



ORIGINAL MANUSCRIPT

## Presidential Address. Revise that Syllabus: Malthus and the Historical Imagination

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### Abstract

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The year 2023 is a good moment to be an historian. The connections between the past and the present have never felt so immediate and provocative: political, social, and even meteorological shifts have encouraged us to see the past from new perspectives. Pain is involved. It doesn't always feel good to recognize that writing history is an act of fabrication, one that Michel de Certeau likened to auto manufacturing. "Akin to a car produced by a factory," he wrote in 1974, "the historical study is bound to the complex of a specific and collective fabrication." In that time of similar historiographic transformation, the word "collective" had particular trenchancy, as social histories struggled to revise the field. Every book, every article, "together [represented] a result and a symptom of the group," and aimed to recognize the new model as valuable, as "the *product of a place*" and a particular moment. The collective aspect of scholarship today is not always evident, but it's proven once the metaphorical car reaches completion. A truly valuable work of history should work when put to a road test; its job is to take other historians to new places.<sup>1</sup>

Fabrication, place, and time are ideas central to the subject of my presentation—Thomas Robert Malthus—and my recent work on his *Essay on the Principle of Population*.<sup>2</sup> Malthus has stood as one of those immovable objects situated on the landscape of British history, an author who also made history by writing a particular version of it. Who could argue with his neat theory that human reproduction increases faster than the rate of food production, an argument he condensed into a syllogism with an intimidating aura of mathematics? Over the course of two centuries, historians have confronted his influence, often with the same reverence shown by his alma mater, Jesus College, Cambridge. The university website duly describes him as "the founder of population studies and one of the greatest English economists of the 19th century."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Michel de Certeau, "The Historiographical Operation," in *The Writing of History*, trans. Tom Conley (New York, 1988), 64.

<sup>2</sup> I have drawn sections of this article, both paraphrased and reproduced verbatim, from my book: Deborah Valenze, *The Invention of Scarcity: Malthus and the Margins of History* (New Haven, 2023). Passages will be cited accordingly.

<sup>3</sup> See <https://www.jesus.cam.ac.uk/thomas-robert-malthus>

Probably most members of the North American Conference on British Studies, at least those who teach surveys of Britain or Europe, cite Malthus in their lectures on industrialization. The age of capitalism and colonialism or simply the rise of the British state depend on a narrative about the press of numbers. Every historian accepts that Malthusian thinking, immortalized by Dickens in *Hard Times*, gave rise to the New Poor Law and a dominant belief that the Irish had caused their own demise in the Great Famine of 1845–52. We all have a vague sense that Malthus makes for a difficult moral argument about nineteenth-century Britain, but how seriously have we considered his impact on our thinking about the more general narrative of history?

Over the course of several decades of research, I became convinced that Malthus and his formula presented a much bigger problem for British historians. My own work in researching agricultural arrangements for a book on the history of milk helped me see a basic fact about Malthus's legendary theory: his argument was as much about food as it was about human reproduction, it rested on a very particular narrative of history, and it was patently fabricated (if we may press on with our metaphor) with faulty components. It was a car without an engine, because his notion of food was limited to a single commodity that functioned as an abstraction: grain. In fact, enough food existed to feed all of Britain when Malthus was writing and precisely what common people were eating was far different from what he assumed they must eat. Moreover, Malthus's grasp of population history was poor. Without census data, he got the population of Britain wrong by 56 percent, and came under serious criticism from the architect of the first census in 1801, who commented that Malthus was "not likely to dogmatize less because he knows less." In short, Malthus was recognized in his day as a polemicist and a bad historian.<sup>4</sup>

More problematic is the staying power of a formula that acts like malware, once inside a thinking process. As Alex de Waal aptly puts it, Malthus's argument is a "Zombie concept," something impossible to kill, once it escapes into the world at large. Food and survival, now, as in Malthus's time, is a matter of distribution, not supply, and distribution has a great deal to do with states and markets as well as land and labor. Today, as then, enough food exists in the world to feed the entire global population. On the side of reproduction, the rich may have as much sex and as many children as they like; the poor—as demonstrated by Tory policies today in Britain—have been told that two children are enough. Some people have a subconscious sense, thanks to Malthus, that populous countries are full of people who reproduce with abandon and can't pay their own way. Malthusians won the day back in 1800 and their impact on Western neoliberal economic theory is still evident.<sup>5</sup>

