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**Carlyle, Malthus and Sismondi: The Origins of
Carlyle's Dismal View of Political Economy**

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Carlyle, Malthus and Sismondi: The Origins of Carlyle's Dismal View of Political Economy¹

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Abstract: While it is correct to say that Carlyle first applied the exact phrase “dismal science” to political economy in his 1849 article on plantation labour in the West Indies, I argue that Carlyle came to the view that political economy was “dismal” well before that time. Indeed, his negative attitude can be seen quite clearly in his earlier published reactions to the writings of Malthus (and Sismondi, amongst others) on population growth and its consequences and also to the perceived ‘materialistic’ nature of the subject matter of political economy.

Introduction

The (exact) phrase “dismal science” was first applied by Carlyle to political economy in his 1849 *Fraser's Magazine* article “Occasional Discourse on the Negro Question”, as Levy (2001a & b), and (well) before him Persky (1990) and Vanden Bossche (1991), have noticed.² However, it is one thing to note this, it is quite another thing to claim, as Levy does, that: “Here is a fact that seems to surprise many deeply learned scholars. The term “dismal science” was applied to British political economy as the 1840s ended because of its role bringing about the emancipation of West Indian slaves in the 1830s” (Levy, 2001a, p5, emphasis in original). In my view there is a good deal that can be said in defence of those “deeply learned scholars” who claim that Carlyle had come to the view that political economy was “dismal” much earlier than 1849 and that he formulated this view in reaction to the gloomy predictions of Malthus (and others) in

¹ I am grateful to John Creedy, Mike White and to two anonymous referees for very helpful comments and suggestions especially in relation to the introduction and the section on Malthus.

² Carlyle contrasted the “dismal science” with the “gay science” which a referee has pointed out is (Carlyle's translation of) a Provençal term for the art of poetry writing.

relation to population growth and its consequences (and also to the perceived ‘materialistic’ nature of the subject matter of political economy).³

A comprehensive account of the relationship between Carlyle and Political Economy has yet to be written but when it is written it will have to address many issues besides identifying the exact specific circumstance in which the first use of the phrase dismal science appears. These issues would include: Carlyle’s views of Malthus (and others) on Population; Carlyle’s reaction to the perceived world-view of political economists such as Smith, Malthus, Ricardo, Sismondi and McCulloch, and; the way in which later writers such as Marshall responded to Carlyle’s criticism. It would also need to address Carlyle’s views on other economic issues such as free trade, the poor laws and the corn laws. In this note I will only address the first of these although, as we shall see, one cannot sensibly discuss this without also discussing the connection between Carlyle and Sismondi.

Carlyle and Malthus

A great many writers have specifically linked the origins of Carlyle’s view that political economy was a “dismal science” to Carlyle’s reaction to Malthus. To take just a few authors: “after he had read Malthus, Carlyle called economics ‘the dismal science’” (Helibroner, 1986 p 78). Malthus’s “prediction of misery led Carlyle to call economics ‘the dismal science’” (Staley, 1989, p 59). “Thomas Carlyle, after reading Malthus, called political economy the ‘dismal science’” (Oser and Brue, 1988, p 91). “There was a final if unintentional, Malthusian legacy, one for which he was responsible along with Ricardo. Economics would hereafter be associated with the atmosphere of unrelieved pessimism and gloom, and economists would be given the name and reputation (by way of Carlyle) that survives to this day, that of ‘Respectable Professors of the Dismal Science’” (Galbraith, 1987, p 81). I think there is much that can be said in defence of the views of these “deeply learned scholars” and an obvious place to start is by looking at what Carlyle wrote before 1849 about Malthus’s thoughts on population.

³ Ian Castles has discussed Carlyle’s use of the term ‘dismal science’ in his excellent note in the Academy of the Social Sciences newsletter, see Castles (1997). I am grateful to a referee for drawing this to my attention.

There are only two explicit references to Malthus and his ideas on population in the thirty-one Volumes of Carlyle's *Collected Works* and both appear many years prior to the 1849 *Fraser's Magazine* article.⁴ The first reference is in a work of Carlyle's titled *Sartor Resartus*⁵ ('The Tailor Re-clothed') which was published as a series of articles in *Fraser's Magazine* in 1833-34.⁶ In the latter part of this work he refers to the ideas of "a disciple of Malthus; and so zealous for the doctrine, that his zeal almost literally eats him up. A deadly fear of Population possesses [him]; something like a fixed idea; undoubtedly akin to the more diluted forms of Madness. Nowhere, in that quarter of his intellectual world, is there light; nothing but a grim shadow of Hunger; open mouths opening wider and wider; a world to terminate by the frightfullest consummation: by its too dense inhabitants, famished into delirium, universally eating one another." (Volume 1 of *Collected Works*, p 180f).^{7,8}

The second of the two references to Malthus is in a work titled *Chartism* which was first published in late 1839. There Carlyle writes (Volume 10, p 419): "The controversies on Malthus and the 'Population Principle', 'Preventative check' and so forth, with which the public ear has been deafened for a long while, are indeed sufficiently mournful. Dreary, stolid, dismal, without hope for this world or the next, is all that of the preventative check and the denial of the preventative check" (my emphasis). The important thing to notice here is that he is using the word "dismal" some ten years before the "Occasional Discourse on the Negro Question". Carlyle's views as

⁴ I have only been able to find one explicit reference to Malthus in the twenty-six volumes of the *Collected Letters of Thomas and Jane Welsh Carlyle* and that is in a letter dated 7th of June 1820. