

Marriage And Revolution: Monsieur And Madame Roland

Article

Malthus and the Philanthropists, 1764–1859: The Cultural Circulation of Political Economy, Botany, and Natural Knowledge

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Abstract: Modernity does not possess a monopoly on mass incarceration, population fears, forced migration, famine, or climatic change. Indeed, contemporary and early modern concerns over these matters have extended interests in Thomas Malthus. Yet, despite extensive research on population issues, little work explicates the genesis of population knowledge production or how the process of intellectual transfer occurred during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. This paper examines the Delessert network's instrumental role in cultivating, curating, and circulating knowledge that popularized Malthusian population theory, including the theory's constitutive elements of political economy, philanthropy, industry, agriculture, and botany. I show how deviant, nonconformist groups suffered forced migration for their political philosophy, particularly during the revolutionary 1790s, resulting in their imprisonment and migration to America. A consequence of these social shifts was the diffusion and dissemination of population theory—as a pursuit of scientific knowledge and exploration—across both sides of the Atlantic. By focusing on the Delesserts and their social network, I find that a byproduct of inter and intra continental migration among European elites was a knowledge exchange that stimulated Malthus's thesis on population and Genevan Augustin Pyramus Candolle's research on botany, ultimately culminating in Charles Darwin's theory of natural selection and human evolution.

Keywords: knowledge circulation; nature; political economy; philanthropy; population; botany; translation; network

1. Introduction

Contemporary concerns over migration, population, and the environment contribute to an enduring interest in Thomas Robert Malthus (1766–1834). However, such preoccupations are not restricted to the modern period. In the late eighteenth century, before Malthusian became an adjective, there were debates on population, unease over migration, immense ecological changes affecting human civilization, and the initial developments of the Industrial Revolution, which led to humanity impacting global climate. Concerns over hunger and revolution, both influenced by global climate shifts during the Little Ice Age (1300–1850), increased in the early nineteenth century. As a consequence, Europeans developed a widespread interest in Malthus, political economy, botany, and philanthropy.

The Malthus family failed to preserve international distinctions bestowed upon T. R. Malthus, a practice that was continued by their descendants. Malthus's great-great nephew, Robert Malthus (1881–1972), was thus surprised, when travelling as a youth in the late nineteenth century, that their name was still renowned on the Continent [1]. The great Malthus biographer and scholar Patricia James reflects: "the remote uncle nobody had talked about at home was regarded as a great man

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