

Toward Liberalism: Politics, Poverty, and the Emotions in the 1790s

Peter Denney
Griffith University

I

IN THE VOLATILE ATMOSPHERE of the mid-1840s, the leading exponent of Victorian liberalism, John Stuart Mill, published an essay in the *Edinburgh Review* in which he rejected the assumption that political economy encompassed a “hard-hearted, unfeeling” approach to the question of poverty.¹ Entitled “The Claims of Labour,” a major purpose of the essay was to advocate self-help as the key to improving the condition of the laboring classes. According to Mill, the promotion of self-help was an urgent matter, for there had been a revival of the belief that the situation of the poor could be ameliorated either by charity or by the redistribution of property. It was as if people had forgotten the population theory of Thomas Robert Malthus, who, beginning in the late 1790s, argued that such schemes exacerbated the problem of poverty by discouraging the laboring classes from developing qualities like restraint and industriousness that were crucial not just to their improvement but to their survival. Radical and conservative critics alike condemned Malthus both for the bleakness of his theory and for the cold, calculating attitude it seemed to endorse. While understanding such criticism, Mill dismissed these detractors as the “sentimental enemies of political economy.”² At the same time, he insisted that political economy was compatible with sympathy, if not with sentimentality. If interpreted correctly, it generated a view of the poor that mixed empirical observations with positive emotions, producing a sense of optimism regarding the future of the laboring classes. As Mill remarked in

¹ John Stuart Mill, “The Claims of Labour” (1845), in *Dissertations and Discussions*, 2 vols. (London: J. W. Parker, 1859), 2:187.

² John Stuart Mill, *Autobiography* (1873), ed. John M. Robson (London: Penguin Books, 1989), 179.



a letter to his editor, the “hard, abstract mode of treating” the issue of poverty had to be softened by an attitude of “sympathy,” a balancing act that made political economy a source of “benevolent feeling” as well as scientific knowledge.³

For Mill, this focus on the emotions owed much to his encounter with the poetry of William Wordsworth, who, like Malthus, albeit in a different spirit, also began experimenting with new ways of representing the poor in the 1790s. Specifically, Wordsworth taught the young liberal thinker about the “culture of the feelings” that animated and united humankind, and this appreciation of sympathy, among other emotions, helped to heal Mill of the depression and mental aridity that had been caused by his strict Utilitarian upbringing.⁴ While it was precisely the lack of such attention to feelings that critics believed to characterize political economy, especially its Malthusian view of poverty, Mill argued, on the contrary, that the author of the population theory had been misinterpreted. Far from being a prophet of doom, Malthus was a purveyor of hope, for he had shown that the poor were able to improve their situation if they developed the capacity to “help themselves.” As a result, wrote Mill, only from the time of Malthus’s *An Essay on the Principle of Population* was the “economical condition of the laboring classes . . . regarded as susceptible of permanent improvement.” Paradoxically, this involved those in authority attending to the emotions of the poor, while establishing a system of popular education that would train the latter to moderate their feelings so as to become “rational beings . . . capable of foresight.”⁵ Such emphasis on the affective relations of the laboring classes had been a feature of political propaganda in the decade of the French Revolution. And evidently, the liberalism articulated by Mill in this essay in the 1840s was deeply informed by the debate about poverty in the 1790s, not least in its reconciliation of Malthusian political economy with a Wordsworthian valuation of “powerful feeling.”⁶

In an early response to the *Essay on Population*, formulated around 1800, Dugald Stewart similarly interpreted Malthus as the exponent of a view of the poor that combined optimism with pragmatism, a “liberal author” who shared, with some qualifications, the commitment to progress embedded in Scottish Enlightenment philosophy. Because he highlighted the biological forces that constrained improvement, the “gloomy inferences” made by his critics, Stewart added, were understandable. Nevertheless, such conclusions were erroneous.⁷ After all, Malthus depicted the principle of population as a device by which God increased the aggregate happiness of society, though, as his critics pointed out, the poor must have been justified in failing to see much Providence in their misery. Moreover, in the third edition of his *Essay*, published in 1806, he condemned the “illiberal” tone of the writings against him, as if vitriolic rhetoric was symptomatic of superficial, dogmatic, and specious thinking.⁸ With some irony, however, critics like William Hazlitt routinely deployed this “illiberal” rhetoric to defend the “liberal” principles that were

³ John Stuart Mill, *The Earlier Letters of John Stuart Mill, 1812–1848*, ed. Francis K. Mineka (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1963), 644.

⁴ Mill, *Autobiography*, 121.

⁵ Mill, “Claims of Labour,” 183, 203–4, 207.

⁶ On the amalgamation of Malthus and Wordsworth in Mill, see Donald Winch, *Wealth and Life: Essays on the Intellectual History of Political Economy in Britain, 1848–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 61–75.

⁷ Dugald Stewart, *Lectures on Political Economy*, in *The Collected Works of Dugald Stewart*, ed. William Hamilton, 11 vols. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1854–60), 8:207.

