

**ENLIGHTENMENT IN  
BRITAIN - THOMAS  
MALTHUS: ESSAY ON  
THE PRINCIPLE OF  
POPULATION**



# ENLIGHTENMENT IN BRITAIN - THOMAS MALTHUS: ESSAY ON THE PRINCIPLE OF POPULATION

## Description

Through an in-depth analysis of primary and secondary sources, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain how Thomas Malthus saw the ratio between population growth and food supplies, and whether or not he believed government programs designed to help the poor were in the end good for society.

## Subjects

European History  
World History  
Economics  
Sociology

## Grade Level

11-12

## Duration

90 minutes

## Tour Links

- Bath Abbey, Bath

## Essential Questions

- Who was Thomas Malthus? What are his contributions to economic theory?
- In his famous work, *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, how did Malthus see the ratio between population and food? Did he see measures designed to make people equal as helping or hurting society? What, if any, solution did he suggest on how to solve the problem of checking population growth?
- How did later philosophers and economists see Malthus and his writings?

# Academic Summary

## Primary Source

### Excerpts from Thomas Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, 1798

I think I may fairly make two postulata.

**First, That food is necessary to the existence of man.**

**Secondly, That the passion between the sexes is necessary, and will remain nearly in its present state.**

These two laws ever since we have had any knowledge of mankind, appear to have been fixed laws of our nature; and, as we have not hitherto seen any alteration in them, we have no right to conclude that they will ever cease to be what they now are, without an immediate act of power in that Being who first arranged the system of the universe; and for the advantage of his creatures, still executes, according to fixed laws, all its various operations.

I do not know that any writer has supposed that on this earth man will ultimately be able to live without food. But Mr. Godwin has conjectured that the passion between the sexes may in time be extinguished. As, however, he calls this part of his work, a deviation into the land of conjecture, I will not dwell longer upon it at present, than to say, that the best arguments for the perfectibility of man, are drawn from a contemplation of the great progress that he has already made from the savage state, and the difficulty of saying where he is to stop. But towards the extinction of the passion between the sexes, no progress whatever has hitherto been made. It appears to exist in as much force at present as it did two thousand, or four thousand years ago. There are individual exceptions now as there always have been. But, as these exceptions do not appear to increase in number, it would surely be a very unphilosophical mode of arguing, to infer merely from the existence of an exception, that the exception would, in time, become the rule, and the rule the exception. 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 show the immensity of the first power in comparison of the second.**

We will suppose the means of subsistence in any country just equal to the easy support of its inhabitants. The constant effort towards population, which is found to act even in the most vicious societies, increases the number of people before the means of subsistence are increased. The food therefore which before supported seven millions, must now be divided among seven millions and a half or eight millions.

The poor consequently must live much worse, and many of them be reduced to severe distress. The number of labourers also being above the proportion of the work in the market, the price of labour must tend toward a decrease; while the price of provisions would at the same time tend to rise. The labourer therefore must work harder to earn the same as he did before. During this season of distress, the discouragements to marriage, and the difficulty of rearing a family are so great, that population is at a stand. In the meantime the cheapness of labor, the plenty of laborers, and the necessity of an increased industry amongst them, encourage cultivators to employ more labor upon their land; to turn up fresh soil, and to manure and improve more completely what is already in tillage; till ultimately the means of subsistence become in the same proportion to the population as at the period from which we set out. The situation of the laborer being then again tolerably comfortable, the restraints to population are in some degree loosened; and the same retrograde and progressive movements with respect to happiness are repeated....

The theory, on which the truth of this position depends, appears to me so extremely clear; that I feel at a loss to conjecture what part of it can be denied. 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.

## **Secondary Summary**

Population control is and always has been a touchy subject, and yet it is also a topic of grave concern in modern industrialized western societies. Scientific advances such as improvements in crop rotation methods, improved plows and selective breeding of farm animals that were developed in the eighteenth century brought a sharp increase in food production. These in turn spurred a population increase in Western Europe, particularly Great Britain. The numbers were simple. In societies with more food, less people starved. More food also meant healthier people. Death rates went down. Infant survival rates went up. When this revolution happened in the British North American Colonies / United States, thousands moved west in search of new land and opportunities, a trend that would continue throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Great Britain was different. By 1800, as the population in Britain had swelled to an estimated 10 million.