My own fascination with Malthus comes from a long history of being made to understand that his doomsday narrative served a purpose as an unassailable part of the intellectual universe. As an undergraduate at Harvard/Radcliffe, I read the *Essay* at least three times. Today, that kind of involvement with one eighteenth-century text is highly unlikely, but the fact that the *Essay* has mostly disappeared from reading lists may suggest that the questions Malthus stirred up can be assumed to be answered. My first acquaintance occurred in a freshman seminar on utopias. Taught as a vast survey of history and literature, we worked our way through Plato's *Republic* and More's *Utopia* all the way to Herbert Marcuse's *One Dimensional Man*, accounts of Paris in 1968, and Californian communes. The instructor, the late Simeon Wade, was stunningly well-read and easily the most brilliant person I had ever met in my eighteen years of life. Tragically, his own intellectual idealism drove him away from academe by the mid-1970s, though not before he himself went down in history as the planner of an LSD trip in Death Valley with Michel Foucault, an experience the famous

<sup>4</sup> E. A. Wrigley, "Malthus's Model of a Pre-Industrial Economy," in *Malthus Past and Present*, ed. J. Dupâquier, A. Fauve-Chamoux and E. Grebenik (London, 1983), 114; Rickman quoted in Robert J. Mayhew, *Malthus: The Life and Legacies of an Untimely Prophet* (Cambridge, MA, 2014), 131.

<sup>5</sup> Alex de Waal, *Mass Starvation: The History and Future of Famine* (Cambridge, 2018), 37–39.

philosopher named as one of the most important moments of his life.<sup>6</sup> In our lengthy syllabus, Wade deftly inserted Malthus between Condorcet and Robert Owen: there the *Essay* worked as a political correction, in case we entertained a belief that Enlightenment optimism flowed easily into generous socialist visions of the nineteenth century, because it certainly did not.

Confronted with this naysayer, T. R. Malthus, we ardent neophytes reached for summary conclusions. As I think back on those freshman insights, they resembled today's standard lines on Malthus. He was a clergyman and he was telling the poor to be sexually abstinent. He was familiar with Classical history, like his Cambridge contemporaries, and he was invoking familiar images of the decline and fall of civilization because poor people bred like rabbits. I don't recall being troubled by his dismissal of so much of humanity clamoring for "room and nourishment" in the face of nature's tendency to destroy, rather than give, though we must have had fresh recollection of what More's *Utopia* had proposed about food, shelter, and social justice. Something about Malthus's message and its conservative foundation registered a reminder for the undergraduate mind on scholarship support: be grateful for the institution at which you are a visitor. Scarcity was a hard fact of nature and society.

At that time, challenging Malthus wholesale would have been out of the question (or not worth the fight). In the 1970s and even the 1980s, social history "from below" had only just begun to make inroads into the academy and was suspect for being grounded in something called "ideology," while mainstream accounts were seen as impartial truth. For me, another inhibition was operating in a subconscious way: I was a first-generation student at Harvard/Radcliffe in 1971, and scarcity and exclusion were the first lessons learned upon arrival, principles understood by everyone around me, from the masters of the residential halls to the security guards at the entrances of the libraries. Malthus seemed to speak for what was known as the Establishment, a shadowy monolith that new college students needed to approach with caution. The theorist on population served as a powerful man on the inside, telling those who were on the outside that they were too numerous and too clamorous. These sorts of checks on intellectual autonomy seemed ubiquitous to a nervous and insecure student of history. There was too much I didn't know yet. My better judgment said to accept the message and watch and wait for a stone to pick up and throw later in my intellectual training.

This distinction between insiders and outsiders is relevant to how I decided to reread Malthus a half-century later. The *Essay* had, and still has, tremendous import as a cornerstone of liberal economic theory, but also as a psychological test: as a reader, where do you allocate the most intellectual energy in order to resist? Anyone who doesn't know their Herodotus may feel uneasy about saying where population history is headed. The text points backwards and forwards to the structures of society—hierarchical or atomistic—and most important, to the categorization of people. Oddly, the *Essay* never mentions the vast nation of rural dwellers and actual forms of food-growing, which should throw up a red flag for a reader of a text produced in 1798. This certainly caught my eye as an historian of the dairy and food history. What about eighteenth-century agricultural improvement, the precursor of industrialization? The familiar textbook approach usually reveals the agricultural revolution as though it were inevitable. Most history courses hasten through the first half of the nineteenth century without mentioning the production of food again, as though Malthus's arguments and the reforms it implied (free market capitalism and punitive measures for those who fell short of wage discipline) were inevitabilities, too. The age-old story of rural declension—enclosures, migration, Captain Swing, consolidation of landholding, and homogenization of rural life—is meant to give way to an urban and progressive narrative in the nineteenth century. Malthus's depiction of those outside this very march of progress seemed to point to a meaningful hiatus.