⁸ Thomas Robert Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (1803–26), ed. Donald Winch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 333.

perceived to be under threat by Malthus's antisocial vision. For Hazlitt, Malthus's *Essay* painted an unremittingly bleak picture, not only because it contended that population growth outstripped food supply, but because it identified fear rather than hope as the key stimulus to virtue in the poor. Of the man who gave political economy its reputation as the dismal science, Hazlitt wrote with thoroughgoing disdain: "[Malthus] lectures [the poor] on economy, on morality, the regulation of their passions . . . and on the ungracious topic that the 'laws of nature, which are the laws of God, have doomed them and their families to starve.'" In this theodicy, the land failed to provide the poor with subsistence, while the rich neglected to show them compassion. The result, Hazlitt argued, was a theory as false as it was callous. Combining a reliance on mathematical methods with a fixation on sexual appetites, Malthus evaluated the condition of the poor without reference to humanitarian principles, making his work not only unphilosophical but "illiberal."⁹

In this context, of course, the word "illiberal" did not mean Malthus's opposition to any coherent ideology of liberalism. Throughout the first three decades of the nineteenth century, the concept of liberalism was still under construction, and its terminology began to stabilize only in the 1820s, when the noun "liberal" came into being to denote a political term.¹⁰ This gradual, uneven emergence of liberalism borrowed some aspects of Scottish Enlightenment philosophy while reworking or rejecting others.¹¹ Moreover, it comprised the interaction of a range of opposing discourses, from Whiggism to Evangelicalism, Utilitarianism to Romanticism.¹² In fact, the different combination of these discourses was arguably a major contributing factor in the separation of economic and political liberalism.

As used by Hazlitt, "illiberal" meant ungenerous, narrow-minded, and perhaps even despotic. It also implied a depersonalizing outlook careless or contemptuous of the feelings of others. While this was a caricature of Malthus, it was a common one. In the 1820s, for example, Mill noted that Malthus's "anti-population doctrines" were denounced as "repulsive to the natural feelings of mankind."¹³ As we have seen, Mill's own liberalism infused Utilitarian and Romantic elements, giving rise to an individualistic psychology. Mixing individualism with paternalism, however, Mill also drew on Malthus to argue that the poor should be prevented from marrying if they were unable to prove their ability to maintain any ensuing children.¹⁴ This was indicative of the way in which a version of Malthus was absorbed into many strains of early nineteenth-century liberal thought,¹⁵ even as embryonic liberal intellectuals like Hazlitt attacked him for his conservatism, pessimism, and coldheartedness. From the 1820s, for instance, liberal Toryism combined Malthus's theological and free-market views into a system of Christian political economy

⁹ William Hazlitt, *The Spirit of the Age* (1825; London: Oxford University Press, 1954), 170–71.

¹⁰ Raymond Williams, *Keywords* (1976; London: Fontana, 1983), 179–81; D. M. Craig, "The Origins of 'Liberalism' in Britain: The Case of *The Liberal*," *Historical Research* 85, no. 29 (2012): 469–70.

¹¹ See J. W. Burrow, *Whigs and Liberals: Continuity and Change in English Political Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988).

¹² Mark Bevir, "The Long Nineteenth Century in Intellectual History," *Journal of Victorian Culture* 6, no. 2 (2001): 319–22.

¹³ Mill, *Autobiography*, 97.

¹⁴ Gregory Claeys, *Mill and Paternalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 173–210.

¹⁵ H. S. Jones, *Victorian Political Thought* (London: Macmillan, 2000), 14–17; Alan Sykes, *The Rise and Fall of British Liberalism, 1776–1988* (London: Longman, 1997), 12–14; Anthony Arblaster, *The Rise and Decline of Western Liberalism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984), 243–48; D. E. Bland, "Population and Liberalism," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 34, no. 1 (1973): 118–22; Guido de Ruggiero, *The History of European Liberalism* (1927; Boston: Beacon Press, 1959), 109–11.

in which scarcity and suffering were depicted as divine mechanisms for promoting piety, industriousness, and self-reliance.¹⁶ As expected from an Evangelical mode of thought, this gave some consideration to the emotions, not least because it normalized the occurrence of distress and examined its relationship to the role of sympathy in society. In fact, Christian political economy represented inequality as essential to fostering, to quote John Bird Sumner, “reciprocal emotions of gratitude and goodwill,” as if benevolence could thrive only in a hierarchical society where individuals were connected by voluntary ties, free to spend or to starve.¹⁷ On the other side of the political spectrum, Malthus’s population principle became a founding tenet of philosophic radicalism,¹⁸ embraced in modified form by old Jacobins like Francis Place. And it was also welcomed by the heirs of the Scottish Enlightenment—namely, the Whig journalists and readers of the *Edinburgh Review*.¹⁹ In all these ways, an iteration of Malthus became a staple of an emergent liberalism, but this was a fragmented ideology that could appeal to Whig, Tory, or radical constituencies.²⁰ As a result, there was sometimes an “illiberal” dimension to liberalism in the early nineteenth century, especially in relation to the problem of poverty. And this was related to the fact that Malthus’s *Essay* was first published as part of the French Revolution debate, where it figured as a loyalist repudiation of radical utopian arguments for reform. In a revealing anticipation of current neoliberal ideology, it aimed to discredit radicalism by wedding economic liberalism to social and political conservatism.

II

During the 1790s, the reaction to the French Revolution in Britain politicized and ultimately transformed the debate about poverty, culminating in the population theory of Malthus as well as the humanitarian poetry of Wordsworth, while bequeathing to liberalism a tension between Utilitarian and Romantic interpretations of society. This essay examines the role and significance of the emotions in this debate by analyzing conflicting representations of the affective lives of the poor in political propaganda and some related writings. Specifically, the essay explores the ways in which the emotions of the poor were depicted in several well-known pamphlets by radicals and loyalists, including writings by Thomas Paine and Hannah More. By focusing on these affective aspects of the French Revolution controversy, it considers how such rival representations of the emotions in the debate about poverty shaped Malthus’s theory and influenced the perceived division between poetry and political economy that became a hallmark of liberalism.