Many people in Britain at the time were flooding into cities like London, Liverpool and Manchester. Enclosure acts and farm improvements drove up agricultural production, but had also driven down the need for as many hands to work the farm. In a pattern that continues to be repeated around the developing world, people left the farms for the cities looking for work. This excess urban population, mostly unskilled and poor, would later provide a readily available source of labor for the new factories of the industrial revolution. At the turn of the nineteenth century, however, the industrial revolution was still decades away, and the poor masses in British cities were causing quite a strain on governmental and private services and charities. As the century expanded, British cities like London became death traps with overcrowded and unsanitary slums.

In 1798, Thomas Malthus, a respected British economist and scholar of the time, wrote an influential paper called *An Essay on the Principle of Population*. The pamphlet tried to answer the questions of what causes poverty and how to control it. Malthus based his theories on two general assumptions. First that all humans need food to survive. Second that all humans have an innate need to procreate.

Malthus lived during the 18th century agricultural revolution, a time when food supplies were increasing exponentially, creating a surplus. Most economists and theorists of the time believed that the new agricultural breakthroughs would continue indefinitely and that the world would therefore continue to have a food surplus. This extra food allowed the population in England to increase. Malthus believed, however, that at some undetermined point in the future this increase in population would eventually outstrip the ability of the land to provide enough food. In the meantime, the "extra people" no longer needed in agricultural pursuits would inevitably congregate in city slums. In Malthus' view, therefore, extra food from the agricultural revolution ironically helped bring about mass poverty.

The second major concern of Malthus was his assumption that all humans innately need to procreate. Poor families, driven into the slums without any marketable skills, inevitably turned to each other for attachment and comfort. This in turn led to more pregnancies and births. More children survived because of the available extra food, thereby creating a vicious cycle of poverty and misery. Rather than providing more government relief to the poor, which he said only exacerbated the situation because it lowered the death rates and

encouraged higher birth rates, Malthus instead called on private religious organizations to promote “preventative checks” to lower the birth rate including the postponement of marriage, celibacy and even birth control. At the same time, he also recognized the need for “positive checks” that would raise the death rate including disease and war. Malthus believed if such checks were not instituted than populations would continue to grow exponentially while food supplies would eventually reach an upper limit. Once the two lines met on the theoretical graph and the population outstripped its food supply, starvation, disease, crime and misery would drive the population down. Without proactive measures to check the cycle, Malthus believed that humanity was doomed to a bleak future.

Malthus, writing in 1798, could have never imagined the changes that would take place over the succeeding two centuries. Improvements in agriculture have allowed farmers and ranchers to produce more and more food every year. Scientific advances have increased crop yields to a point where it seems that no one should starve. The industrial and commercial revolutions have provided jobs on a scale that classical economists like Malthus and his peers could not even fathom. The world’s population has exploded from an estimated 1 billion in 1800 to over 7 billion today, and since 1960 it has grown from 3 billion to over 7 billion. Many experts believe it will reach well over 9 billion by the middle of the 21st century. For now, food is holding out, but for how long? Was Malthus right? Through an in-depth analysis of primary and secondary sources, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain how Thomas Malthus saw the ratio between population growth and food supplies, and whether or not he believed government programs designed to help the poor were in the end good for society.

## Objectives

1. Students will identify, understand and be able to explain how Thomas Robert Malthus, in his famous paper *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798), saw the ratio between population growth and food supplies.
2. Students will identify, understand and be able to explain how Malthus viewed government programs designed to help the poor and whether or not he believed these programs were actually helping society.

# Procedures

## I. Anticipatory Set

- Writing / Question: Should the government help poor people? (5 min)
- Handouts – Copies of the primary sources and readings from the websites listed below (5 min)

## II. Body of Lesson

- Lecture / PPT – Thomas Malthus and An Essay on the *Principle of Population* (20 min)
- Video – Thomas Malthus and Population Growth (10 min)
- Independent Activity – Students read the primary sources and articles on Thomas Malthus and his Essay on Population, taking notes as appropriate. (20 min)
- Suggestion: Have the students read some of these articles for homework.
- Suggestion: AP / Advanced students should read the entire essay.
- Group Activity – Discussion on the Malthus and the Essay on Population. (20 min)

## III. Closure

- Exit Ticket / Assessment – Short Essay: Explain in detail how Thomas Malthus saw the ratio between population growth and food supplies, and whether or not he believed government programs designed to help the poor were in the end good for society.

