

Thomas Robert Malthus: An Essay on the Principle of Population: ACCOMPANYING HISTORICAL NOTES

DATES

Persons

Thomas Malthus 1766–1836,
David Hume 1711–1776,
Adam Smith 1723–1790,
William Goodwin 1756–1836,
Jean-Antoine-Nicholas Caritat, Marquis de Condorcet, 1743–1794,
William Pitt (Pitt the younger), 1759–1806, Prime Minister of England,
1783–1801 and 1804–1806.

Events

1789: the French Revolution,
1798: *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, published anonymously,
1803: An enlarged and revised edition of the *Essay*, published in Malthus's
own name (further editions 1806, 1807, 1817, 1826),
1795: The Speenhamland System.

NOTES

Condorcet. Jean-Antoine-Nicholas Caritat, Marquis de Condorcet was a French mathematician and Philosopher of a liberal persuasion. Condorcet held a seat in the French National Assembly and was a sometime supporter of the Jacobin faction. For speaking out against the Jacobin Leader Robespierre he was ordered to be arrested, but escaped. While in hiding, he wrote his book *Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progress de l'esprit humain* which figures prominently in the polemic of Malthus's *Essay*. Condorcet was eventually caught and put in prison where it is said, he was 'allowed' to commit suicide. His book was published in 1794 after his death. An English translation published in 1795 was an immediate bestseller. References to Condorcet can be found in Sharma.

Sharma, S. (1989), *Citizens*, Viking Penguin, London

Godwin. English political philosopher and man of letters. His *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793), which was originally intended as a defence of the French Revolution against Edmund Burke's attack on it, stands as a culminating statement of the eighteenth-century faith in man's innate goodness and his capacity to be guided by reason. Goodwin espoused an extreme libertarian, anarchist philosophy, which placed the blame for society's evils on the unjust institutions of marriage, property and government. Godwin is remembered also

as the husband of Mary Wollstonecraft, a major feminist thinker, and as the father of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelly, the author of *Frankenstein*.

Speenhamland. In 1795, the Berkshire Court of Quarter Sessions summoned Justices of the Peace, (i.e lay magistrates) and ‘several discreet persons’ to meet at Speenhamland for the purpose of rating husbandry wages. This meeting passed the famous resolution providing for the supplementing of wages out of the rates, on a certain fixed scale, according to the price of flour. The example of these seven clergymen and eleven squires was quickly followed in other counties; and Quarter Sessions used to have tables drawn up and printed, giving the justice’s scale, to be issued by the Clerk of Peace to every acting magistrate and to the churchwardens and oversees of every parish. See Hammond and Hammond for references.

The objection which may be raised against such a system of Poor Relief, and which was raised at the time, is that it tends to depress the wages of agricultural labourers as a whole. It was, in effect, proposing a subsidy to the landowners and farmers who were no longer obliged to pay wages necessary to sustain their workforce in times of dearth when the price of foodstuff was high and when, presumably, the profits from farming were also high. At the time when the Speenhamland system was introduced, farmers were profiting from the scarcities arising out of the Napoleonic wars which impeded imports of corn and other foodstuffs.

It is notable that in 1815, at the end of the Napoleonic wars, the farming interest benefited from the enactment of the Corn Laws which forbade the import of wheat when its price was under 80 shillings. This, in effect, preserved the conditions under which they had prospered throughout the period of war.

Hammond, J.L., and B. Hammond (1911), *The Village Labourer*, Longmans Green and Co. London, Reprinted 1995 , Alan Sutton Publishing, Stoud.

Pitt’s Poor Law Bill. In 1795 and 1796, there was some discussion in the House of Commons on the condition of agricultural labourers arising out of the proposal of Whitbread to enable magistrates to fix a minimum wage. Pitt made a long speech rejecting Whitbread’s proposals during the debate of the second reading of his bill, and he promised to introduce a bill of his own. Pitt’s bill died of general hostility almost at its birth. The occasion of its demise was a debate in Parliament in 1797 in which nobody but Pitt defended the Bill; and even Pitt defended it only with great diffidence. Poor Law Reform was thus abandoned. One of the most influential opponents of the Bill was Jeremy Bentham.

Amongst the proposals of of the Bill was a measure whereby every poor man with more than two children who was not self supporting, and every widow with more than one child, was to be entitled to a weekly allowance in respect

of each extra child. It was against these proposal that Malthus militated:

Mr Pitt's Poor bill has the appearance of being framed with benevolent intentions, and the clamour raised against it was in many respects ill-directed and unreasonable. But it must be confessed that it possesses in high degree the great and radical defect of all systems of the kind, that of tending to increase the population without increasing the means of its support, and thus to depress the condition of those that are not supported by the parish and consequently to create more poor.

It seems that Pitt, who knew little of country affairs, had, in the period following the rejection of Whitbead's proposals, begun to grapple with the issues in a spirit of good faith. However, by all accounts, his proposals where ill-considered and incoherent.

Pitt was a conservative—or a Tory, in a terminology of the time which has survived to this day—and, therefore, he was a natural ally of the landowning interest. It was no part of his usual political agenda to be defending the interests of the agrarian poor; and, faced with such strong opposition, including the opposition of liberals and social reformers, he was bound to abandon the cause.