In fact, Malthus fully intended to create a narrow gauge for his argument about food supplies for a specific reason: grain agriculture (in a word, cultivation) and the social

<sup>6</sup> Simeon Wade, *Foucault in California [A True Story—Wherein the Great French Philosopher Drops Acid in the Valley of Death]* with a Foreword by Heather Dundas (Berkeley, CA, 2019).

arrangements it required represented incontestable measures of the reward of British civilization. For Malthus, grain agriculture was destined by history, informed by natural philosophy, and rooted in a particular historical narrative of interaction with the natural environment. Rhetorical strategy constituted his strongest card, not a surprising one for an unpublished writer aiming to get into print. Malthus leaned heavily on a narrative strategy derived from the Classics and a dramatic orientation emulating that of Edward Gibbon's recently published *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. He drew the phrase "the struggle for existence" directly from Gibbon, who also provided him with another important motto: "The measure of population is regulated by the means of subsistence." Violent imagery employed in the *Essay* resembles that of *Decline and Fall* while not-so-subtly conjuring up support for the side of civilization.<sup>7</sup>

Within the pages of Gibbon, Malthus found a useful vehicle for his story of hard-won achievement in producing sustenance: the stark dichotomy between an eighteenth-century notion of civilization and a barbaric struggle for existence. For Gibbon, as well as Malthus, settled agriculture served as the foundation of modern historical time; until that condition was established, human collectivities exhibited all sorts of failures, whether technological or moral. As Gibbon had expressed it, "Modern nations are fixed and permanent societies ... bound to their native soil by arts and agriculture." Cultivation of the land was the means of civilizing the roaming hunter, depicted as a "lazy warrior" or "indolent" savage who was driven by bodily urges.<sup>8</sup> Malthus underscored the point in his own words: "The natural state of man" was far from noble; it could be characterized by a universal tendency toward "a state of sloth."<sup>9</sup>

Recent scholars studying the Global Middle Ages have exposed a pervasive "origin story for the development of civilization" that depicts the struggle between settled agriculture and the nomadic "other." The "Mesopotamian model" of the rise of cities depended on this same dichotomy. Implicit in the standard account was a relationship of power: the civilizational epicenter, the city, overshadowed the hinterlands, where unruly outsiders roamed and resisted law, taxes, and improvement. There is no mystery about who wins this struggle. For Europeans, this narrative carries the aura of what the authors of an important *Past & Present* article called a "just so" story: no other cast of players or sequence of events seems imaginable. For marginal peoples, it is the story of subverted existence and stymied evolution.<sup>10</sup>

Over time, from the perspective of the centers of political power in Europe, existence outside this intricate fiscal and market apparatus appeared increasingly subversive. Transitional periods like the seventeenth century offered abundant proof. A growing chasm between rich and poor fueled daily conflicts and sporadic rebellions from the late sixteenth century through the seventeenth century. In Fernand Braudel's memorable account of the Mediterranean, "disturbances broke out regularly, annually, daily even, like mere traffic accidents which no one any longer thought worth attention." Vagrancy and banditry became the rule rather than the exception. Disparate data on rebellions categorized as both political and broadly socioeconomic showed that economic downturn exposed breaches in social trust that had been maintained only with concerted effort under more sanguine conditions.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Valenze, *Invention of Scarcity*, 123, 125; Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (Basel, 1787–89), 9: ch. 50, 91–92, quoted in Valenze, *Invention of Scarcity*, 97.

<sup>8</sup> Gibbon, *Decline and Fall*, 1: ch. 9, 293–94.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Robert Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population: The 1803 Edition*, ed. Shannon C. Stimson (New Haven, 2018), 60.

<sup>10</sup> Conrad Leyser, Naomi Standen and Stephanie Wynne-Jones, "Settlement, Landscape, and Narrative: What Really Happened in History," *Past and Present* 238, supplement 13 (2018): 232–60.

<sup>11</sup> Valenze, *Invention of Scarcity*, 62; R. I. Moore, *The First European Revolution, c. 970–1215* (Oxford, 2000), 39–41; Fernand Braudel, *The Structures of Everyday Life: The Limits of the Possible*, trans. Siân Reynolds (New York, 1981), 133; Sebastien Mercier, *Tableau de Paris* (Amsterdam, 1781–88), cited in Braudel, *Structures of Everyday Life*, 133.