A preoccupation with the emotions of the poor was a characteristic feature of political propaganda in the 1790s, with both loyalists and radicals acknowledging the role of the passions in either reinforcing or challenging the established order of society. Among opponents of reform, for instance, Thomas Paine was frequently condemned for seeking to “inflame the passions of

¹⁶ Peter Mandler, “Tories and Paupers: Christian Political Economy and the Making of the New Poor Law,” *Historical Journal* 33, no. 1 (1990): 81–103; Boyd Hilton, *The Age of Atonement: The Influence of Evangelicalism on Social and Political Thought, 1785–1865* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 36–39, 81–91, 100–108.

¹⁷ John Bird Sumner, *A Treatise on the Records of the Creation*, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (London: J. Hatchard, 1818), 2:360.

¹⁸ Elie Halevy, *The Growth of Philosophic Radicalism* (London: Faber and Faber, 1928), 243–44, 489–90.

¹⁹ Biancamaria Fontana, *Rethinking the Politics of Commercial Society: The “Edinburgh Review,” 1802–1832* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 53–56.

²⁰ See David McNally, *Against the Market: Political Economy, Market Socialism and the Marxist Critique* (London: Verso, 1996), 87.

the poor.”²¹ Since the passions were viewed as contagious, this was perceived as a dangerous situation that facilitated the spread of antisocial emotions like hatred, anger, and disaffection in the laboring classes. Moreover, such emotional contagion threatened to undermine the civility of a modern, commercial nation. The function of anger in a modern society was an important component of the French Revolution debate, consolidating a distinction between righteous indignation and irrational rage.²² Whereas rage precluded sympathy, it was assumed, indignation generated and expressed it. In *Rights of Man*, Paine argued that the French Revolution had its origins in disinterested rationality rather than personal hatred, and he contrasted the mindless, uncivilized “rage” of Edmund Burke with his own enlightened indignation, fueled by an impatience with injustice and suffering.²³ In addition, his rhetoric combined outrage with humor not only to appeal to the laboring classes but to moderate or lighten the tone of his invective. Loyalists, however, interpreted him as a brazen purveyor of hatred and other aggressive emotions. To quote the clergyman James Hurdis, while Paine professed a “love of mankind at large,” he was “swayed by a malignant principle,” desiring to “blow the bellows upon the populace, and enjoy the conflagration which his diabolical endeavors excite.”²⁴ But most radicals were similarly suspicious of hatred, associating it with intolerance, insensitivity, and ultimately despotism. With “mingled zeal and hatred,” wrote Henry Yorke, the “Great” conspired to “oppress the Poor,” and a “fierce spirit of intolerance, equaled only in the days of religious bigotry and fanaticism, rages with fury throughout every part of our divided and unhappy country.”²⁵ For radicals as well as more moderate reformers, this climate of despotism was often evidenced by the extreme and excessive emotions of the poor, their despair requiring redress and their anger prompting action. At the same time, such passions were also troubling, as likely to be manipulated by loyalists as harnessed to the cause of reform.

In conservative political pamphlets, directed to the laboring classes and intended to persuade them to support the established government along with, from 1793, its war against the young French Republic, a high premium was placed on emotional moderation. Moreover, the poor were prescribed a very narrow range of emotional styles and standards, the most common being a kind of bland cheerfulness. Like anger, dejection was classified by loyalist writers as an illegitimate emotion, an impious combination of self-absorption and dissatisfaction. As Hannah More noted in one of her *Cheap Repository* tracts, the feeling of “despair” was “common with people” who had “no religion.”²⁶ In the literature of loyalism, however, even hope was occasionally represented as a questionable outlook, especially if it implied a belief in the possibility of remaking the world. Among the laboring classes, hope had the potential to foster boldness, disregard security, and stimulate collective action. In addition, a disposition of hope had become indelibly associated with radicalism, whether its vision of reform was construed in rationalist or millenarian terms. Perhaps no one exemplified this more than the radical enthusiast and

²¹ John Gifford, *A Plain Address to the Common Sense of the People of England* (London: C. Lowndes, 1792), 36.

²² Andrew M. Stauffer, *Anger, Revolution, and Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 38–54.

²³ Thomas Paine, *Rights of Man* (1791–92), in *Political Writings*, ed. Bruce Kuklick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 70, 146.

²⁴ James Hurdis, *Equality: A Sermon* (London: J. Johnson, 1794), 38.

²⁵ Henry Yorke, *Reason Urged Against Precedent* (London: G. and J. Robinson, 1793), 3–4, 10.

²⁶ Hannah More, *The History of Hester Wilmot* (1796), in *Tales for the Common People and Other “Cheap Repository” Tracts*, ed. Clare MacDonald Shaw (Nottingham: Trent Editions, 2002), 100.

publicist Richard “Citizen” Lee, who in his poem “Let us Hope to See Better Times” prophesied that a “happier Day” was coming, when the so-called “Rabble” would be relieved of their “present Distress”:

O! let it enliven the Hearts of the Poor,
While *Tyrants* shall tremble and sink in Despair;
The Reign of Oppression is but for an Hour,
’Till all the wide World sweet FREEDOM shall share.²⁷

Downplaying hope, loyalist texts depicted the literature of reform as a dismal discourse, causing despondency in the poor. This was a threatening emotion since it possessed the potential to goad disaffection and protest. In Hannah More’s *Village Politics*, for example, the story begins with Jack Anvil the blacksmith asking his friend Tom Hod the mason: “What’s the matter, Tom? Why dost look so dismal?” And sure enough, Tom is “very unhappy, and very miserable” because he has been reading *Rights of Man*.²⁸ As Jack explains to his friend, after satirizing him for needing to read a book to reveal his sadness, “levelling makes people so dismal. These poor French fellows used to be the merriest dogs in the world; but since equality come in, I don’t believe a Frenchman has ever laughed.”²⁹ Even worse, opined More, the reform movement had become tantamount to a religion, with hatred of authorities replacing love of neighbors as proof of devotion.³⁰ And yet, no less than hatred, merriment was considered by some loyalists to be a similarly undesirable emotion in the laboring classes. For unrestrained joy, especially collective joy, was regarded as a dangerous behavior since it involved, albeit temporarily, a freedom from self-regulation and an associated unconcern for the opinions of others.³¹ While More’s *Cheap Repository* tracts contained many nostalgic elements, they mostly located their characters in the present,³² advocating the cultivation of regulated emotional habits and values that were compatible with a modern, commercial society. As demonstrated by the hero of another tale, *The Shepherd of Salisbury Plain*, the deserving poor were expected to display a high level of emotional control, prone neither to anger nor to despair, and habituated to civility, contentment, and self-discipline.

For loyalist writers, civility was linked to social hierarchy, but far from fueling nostalgia for the past, this regulated culture of feeling was held to be a beneficial feature of commercial modernity. By contrast, they argued that Paine and his followers sought to overthrow the existing system of property,³³ advocating a principle of economic equality that, if instituted, would return Britain to a state of savagery, where emotions were aggressive, cruel, and volatile. As one critic noted, such a “language of passion and revenge” might have been appropriate in the age

²⁷ Richard Lee, *Songs from the Rock* (London: J. S. Jordan, 1795), 9. For excellent studies of Lee, see Jon Mee, “The Strange Career of Richard ‘Citizen’ Lee: Poetry, Popular Radicalism and Enthusiasm in the 1790s,” in *Radicalism in British Literary Culture, 1650–1830: From Revolution to Revolution*, ed. Timothy Morton and Nigel Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 152–56; Jon Mee, *Print, Publicity and Radicalism in the 1790s: The Laurel of Liberty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 149–67.

²⁸ Hannah More, *Village Politics*, 2nd ed. (London: F. and C. Rivington, 1792), 3–4.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 19.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 18.

³¹ Susan Pedersen, “Hannah More Meets Simple Simon: Tracts, Chapbooks and Popular Culture in Late Eighteenth-Century England,” *Journal of British Studies* 25, no. 1 (1986): 88–97, 106–8.

³² See Kevin Gilmartin, *Writing against Revolution: Literary Conservatism in Britain, 1790–1832* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 58–59, 64–68.

³³ Gregory Claeys, *Thomas Paine: Social and Political Thought* (Boston: Unwin Hymen, 1989), 155–57.

of Ossian and Odin, but a contemporary “friend of social and civil life” should not descend to “invective, calumny and commonplace abuse.”³⁴

The notion of equality as generating vehement, unpredictable, or indifferent behavior was an issue raised by Richard Watson, bishop of Llandaff, in a loyalist sermon published in 1793. A liberal Whig, previously committed to reform, Watson joined the opposition to radicalism when the French Revolution started taking a violent turn. In this early piece of loyalist propaganda, the political prelate drew on Scottish Enlightenment philosophy to contend that inequality was a precondition of the sympathy that Adam Smith defined as the moral glue of commercial society. From a theological perspective, it was also conducive to Christian virtues such as contentment, meekness, benevolence, and compassion. “Were all men upon a level,” Watson proclaimed, “there would be no room for the exercise of charity and compassion on the one hand, nor of patience and gratitude on the other.”³⁵ Accordingly, emotions such as envy and despair were defined as vices that defied or discounted the Providence of God. Moreover, expressions of resentment at those who withheld charity were sinful because the only true charity involved voluntary, private aid, unable to be compelled. While equality perverted or repressed the emotions, then, personal freedom, combined with social hierarchy, activated and refined them. As Malthus would do several years later, Watson conceived of social hierarchy as an emotional economy, with charity being exchanged for gratitude and inequality ensuring civility. Notwithstanding key differences, a variation of this emotional economy was also apparent in *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity*, the memorandum Edmund Burke presented to William Pitt in 1795 in order to advise the prime minister on ways of dealing with the food shortage crisis, which, following a series of failed harvests, was causing enormous distress among the rural poor. Posthumously published in 1800, Burke’s pamphlet constituted an attack on the principle of public poor relief and a related defense of the free market, as articulated in political economy. And this was given a notorious theological justification, with the “laws of commerce” being compared to the “laws of nature, and consequently the laws of God.”³⁶ Unsurprisingly, given his hard-line free-market views, Burke paid short shrift to the emotions, explaining that compassion for the poor was misdirected and complaining that, in a period of scarcity, there was “nothing on which the passions of men [were] so violent, and their judgment so weak” as the price of provisions.³⁷ At the same time, however, he argued that the laws of commerce stimulated charity, for individuals with no claim on the public purse were thrown onto the mercy of their superiors, whose private, discretionary charity was more satisfying, more genuine, and more in line with freedom than mandatory public relief. Needless to say, while this functioned to make the poor self-reliant, it also operated to ensure their deference.

Little wonder, in this context, that many radicals denounced gratitude as an emotion inimical to liberty, fostering the despotism of the rich, cultivating the servility of the poor, and privileging mutual dependence over autonomy. Without doubt, the best disavowal of this emotion came from the pen of Charles Pigott, who, in his *Political Dictionary*, noted that the word “Grateful” was “obsolete,” since it was currently “used for *great fool*.”³⁸ The tone of irreverence, here, made

³⁴ Thomas Hearn, *A Short View of the Rise and Progress of Freedom in Modern Europe, as Connected with the Causes which led to the French Revolution* (London: W. Richardson, 1793), 96.

³⁵ Bishop Watson, *A Sermon Preached before the Stewards of the Westminster Dispensary, with An Appendix* (London: T. Cadell, 1793), 14.

³⁶ Edmund Burke, *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity* (London: F. and C. Rivington, 1800), 32.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 1.

³⁸ Charles Pigott, *A Political Dictionary* (London: D. I. Eaton, 1795), 50.

an important point. As well as entertaining his readers, it articulated an opposition to the style of refined sensibility that, in the realm of social relations, represented conflict or contention as incompatible with profound or deep feeling. In doing so, Pigott demystified the emotional economy of loyalism, enabling social hierarchy to be viewed in a rational, rather than sentimental, light as something capable of being ridiculed and reformed.

In one of the earliest radical interventions in the French Revolution debate, published in 1790, Mary Wollstonecraft highlighted the ambivalent place of the emotions in discussions regarding the condition, management, and improvement of the poor. Written as a critique of the sentimentalism of Burke's *Reflections*, the pamphlet used the language of sentiment to identify a habit of insincerity in the aristocracy, whose absorption in superficial pursuits and manners left them devoid of affections.³⁹ And the poor were represented as emulating these vices, causing them to display the same hatred that, in loyalist writings, was depicted as a violation of emotional civility but that Wollstonecraft portrayed as a legitimate response to the unfeeling civility of the rich. Furthermore, even though Wollstonecraft everywhere implied that a strong sensibility was essential for promoting concern for the poor, she recognized its potential to privilege emotions over actions, suggesting the adoption of a more utilitarian approach. As she implored, "such misery demands more than tears!"⁴⁰ And in keeping with this, charity was classified as a redistributive act rather than an emotional one.

In the second part of *Rights of Man*, as well as in his important work *Agrarian Justice*, Thomas Paine also defined relief as a right rather than a charity, again offering a critique of the emotional economy of loyalism. And to accentuate this, he focused on emotions much less than other political writers. In fact, he was as reliant on calculations as Malthus and later Utilitarian thinkers, though these formed the basis of a proposed welfare scheme that aimed to use progressive taxation to put an end to poverty, repudiating some of the basic assumptions of loyalist theory, Anglican theology, and most varieties of political economy.⁴¹ At the same time, Paine recognized that this reform would disperse positive emotional effects throughout society, increasing the happiness alike of the old and the young, the affluent and the laboring classes. With the implementation of a social insurance scheme, he declared, the "hearts of the humane will not be shocked by ragged and hungry children, and persons of seventy and eighty years of age begging for bread."⁴² In opposition to the claims of loyalist writers, Paine believed that public happiness required the absence of poverty rather than the establishment of economic equality. As he noted in an intriguingly aestheticized passage, "it is impossible to enjoy affluence with . . . felicity . . . whilst so much misery is mingled in the scene."⁴³ Moreover, Paine reserved his harshest criticism for the way in which, under a despotic government, the poor were treated like animals, creatures of passion rather than reason, with the rich seeking to break their spirit and enforce their dependence. A very similar point was made by the radical orator and activist John Thelwall, who in *Rights of*

³⁹ See John Barrell, *Imagining the King's Death: Figurative Treason, Fantasies of Regicide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 10–15; Barbara Taylor, *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 64–69.

⁴⁰ Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790), in *Political Writings*, ed. Janet Todd (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 59–60.

⁴¹ Gareth Stedman Jones, *An End to Poverty? A Historical Debate* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 21–29, 41–48.

⁴² Paine, *Rights of Man*, 240.

⁴³ Thomas Paine, *Agrarian Justice* (Paris: W. Adlard, 1797), 11.

Nature attacked the tendency of the aristocracy to define the poor by their mechanical appetites, reducing them to automata without minds, feelings, aspirations, and desires. “Foul befall the government, that considers the great mass of the people as brute machines; mere instruments of physical force; deprived of all *power*, and destitute of all *right* of information; and doomed, like the dray-horse, or the musquet, to perform, mechanically, whatever task of drudgery, or murder, a few ‘counsellors and deliberators’ may command!”⁴⁴ In addition, Thelwall depicted hunger not only as a physical sensation or even, as in some versions of political economy, a stimulus to labor but as a psychological disturbance that produced in the poor a distaste for home, as they came to see their domestic affections as sources of misery, always being thwarted rather than gratified.

The issue of poverty was raised by liberal as well as radical commentators, though in the 1790s there was no coherent liberal outlook, and so it perhaps makes more sense to talk of a radical Whig or a moderate radical perspective. Sometimes labeled a “liberal,” for instance, the essayist and schoolmaster Vicesimus Knox is arguably best described as an Anglican Country Whig, whose views came to be radicalized, or at least appear radicalized, in the wake of the French Revolution owing to the attenuation of moderate political positions that followed the emergence of loyalism and its associated climate of paranoia and repression.⁴⁵ At the same time, the reluctance with which he accepted the value of plebeian political activity—welcomed as inevitable rather than desirable—and the centrality he gave to the aesthetic and cultural aspects of improvement produced a form of radicalism with recognizably liberal elements. Certainly, there was a strain of liberalism in the middle-class opposition to the wars with revolutionary France, and Knox identified as a member of this informal group, comprising Anglicans, Evangelicals, and Dissenters.⁴⁶ An important, if much neglected, exponent of sensibility, Knox placed great emphasis on the emotions of the poor in his pamphlet *The Spirit of Despotism*, published in 1795. This pamphlet was dedicated to men of feeling, and one of his motivations for writing it was to critique the way in which, under the repressive, alarmist government of William Pitt, the predominant passion in society had become fear—an emotion inimical to enterprise and excellence. Like Wollstonecraft, he associated the aristocracy with insensibility, seeing this social group as “destitute of feeling for others” and without any recognition of the “common tie of humanity.” And like Paine and Thelwall, he argued that the poor had become “merely instruments subservient to the will and pleasure of aristocratic insolence.”⁴⁷ However, Knox was suspicious of universal male suffrage, not least because it risked inflaming the emotions of the laboring classes, causing violence and perhaps even tyranny. And although he was not opposed to radical assemblies, he thought popular political meetings were dangerous since they stirred up aggressive passions, especially at a time when repression was exacerbating disaffection. As he implied throughout the pamphlet, the French Revolution debate had thoroughly perverted the emotional disposition of

⁴⁴ John Thelwall, *Rights of Nature, Against the Usurpations of Establishments* (1796), in *The Politics of English Jacobinism: Writings of John Thelwall*, ed. Gregory Claeys (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 407.

