (see Pullen, 1982)—the distinctive methodological principle which dominated his political economy, incorporating the policies of moderation, balance, the happy medium, the golden mean and the middle way, and which has been aptly epitomised in Donald Winch's phrase 'Malthus the moderate' (Winch, 1987, p. 76).

Malthus's views on the economic and political importance of a larger and more affluent middle class became an integral part of his total economic system, as discussed in Pullen (2016). When his arguments for an expanded middle class are combined with other aspects of his system—notably his insistence on the role of effective demand, his doctrine of proportions, his emphasis on the development of the service sector as a source of employment and as a stimulus to production, his concept of sectoral balance between agriculture, manufacturing, and the provision of non-material services—they become a powerful argument for greater, though not excessive, economic equality, and provide a valuable contribution to current debates on that issue, as well as adding a significant element to the logical coherence of Malthus's macroeconomic system, and hence to the rehabilitation of Malthus as macro economist.

## 5. Conclusion: the middle classes and the wider distribution of wealth

There are statements in Malthus's writings, as quoted above, which appear when taken in isolation to suggest that he advocated a society dominated by the higher economic classes and serviced by the lower economic classes. But the conclusion of this article is that, when taken in combination with his other statements on the structure of society, the balance of the textual evidence cannot sustain the view that Malthus was a sycophantic servant of the aristocracy, or a lackey of the landlords. Nor does the textual

evidence support the view that he was indifferent to the poverty and misery of the lower economic classes, or that he believed widespread poverty was inevitable. The balance of the textual evidence seems to show that he firmly supported the goal of a prosperous and expanding middle class, and an increase in the relative size and affluence of the middle classes, with greater opportunities for members of the lower social classes to move up into the middle classes.

In advocating a proportionate growth of the middle economic class, and thus by implication a decline in the combined proportionate size of the lower and higher economic classes—although not advocating or predicting a system of society in which there would be no classes other than the middle class—Malthus was in effect attempting to provide a rational justification for a wider distribution of wealth and greater economic equality. The policy he was suggesting was not absolute equality of property, but 'a nearer equalization of property' (Malthus, 1986, vol. 1, p. 121), and a reduction in the size of the differences in wealth between the social classes.

The emphasis given by Malthus to the importance of a wider distribution of income and a decrease in economic inequality has been discussed in Pullen (2001), where it is argued that Malthus regarded an adequate level of distribution as essential for the growth of effective demand and production, and in fact regarded distribution as a factor of production, along with land, labour, capital, enterprise, etc.—and in Pullen (2016), where it is argued that for Malthus a fundamental cause of poverty, or slow growth, or depression, or glut is the maldistribution of wealth, income and property.

Although advocating a greater degree of equality, Malthus was not a protagonist for equality as a general principle to be implemented without exception for all societies at all times. He had strongly rejected the systems of equality proposed by Godwin, Condorcet and Owen. He did not maintain that more equal societies will *always* be better societies or wealthier societies. His apparent purpose was to provide a theoretical solution to the practical problem of improving the current economic condition of Britain. In keeping with his 'doctrine of proportions', he sought to define the conditions that would generate an optimum balance between extreme equality and extreme inequality. In criticising Lord Lauderdale for deprecating saving and the accumulation of capital, and in criticising other writers for exaggerating their importance, Malthus said: 'This tendency to extremes is exactly what I consider as a great source of error in political economy'.[25] In Malthus's judgement, the remedy for the economic problem of Britain in the 1820s would require not only reforms in the improvidence of the working classes, but also a more equal distribution. The appropriate remedy for other societies at other times would need to be determined according to the circumstances of each case; the remedies in other cases might or might not require greater equalisation. Thus, for example, he argued that the optimum size of the number of persons engaged in the provision of personal services, as distinct from the production of material goods, 'should vary in different countries, and at different times, according to the powers of production', and should be relative to 'the natural resources of the soil, and the acquired tastes and habits of the people'.[26] He did not underestimate the difficulty of ascertaining the optimum level for the distribution of income and wealth, or for any

[25] Malthus (1989b, vol. 1, p. 352); altered in the second edition of the *Principles* to 'This tendency to extremes is one of the great sources of error in political economy, where so much depends upon proportions'.

[26] Malthus (1989b, vol. 1, pp. 489–90); 'acquired tastes and habits' was altered in the second edition of the *Principles* to 'skill, and acquired tastes'.

other economic variable, even admitting in the case of the optimum level of saving that 'the resources or political economy may not be able to ascertain it' (Malthus, 1989b, vol. 1, p. 9), but his admission of the difficulty of ascertaining it did not diminish his insistence on the importance of seeking to attain it. He appears to have been convinced that the benefits to be gained by society from a more equal distribution of wealth were such that it was imperative to engage in attempts to identify and approach that goal.

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