With the spread of Enlightenment ideas in the eighteenth century, the spirit of perfectibility promised to solve the problem of the rural margins peacefully: the diffusion of knowledge and simple technology would eventually carry the barbaric “other” forward into the future. Everyone benefited, according to Scottish writers, including women, who were spared the brutish labor of toiling on behalf of mere sustenance. Even without formal knowledge of Mesopotamia, eighteenth-century historians offered the lineaments of agricultural modernization learned through stadial history. According to stadial theory, as described by Adam Smith, the history of humanity had progressed through four stages related to modes of production: the age of hunting and gathering; the age of pastoralism, featuring herds and flocks; the age of cultivated agriculture; and finally, the age of commerce, marked by a division of labor. Human exceptionalism thus became locked in an embrace with a particular trajectory of urban–rural relations and food production.<sup>12</sup>

In reality, the makers of agricultural progress were particular people with access to land and power over labor; in the European context, many were inhabitants of the Low Countries and England, who possessed sufficient capital and land to make a go of modernizing their farming techniques. Under the banner of improvement in this grand scheme of history, students of the past were (and still are) encouraged to identify with those who vanquished nature without giving too much attention to the terms of their own alliance with the improvers. The benefits of progress came along with a contract presented as rational; pleasing stories about bonding with nature and animals needed to be set aside as childish. In a sense, this is how Malthus encouraged his readers to think.

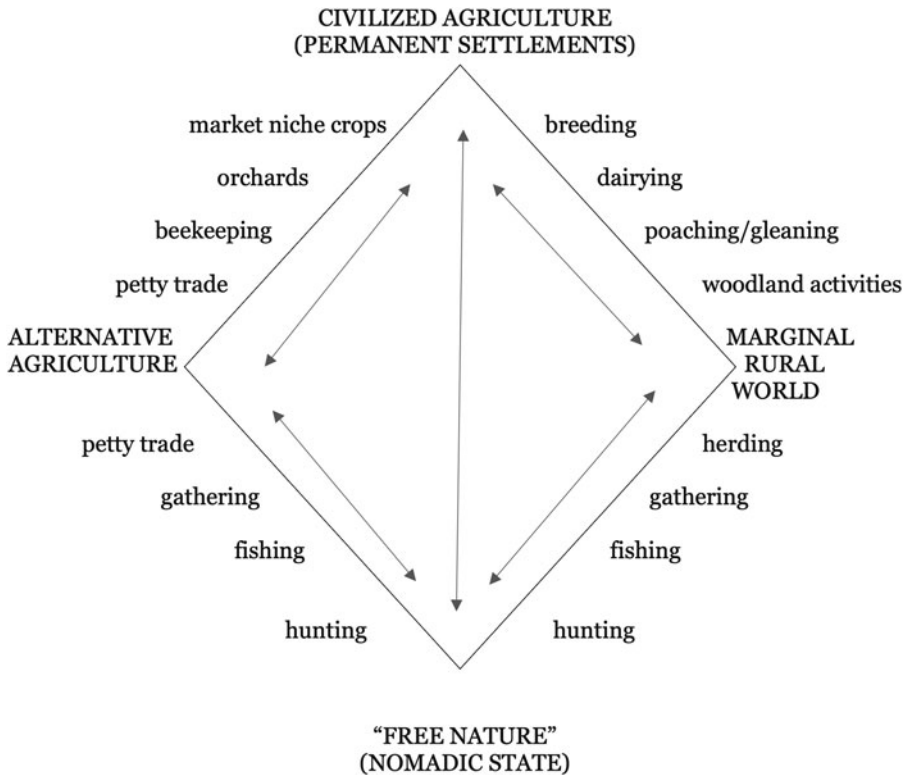
The continuing force of this learned pathway of history is so strong that we can hardly see our way out of the ramparts that enclose us on all sides. And here is where metaphor and imagination can help us trace a different route through the map of agricultural history. By examining a wider array of elements in historical context, we can begin to discern competing lines of reasoning that were fighting for survival during the second half of the eighteenth century. A visual map of value, illustrated in the accompanying diagram (Figure 1), will help us to see vectors of power established between food procurement and the forces of nature; a simple binary between nomad and settler does not do justice to the complexity of relationships involved in extracting food from the earth’s resources. In this initial attempt, the British model remains central to this schematized map. Ultimately, we must try to theorize a wide variety of settings in order to accommodate the spaces and methods of producers of food outside Britain and Europe.<sup>13</sup>

Our diagram of Malthusian reasoning ultimately points to a model of connected social and political formations within what he and many historians well into the twentieth century regarded as civilizational development. This emphasis will show that within modernizing European culture, the passage of time conferred benefits upon certain crops and means of production, while marginalizing or even negating others. At the time of the *Essay on Population*, the privileged place given to sedentary grain cultivation validated changes occurring in the landscape of Britain and areas of western Europe. (In teaching, the term “enclosures” must stand in for a multitude of changes in the land.) A print culture of improvement, which proliferated during the European Enlightenment, advertised the material rewards of grain cultivation. Our diagram can simulate many different connections between food production and historical change; I will touch upon just a few that are relevant to Malthus’s *Essay on Population*.