⁴⁵ See John Barrell, *The Spirit of Despotism: Invasions of Privacy in the 1790s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 4–9.

⁴⁶ See J. E. Cookson, *The Friends of Peace: Anti-war Liberalism in England, 1793–1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 32–33; Emma Vincent Macleod, *A War of Ideas: British Attitudes to the Wars against Revolutionary France, 1792–1802* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998), 126–34.

⁴⁷ Vicesimus Knox, *The Spirit of Despotism* (London: n.p., 1795), 196–97.

British society, with the rich exhibiting anger, petulance, and sullenness, and the poor experiencing despair and “depression.”⁴⁸

III

If the French Revolution debate politicized the issue of poverty, it was thoroughly transformed by the publication of Malthus’s *Essay on Population* in 1798. Within a generation, as we have seen, the *Essay* pervaded and utterly changed political economy,⁴⁹ contributing to a notion of liberalism that appealed to conservative as well as radical constituencies. Culminating in the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, which centralized poor relief and curtailed its availability, Malthus contributed to the widespread acceptance of a harsher attitude to the poor. This was condemned by an uneasy alliance of reactionary and radical critics, who argued that Malthus privileged economic over moral considerations, depersonalizing the poor, ignoring their emotions, and denying them basic rights. Despite these attacks, the *Essay* played a crucial role in the process by which liberalism forged a consensus among the affluent classes regarding the primacy of economic freedom in an emergent market society.⁵⁰ And yet, even though Malthus himself was a moderate Whig, his population theory started life as a kind of loyalist treatise that aimed to discredit radical arguments for social and political reform, especially the perfectibilist visions advanced by writers like William Godwin.⁵¹

While Malthus drew on Scottish Enlightenment philosophy, his theory of population reinterpreted this progressive mode of thought in light of the anxious, rancorous atmosphere of the 1790s.⁵² To begin with, fear of the French Revolution cast a long shadow over the *Essay*, and Malthus associated this seismic event with an eruption of base passions that returned civilized society to a savage state and threatened to inspire similar incendiary conduct in Britain. As he asserted, France had become “debased by such a fermentation of disgusting passions, of fear, cruelty, malice, revenge, ambition, madness, and folly as would have disgraced the most savage nation in the most barbarous age.”⁵³ Related to this was the growing fear of the laboring classes, who, in addition to experiencing food shortages and other intense hardships, could now be imagined to be well versed in radical political literature. “If political discontents were blended with the cries of hunger,” declared Malthus, “and a revolution were to take place by the instrumentality of a mob . . . the consequences would be unceasing change and unceasing carnage.”⁵⁴ In Malthus’s view, a “mob” tended to arise during a perfect storm of suffering, disaffection, and surplus

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁴⁹ See Murray Milgate and Shannon C. Stimson, *After Adam Smith: A Century of Transformation in Politics and Political Economy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 121–22.

⁵⁰ Stedman Jones, *An End to Poverty?*, 71–72; Gregory Claeys, “Whigs, Liberals and Radicals,” *Historical Journal* 33, no. 3 (1990): 737.

⁵¹ See esp. Stedman Jones, *An End to Poverty?*, 88–109; David McNally, “Political Economy to the Fore: Burke, Malthus and the Whig Response to Popular Radicalism in the Age of the French Revolution,” *History of Political Thought* 21, no. 3 (2000): 427–47; Gregory Claeys, *The French Revolution Debate in Britain: The Origins of Modern Politics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 155–59.

⁵² Fredrik Albritton Jonsson, “Island, Nation, Planet: Malthus in the Enlightenment,” in *New Perspectives on Malthus*, ed. Robert J. Mayhew (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 147.

⁵³ Thomas Robert Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798), ed. Antony Flew (London: Penguin, 1985), 121.

⁵⁴ Malthus, *Essay* (1803–26), ed. Winch, 245.

population, and this unleashed aggressive emotions like resentment on the polity in a process that was “fatal to freedom.”⁵⁵