## Extension

### **On tour: Abbey Church of Saint Peter and Saint Paul, Bath (commonly known as Bath Abbey)**

While on tour in the UK, students can visit Bath Abbey, where they can see for themselves Malthus's final resting place and a memorial to the man. Bath Abbey was founded as a Benedictine monastery in the 7th Century CE and is still an active Anglican church. It is one of the most visited sites in England. Guided tours of the church, including a stop at the Malthus memorial plaque, are available for a small fee, but visitors are welcome to roam the grounds themselves for free.

# Web Links

## Lesson Plan Websites

- [www.fordham.edu/Halsall/mod/1798malthus.asp](http://www.fordham.edu/Halsall/mod/1798malthus.asp)  
Thomas Malthus: Essay on Population (primary source) – excerpts from the essay from the Modern History Sourcebook at Fordham University
- [www.esp.org/books/malthus/population/malthus.pdf](http://www.esp.org/books/malthus/population/malthus.pdf)  
An Essay on the Principle of Population (primary source) – full text (125-page) version of the essay for AP / Advanced students.
- <http://desip.igc.org/malthus/>  
International Society of Malthus (website)
- [www.ditext.com/flew/malthus.html](http://www.ditext.com/flew/malthus.html)  
Introduction to Thomas Malthus' An Essay on the Principle of Population (academic paper) – this advanced 36-page paper by Antony Flew, retired Professor of Philosophy from the University of Reading (UK), is highly recommended for AP / Advanced students.
- [www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic\\_figures/malthus\\_thomas.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/malthus_thomas.shtml)  
Thomas Malthus (website) – from the BBC
- [www.faculty.rsu.edu/users/f/felwell/www/Theorists/Malthus/Index.htm](http://www.faculty.rsu.edu/users/f/felwell/www/Theorists/Malthus/Index.htm)  
Malthus (website) – from Frank Elwell, Dean of Liberal Arts and professor of Psychology, Sociology and Criminal Justice at Rovers State University (OK)
- [www.faculty.rsu.edu/~felwell/Theorists/Four/Presentations/MALTHUS.PPT](http://www.faculty.rsu.edu/~felwell/Theorists/Four/Presentations/MALTHUS.PPT)  
Malthus and An Essay on Population (PowerPoint) – from Frank Elwell, Dean of Liberal Arts and professor of Psychology, Sociology and Criminal Justice at Rovers State University (OK)
- [www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1](http://www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1)  
Reading Like a Historian: Primary Source Documents (video). Great 2-minute video on how to incorporate primary sources into the Common Core and history classes. From Shilpa Duvoor of Summit Preparatory Charter High School in Redwood City, CA. Highly recommended for teachers.
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=r1ywppAJ1xs](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r1ywppAJ1xs)  
Thomas Malthus and Population Growth (video) – from Khan Academy, this 10-minute video does a good job in explaining the basics behind Malthus and his theories, and is therefore appropriate for all classes.
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=0NdHfB2tFwM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0NdHfB2tFwM)  
Garrett Hardin on Malthus, Darwin and Natural Selection (video) – this 10-minute video is part of a much larger interview session with American sociologist and economist Garrett Hardin, and is highly recommended for all AP and Advanced students and classes.

## Background Information

- [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas\\_Robert\\_Malthus](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Robert_Malthus)  
Thomas Robert Malthus – Wikipedia article
- [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/An\\_Essay\\_on\\_the\\_Principle\\_of\\_Population](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/An_Essay_on_the_Principle_of_Population)  
An Essay on the Principle of Population – Wikipedia article
- [www.passports.com/group\\_leaders/on\\_the\\_road/the\\_united\\_kingdom/bath](http://www.passports.com/group_leaders/on_the_road/the_united_kingdom/bath)  
On the Road: Bath – from Passports Educational Travel
- [www.passports.com/group\\_leaders/on\\_the\\_road/the\\_united\\_kingdom/country\\_profile](http://www.passports.com/group_leaders/on_the_road/the_united_kingdom/country_profile)  
On the Road: Britain (country profile) – from Passports Educational Travel

## Key Terms

- Demographics
- Food Supplies
- Malthus
- Population