At the top corner of the diagram lies sedentary grain agriculture, the high achievement of civilization. The most relevant aspect of this activity, the permanent settlement, could as

<sup>12</sup> The following pages are drawn from Valenze, *Invention of Scarcity*, ch. 3, “Rewriting the Agricultural Revolution: Unnatural Selection in the Malthusian Origin Story,” 55–83.

<sup>13</sup> For an explanation of the usefulness of semiotic squares, see James Clifford, “On Collecting Art and Culture,” in *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, MA, 1988), 226; John J. Corso, “What Does Greimas’s Semiotic Square Really Do?,” *Mosaic* 47, no. 1 (2014): 69–89, at 70.



**Figure 1.** On the right side of our diamond, pathways to the historically marginal rural world hosted their own, distinct claims to land, plants, and animals. The fact that Malthus, on the other hand, failed to recognize such approaches to land and food should be underscored. On the left side of the diamond, the operations of alternative agriculture suggest a more entangled relationship with civilized cultivation and its markets.

easily stand for contemporary Britain as for ancient society. In fact, in Malthus’s time, this was an accurate representation of where British and European agricultural developments had been heading for several centuries. Robert Bartlett’s account of the making of the European continent underscored this “highly particular form of land use” involving “a more densely populated monoculture.” Europeans recognized wheat as “the aristocrat of cereal grains.” Barley and rye, suited to different climatic conditions and diets, were designated as lesser relatives of wheat, and these also expanded across low-lying plains and arable regions in Europe and Britain.<sup>14</sup>

Opposite this dominant system of settled agriculture, at the bottom corner of our diamond, lies the realm of “free nature.” A play on words helps us locate our thinking along a line of historical progression: in the beginning, access to nature and its fruits was allegedly free and, according to the Edenic state suggested by the Book of Genesis, obtained without payment of the sweat of the brow. But exactly what constituted “nature” or the true beginning of natural or agricultural history was largely conjectural in the late eighteenth century. This corner of our diamond, then, can operate as a site of imaginative thinking. According to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, we might imagine a vast reservoir of human and natural resources,

<sup>14</sup> Robert Bartlett, *The Making of Europe: Conquest, Colonization and Cultural Change, 950–1350* (Princeton, 1993), 152. Final quote from Robert Bartlett, “Heartland and Border: The Mental and Physical Geography of Medieval Europe,” in *Power and Identity in the Middle Ages: Essays in Memory of Rees Davies*, ed. Huw Pryce and John Watts (Oxford, 2007), 37. The modernizing narrative of agriculture is an accurate representation of what appears in typical survey texts today.



unspoiled by the luxurious tastes of civilization. If barbarians inhabited this corner, ideally, they were depicted as noble savages, uncorrupted by worldly materialism and vanity. In more realistic terms, accounts of the superabundance of fish in the New World, for example, constituted the empirical evidence for what Europeans labeled as “free.” In travel literature of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, resources available across the globe provided fuel for the imagination of stadial historians.

The pastoral nomad, often substituting for the barbarian in narratives of ancient history, provided a perfect foil for the negative forces at work on this end of a historical continuum. He might convey the fallen state of man or, as the opposite of civilized man, he wandered the earth, lawless and idle in the sense of being untethered to systematic production. He and his animals subsisted outside the bounds of domestication. Sedentarists were Aristotelian creators, while nomads were opportunistic parasites. Sedentarists decoded the secrets of nature and released its bounty for the benefit of human flourishing; nomads simply merged with nature and siphoned off its by-products.

The significance of this bifurcation of society cannot be overemphasized. It is here that the claimants of civilization based their entitlement to land and power over the “other,” cast as a bestial scrounger dependent on nature’s whim. In this way, the spatial organization of the earth’s resources extended its power into political and social organization, dividing up humanity into a distinctive hierarchy. Sedentarists used the justification of cultivation in order to overpower, displace, and sometimes enslave those who had a different relationship to their environment. Justifying their claims through the guarantee of abundance, cultivators marshalled resources and assumed their management (see [Figure 2](#)). Based ostensibly on the fear of having too little to survive, their claims translated subsequently into the power to extend that fear to their subjects, whom they viewed as too inattentive, ignorant, or lazy to labor unless goaded by hunger.