Such alarmism contributed to the pessimism of the *Essay* as well as to its reluctance to discuss the rights of the poor except in order to refute them. But it was the principle of population, of course, that generated what Malthus described as his “melancholy,” fatalistic image of modern society, “condemned to a perpetual oscillation between happiness and misery.”⁵⁶ The notion that food supply was unable to keep pace with population growth, because the former increased in an arithmetic ratio while the latter increased in a geometrical ratio, meant that society always inclined to overpopulation. And due to the insufficiency of nature, overpopulation produced an inexorable rise in poverty, along with an attendant spread of misery. As a result, any scheme of radical social improvement was bound to fail since, without being able to prevent overpopulation, it would aggravate the situation it aimed to correct. A redistribution of property, for example, would enhance the economic circumstances of the laboring classes, but by thus encouraging them to marry and procreate, this would cause rapid population growth until the pressure of overpopulation reintroduced and then increased poverty.⁵⁷ In a Newtonian spirit, Malthus demonstrated the principle of population in mathematical terms, claiming it as one of the laws of nature that governed the cosmos and, in doing so, representing his moral speculations as empirical observations.⁵⁸ It followed from this that poverty, misery, and other problems were not a product of “human institutions,” as Godwin and all radical and reformist individuals supposed. Rather, “evil” had “deeper-seated causes,” as Malthus put it, and ensued from the “laws of nature.”⁵⁹ A corollary of Malthus’s moral Newtonianism was the marginalization of the literature of reform, including writings about poverty, as unscientific.⁶⁰ But if the *Essay* was conceived as a scientific study of population and its effect on poverty, it was also influenced by the tradition of natural theology, especially the Christian Utilitarianism of William Paley. In this tradition, empirical observations were coterminous with divine truths, and Malthus used these claims to support a theodicy, which stated that “evil exists in the world not to create despair but activity.”⁶¹ Specifically, God permitted the presence of misery, scarcity, and poverty, because the prospect of such unfavorable circumstances incited individuals to be industrious, thereby contributing to the productive labor that was the primary Christian virtue, the source of public happiness, and the ultimate foundation of an enlightened, prosperous, and civilized society. In short, the happiness, godliness, and wealth of society relied on the “fear of want” that stimulated the “industry” of its members, especially the poor.⁶² Accordingly, Malthus argued that the idle poor, dependent on relief or charity, should be perceived as a disgrace, with the clear implication that it was beneficial for them to internalize feelings of shame.⁶³ At the same time, however, there was still room for optimism, as Malthus articulated in the second edition of his *Essay*, for the threat of

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 244.

⁵⁶ Malthus, *Essay* (1798), ed. Flew, 62, 67.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 132–45.

⁵⁸ See Robert J. Mayhew, *Malthus: The Life and Legacies of an Untimely Prophet* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2014), 66–67.

⁵⁹ Malthus, *Essay* (1798), ed. Flew, 133; Malthus, *Essay* (1803–26), ed. Winch, 57.

⁶⁰ McNally, *Against the Market*, 75–78; Donald Winch, *Malthus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 16–19.

⁶¹ Malthus, *Essay* (1798), ed. Flew, 217.

⁶² Malthus, *Essay* (1803–26), ed. Winch, 198.

⁶³ Malthus, *Essay* (1798), ed. Flew, 98.

overpopulation could be avoided so long as the poor exercised moral restraint by delaying marriage and postponing sexual gratification until they could afford to support a family without the assistance of the parish. If happiness was within reach of the laboring classes, it could be achieved, at least in the short term, only by accepting a degree of unhappiness—that is to say, by deferring conjugal affections and regulating the passions through a course of unremitting industry.

In all these ways, Malthus exhibited an ambivalent attitude to the emotions of the poor, both insensitive to and preoccupied with their affective lives. One of his objections to Godwin was that the great radical philosopher placed too much weight on the intellectual character of people, ignoring the combination of “rational” abilities and “corporeal propensities” that influenced human behavior.⁶⁴ By contrast, Malthus maintained that even benevolence was grounded in self-love, and that passions and appetites were the sources of all pleasure as well as pain, happiness as well as misery. The poor, in particular, were held to be governed by “bodily cravings,” a remark that dismissed their feelings as sensual impulses and justified their need to be disciplined by the principle of population.⁶⁵ For Malthus, such “bodily cravings” were essential to the establishment and maintenance of civilized society, despite evidencing the uncivilized character of those who were governed by them. They were crucial because the subsistence demands of the body stimulated labor through a battle with niggardly nature, and the act of labor then served as a lesson in the value of deferring the immediate gratification of appetites, ultimately giving rise to rational thought and conduct.⁶⁶ This was similar to the cultivation of moral restraint, a quality that counteracted the pressure of overpopulation by prompting individuals to exert rational control over their bodily passions. As Malthus put it, the “preventive check is peculiar to man, and arises from that distinctive superiority in his reasoning faculties, which enables him to calculate distant consequences.”⁶⁷

If moral restraint was the only remedy to poverty, the dissemination of this quality was undermined by several factors, especially the poor laws. The system of poor relief that had been in place in England since the Elizabethan period was “benevolent” in “intention” but self-defeating, asserted Malthus, for it discouraged industry in the laboring classes by taking away the “fear of want,” along with the shame attached to dependent poverty.⁶⁸ It also diminished the willingness to save among the poor and emboldened them to marry early, before they were sure whether they could afford to support a family without recourse to parish relief. Accordingly, Malthus argued that the poor laws increased population without enlarging food supply, exacerbating the problem of poverty. The first edition of the *Essay*, published in 1798, advocated reform of the poor laws, but by the second edition in 1803, Malthus was recommending their gradual abolition.⁶⁹ In addition to fostering self-reliance in the poor, one of the subsidiary advantages of abolishing the poor laws, he wrote, would be to activate the benevolence of the affluent classes through an expansion of voluntary, private charity, directed to deserving recipients. Although Malthus claimed, perhaps with Thomas Paine in mind, that the “laws of nature, which are the laws of God,” showed that

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 162–63.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 163–64.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 203–6. See Mitchell Dean, *The Constitution of Poverty: Toward a Genealogy of Liberal Governance* (London: Routledge, 1991), 89.

⁶⁷ Malthus, *Essay* (1803–26), ed. Winch, 21.

⁶⁸ Malthus, *Essay* (1798), ed. Flew, 98.

⁶⁹ J. R. Poynter, *Society and Pauperism: English Ideas on Poor Relief, 1795–1834* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969), 156.

the poor possessed no right to relief, private charity remained a valuable activity. In particular, this form of practical benevolence forged sympathetic relations between propertied and propertyless individuals, while assuaging the discontent of the poor.⁷⁰ Whereas public poor relief was perceived as an entitlement, which generated resentment in the poor if it was denied, private charity engendered the “pleasurable sensation of gratitude” in the recipient, binding social groups together through a circulation of positive affections.⁷¹ Unsurprisingly, Malthus regarded feelings of compassion as untrustworthy because they could be as easily triggered by reading a novel as encountering an actual incidence of distress. Likewise, indiscriminate or excessive benevolence was harmful, since, among other things, it undermined the distinction between the deserving and undeserving poor that was crucial to ensuring that charity did not advance overpopulation and diminish public happiness. As a result, benevolence, like all emotions from love to anger, had to be “regulated by experience” and “brought to the test of utility” if it was to fulfill its intended purpose.⁷² Far from denying the emotions, then, Malthus subjected them, at least in his discussion of charity, to a calculating procedure that aimed to soften as well as discipline the lives of the poor.

Romantic critics like William Hazlitt and Robert Southey were united in their condemnation of Malthus, though representations of him alternated between a model of coldhearted rationality and a purveyor of unsavory sensualism. Either way, the theory of population increasingly became an image of all that was wrong in modern, commercial Britain and a testimony to the need for the humanizing influence of poetry in a world increasingly dominated by reductive economic thinking.⁷³ In his witty demolition of Malthus’s *Essay*, published in 1807, Hazlitt pointedly described its author as a man without “poetical or sanguine feelings,” attributing this to a kind of melancholy, which seemed incapable of focusing on anything other than the prospect of future misery.⁷⁴ By this time, however, melancholy had long been associated with creativity, and much Romantic poetry about the poor was understandably concerned with the loss of happiness rather than its attainment. Contradicting himself somewhat, Hazlitt also attacked Malthus for the opposite flaw—namely, for refusing to allow his feelings to interfere with his reason. This was evidenced by his reliance on mathematical calculations. Such calculations reduced the poor to numbers, and as “martyrs” of abstract ideas rather than victims of unfortunate circumstances, they were given no human qualities that might elicit sympathy and prompt a desire to protect them from the severe laws of nature or the harsh measures deemed necessary to limit population growth.⁷⁵ According to Hazlitt, then, the coldheartedness of Malthus was matched by the self-interestedness of his readers. In fact, Hazlitt represented him as a modern-day Bernard de Mandeville, who, by defining support of the poor as a cause of their idleness, dependence, and irresponsible breeding, relieved the propertied classes of “troublesome feelings” such as guilt and pity and suggested that “public virtue” was “best answered by the meanness, pride, extravagance,

⁷⁰ Malthus, *Essay* (1803–26), ed. Winch, 346–47.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 285.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 280–81.

⁷³ For excellent nuanced studies of the Romantic repudiation of Malthus, see Mayhew, *Malthus*, 75–94; Philip Connell, *Romanticism, Economics and the Question of “Culture”* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 13–62; Donald Winch, *Riches and Poverty: An Intellectual History of Political Economy in Britain, 1750–1834* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 288–322.

⁷⁴ William Hazlitt, *A Reply to the Essay on Population* (London: Longman et al., 1807), 86.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 179.

and insensibility of individuals.”⁷⁶ As for the poor themselves, Hazlitt rejected Malthus’s premise that they were motivated only by base passions, by the fear of starvation, or the desire for sexual gratification. On the contrary, by removing the “spring of hope,” the “excessive depression” of the poor stifled their industry and made them heedless of consequences, increasing rather than curtailing their alleged fecklessness.⁷⁷

In 1843 William Wordsworth formulated a note on “The Old Cumberland Beggar,” a poem that was written in early 1798 and published, two years later, in the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads*. The note implied that the poem had been conceived as a critique of “political economists” who, in a long process that culminated in the New Poor Law, were waging a “war upon mendacity in all its forms.” But the “inhumanity” of this treatment of the poor, added Wordsworth, was disguised by a new emphasis on private charity as opposed to public relief.⁷⁸ While this note almost certainly constituted a retrospective rereading of the poem more relevant to the early 1840s than the late 1790s,⁷⁹ “The Old Cumberland Beggar” does seem to engage with the debate about poverty as it was conducted during the revolutionary decade by both political and economic writers. The poem is about the relationship between an old beggar and his small rural community, around which he undertakes regular walks to solicit alms, freely given, from his neighbors. He is strangely unresponsive to the goings-on of the village, but the individuals he meets are all affected and softened by their encounters with him. After representing the slow movement of the beggar, as he wanders from house to house, Wordsworth attacks the utilitarian attitude to the poor, which measures the value of such a person in economic or instrumental terms: “But deem not this man useless.—Statesman! ye | Who are so restless in your wisdom.”⁸⁰ It is an important feature of the poem that the old beggar does not need to exhibit any particular emotions in order to receive charity, and there is no hint either of resignation or of cheerfulness in this inscrutable figure. Similarly, he is neither disposed nor required to show gratitude in exchange for acts of charity, as was expected of the poor by Malthus and other conservative writers. Nevertheless, such acts are undertaken on a voluntary, private basis, and it is their private nature that enables the beggar to fulfill his vital social role of cultivating the sympathy of the local community and strengthening the bonds of its members. For this reason, the poem seems to amount to something like a liberal critique of emergent economic liberalism, even as it constructs an emotional regime at once complementary and hostile to it. It is precisely this ambiguity at the heart of liberalism in its formative period that carries over into the nineteenth century and beyond; and as Wordsworth’s poem suggests, it is an ambiguity that literary works in particular reveal acutely. A

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 5, 18–19.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 280.

⁷⁸ Jared Curtis, ed., *The Fenwick Notes of William Wordsworth* (London: Bristol Classical Press, 1993), 56.

⁷⁹ Connell, *Romanticism, Economics and the Question of “Culture,”* 24–25.

⁸⁰ William Wordsworth, *The Major Works*, ed. Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 51.