No matter what characteristics we attribute to free or cultivated nature, we need to recognize that diffuse activities of food procurement, like natural forces, don’t actually know or see the way to logical progression. Efforts to grow food are interactive, as elements of the environment respond over time to human involvement. The efforts of cultivators must adapt to subsequent challenges as they experience successes or confront resistances that inevitably shape their pathways along irregular rather than straight lines. Our search for a complex, diverse agricultural past should make us suspicious, then, of the straight vertical arrow upward.

Our diagram can reconstitute multiple paths to the present by releasing nature from what is actually a highly constrained—some would say vanquished—historical path. Malthus notoriously presented nature as a “great mistress” of a “mighty feast,” who was strict, exclusive, and merciless in managing limited room at a metaphorical table. His choice of imagery signaled a domestic space and, indeed, he was positioning food production behind domestication in a metaphorical as well as a social sense. We need to step out of Malthus’s constrained great hall and imagine other pathways of domestication, including other forms of social organization. Now we can fully situate the reasoning behind the limited discussion of diet found in the pages of Malthus’s *Essay*. Alternative ways of thinking about food production and social organization can be found along the adjacent sides of our diamond. By dispensing with the Aristotelian notion of human mastery of nature, we can be better positioned to see human relationships embedded within a variety of environments of the past, replete with animals and plants supplying multiple sources of food. These might be fishing villages, forested areas, mountainous terrain, or tidal bays. Rather than aiding a progression toward a particular agricultural destiny, historical actors of many kinds appear within a spectrum of ways of working alongside nature, ranging from borrowing and siphoning to negotiating and collaborating. Not all actors are human: through multispecies ethnography, we can bring to the fore a variety of entangled relationships with animals, fish, plants, and marine life, which a modernizing model regards as separate or marginal to mainstream economic life.

The result is a wholesale rearrangement of the questions we ask about sustenance and rural development. How, for example, can we imagine “a multitude of organisms’ livelihoods



**Figure 2.** *The Plan of Civilization*, unknown artist, ca. 1800. The painting represents an idealized sense of the willing subordination of the Creeks, who were experienced cultivators, to the directives of people of European descent. Foods of the New World, depicted on the right, introduce a certain irony to the narrative taking place at the center of the painting. (Oil on canvas, 35 7/8 X 49 7/8 inches. Purchased by the Greenville County Museum of Art, South Carolina, with funds from the Museum Association's 1990 and 1991 Collectors Groups and the 1989, 1990, and 1991 Museum Antiques Shows, sponsored by Elliott, Davis & Company, CPAs.)

[that] shape and [in turn become] shaped by political, economic, and cultural forces[?]" In order to succeed in this new manner of inquiry, we would need to undo the process of inversion that has "othered" rural inhabitants and Indigenous peoples, as well as animals and plants—revising the "nature and I are two" position—and imagine a different array of simultaneous activities. What if the narrative of agricultural revolution had been interrupted by myriad alternative story lines? This is the act of "resuscitation" that the semiotic diamond is supposed to make possible.<sup>15</sup>

It turns out that our historical accounts have been too sparsely populated to provide a full understanding of "what happened in history," to borrow Gordon Childe's memorable title. Our diagram should help us turn our attention away from the dominant upward arrow representing the classic account of agricultural progress in the center of the diamond so that we can envision multiple paths to the present. "The paradigm of an 'agricultural revolution' that most of us learned in our introductory ... classes can now be seen to be at odds with much of what archeology has revealed," anthropologist Dorian Q. Fuller asserted a decade ago. The process in fact took centuries to occur and was "highly contingent on particular cultural practices that need not have unfolded in a similar way for each domestication" across the globe. To fully comprehend selected pathways, we need "to instead consider in more detail

<sup>15</sup> S. Eben Kirksey and Stefan Helmreich, "The Emergence of Multispecies Ethnography," *Cultural Anthropology* 25, no. 4 (2010): 545–76, at 545; Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (Ithaca, NY, 1981), quoted in Corso, "What Does Greimas's Semiotic Square Really Do?," 77.



the interplay of particular human practices as strategic choices in subsistence and how these were entangled” with specific changes in plant and animal life and the environment.<sup>16</sup>

I would like to complete my discussion of historical imagination by turning to two women, one an historian, the other, an economist, whose ideas about agriculture comprise a wholesale revision of Malthusian thinking. I’ve employed the paradigm of alternative agriculture in my account by drawing on the work of Joan Thirsk, who did more than any other individual to reconstruct the rural past in England and Wales.<sup>17</sup> Thirsk uncovered a multitude of alternative crops and methods in the rural record and she was able to set them in their historical contexts in relation to the market in grain. She found that an experimental tendency became visible when an abundant supply of grain (and a drop in price) drove a search for alternative ways of making a profit from the land. The pattern began as early as the fifteenth century, when “expanding cow-dairies” offered greater income than sheep, and can be seen operating as late as the 1870s, when a worldwide agricultural depression forced some farms to use fruit orchards as a means of surviving. New crops and intensive gardening methods enabled people to realize profits, what Thirsk described as “life-saving value in whole villages.” Such transitions were and remain hard to track; at times, they might appear only in references to “small things” accomplished by women, easily dismissed as insignificant unless one is attuned to the tension between mainstream agriculture and its alternatives.<sup>18</sup>

Ester Boserup deployed a similar alertness as an independent Western researcher in a decolonizing world. During the 1950s and 1960s, while Western policy experts fastened their attention on the connection between food and population growth, Boserup found herself disagreeing with many widely held assumptions. Most Western researchers held the view that the potential for agricultural growth in postcolonial settings had been exhausted and that population control—a signifier for limited reproduction of Indigenous populations—was too slow in the Global South to prevent massive starvation. Boserup saw that more intensive strategies emerged from precisely the situations where increased numbers of inhabitants made them possible. She observed that in many cases, more people meant a greater per capita food supply.<sup>19</sup>

As Boserup recalled years later, she chose to swim against “the Malthusian currents,” which were “considered a sort of basic truth” at the time. It was clear to her that problems lay in the framework of analysis, which began with Malthus himself. “Malthus knew nothing about agriculture,” she matter-of-factly pointed out in an interview in the early 1990s, “people always died from hunger, and so on. That’s why he only grasped a small corner of the total picture and blew it up.” Her first book, *The Conditions of Agricultural Growth: The Economics of Agrarian Change Under Population Pressure* (1965), demonstrated how the familiar assumptions of Malthus were backward in their logic. Increased population did not follow a rise in agricultural productivity; on the contrary, an increase in numbers of people usually led to greater rural productivity. Boserup methodically examined the varied circumstances in which human ingenuity evolved in relation to the environment and the available workforce. As a result of painstaking study, her conclusions were complex. “It is incorrect to say that I turned Malthus on his head,” she noted, not out of modesty, but with a wish for accuracy. “That would have been just another simplification.”<sup>20</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Dorian Q. Fuller, “An Emerging Paradigm Shift in the Origins of Agriculture,” *General Anthropology* 17, no. 2 (2010): 1–12, at 10.

<sup>17</sup> Joan Thirsk, CBE (1922–2013) was one of the founding members of *Past & Present* and the general editor of the eight-volume *Agrarian History of England and Wales* (1972–).

<sup>18</sup> Joan Thirsk, *Alternative Agriculture: A History from the Black Death to the Present Day* (Oxford, 1997), 65, 68–71, 195; Steven King and Alannah Tomkins, eds., *The Poor in England: An Economy of Makeshifts* (Manchester, 2003); John Emrys Morgan, “Poverty and Environment in Early Modern England,” in *The Routledge History of Poverty, c. 1450–1800*, ed. David Hitchcock and Julia McClure (London, 2020), 79–99.

<sup>19</sup> Ester Boserup, *My Professional Life and Publications, 1929–1998* (Copenhagen, 1999), 15–27. A fuller discussion of Boserup and these themes can be found in Valenze, *Invention of Scarcity*, ch. 7, “Malthus and the Margins.”

<sup>20</sup> Boserup provided candid assessments in a series of interviews in the early 1990s. Jon Mathieu, “Finding Out Is My Life: Conversations with Ester Boserup in the 1990s,” in *Ester Boserup’s Legacy on Sustainability: Orientations for*

Trained in comparative agrarian technology, Boserup focused on very specific methods of land use particular to each location. By looking at “the whole group of activities that are needed in a given system of agriculture,” she paid attention to the role of existing local knowledge of the terrain in determining land use. She was not put off by digging sticks and ash fertilization. Greater intensity of cultivation, either by more frequent cropping or by techniques that fortified the environment, proved capable of increasing output in ways unanticipated by classical economists. By bringing into the picture “fallow land, pasture, hunting ground,” and other pursuits besides cultivation, Boserup reintegrated the types of customary subsistence work that had been eliminated by modern agricultural methods.<sup>21</sup>

Judgments drawn from the European agricultural revolution, as well as the Enlightenment’s stadial historians, appeared awkwardly irrelevant in environmental settings far from Scotland and England. Boserup respected the fact that every productive decision made by local inhabitants sprang from knowledge gained through generations of experience with the land and its idiosyncrasies. Highly different climatic conditions and terrain demanded their own custom-made arrangements, an approach later recognized as sustainable and beneficial to the global environment. Finally, all economic activities within a locale required careful consideration as integral contributions to the overall success of a village economy. Not surprisingly, Boserup observed and credited the myriad productive capacities of women in postcolonial spaces. Her next book would present groundbreaking arguments that paved the way for a reevaluation of women’s work across all forms of modern economic production, including at the heart of the European industrial revolution.<sup>22</sup>

Boserup discerned disrespect for Indigenous populations behind many of these strategies, bolstered by neo-Malthusian assumptions. Her diplomatic approach aimed to present both sides of the argument. Yes, one might find examples of Indigenous failure to use land in the best manner (described as “spoiling the land”), but other instances demonstrated success, particularly in an age equipped with increasing knowledge of methods of land preservation. But in the eyes of policy experts, who overlooked evidence of productive adaptation, the Global South was stymied by what was then spoken of as “primitive agriculture.”

The new version of Malthusian theory is based on the idea that the increase of population leads to the destruction of the land; and that people, in order to avoid starvation, move to other land which is then destroyed in its turn. The neo-Malthusians collect all the evidence on the misuse of land and paint a picture of the world as a place where growing populations are pressing against a food potential which not only is incapable of increase but is even gradually reduced by the action of these growing populations.<sup>23</sup>

These pessimistic and often racist views lacked important information and failed to recognize the “practical implications” of strategies, including decisions having to do with intelligent applications of labor and the increase of land fertility by realizable means. Hunting, fishing, and gathering were discounted as productive uses of time. Repeatedly, assessments of what native populations were doing were skewed by the assumption that they were ignorant, lazy, and lodged in a primitive stage of development.<sup>24</sup>

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*Contemporary Research*, ed. Marina Fischer-Kowalski, Anette Reenberg, Anke Schaffartzik and Andreas Mayer (Dordrecht, 2014), 15.

<sup>21</sup> Ester Boserup, *The Conditions of Agricultural Growth: The Economics of Agrarian Change Under Population Pressure* (Chicago, 1965), 13–14.

<sup>22</sup> Students and younger scholars of history today may have difficulty comprehending the need to establish recognition for women workers and their distinct contributions of labor. A truly pathbreaking work is Ester Boserup, *Woman’s Role in Economic Development* (London, 1970). Both of Boserup’s early works have been reprinted. See also *Ester Boserup’s Legacy on Sustainability*, ed. Fischer-Kowalski et al.

<sup>23</sup> Boserup, *Conditions*, 21–22.

<sup>24</sup> Boserup, *Conditions*, 44, 54–55.

As a conclusion to my reappraisal of Malthus's impact, I want to use the central insight of Boserup—the value of human resourcefulness understood in terms of local practices allied with nature—to reopen a consideration of European and global agricultural history. The old model, clearly a car of a certain vintage, is ready for retirement. Malthus may be behind the wheel, governing the certainty and urgency with which we apply the old standard, but the world today requires a different approach. We now know that successive periods of agricultural intensification across the modern European continent proved that feeding growing populations there “turned out to be more Boserupian in shape than Malthusian.” Measures of agricultural output revealed that the relationship between food and population was moving in a direction opposed to a dire outcome in the early nineteenth century. “How this productivity breakthrough was actually achieved leaves plenty of room for research and debate,” Peter M. Jones acknowledged in a recent study of the “Agricultural Enlightenment” of the period. As far as Malthus's predictions went, Jones noted that “[w]ith the benefit of hindsight it is apparent that his theory was in the process of being invalidated even as he was formulating it.” Many different approaches to the land made this possible. Simplification won't work, if we want to understand populations and food production. Peasant polyculturalists, engaged in multiple projects related to food production, are not usually seen as “agents of modernization,” but the road to a more stable modernity may be populated by surprising characters. And the car that takes us there may need to be refabricated more than once.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Peter M. Jones, *Agricultural Enlightenment: Knowledge, Technology, and Nature, 1750–1840* (Oxford, 2016), 134, 223–24.

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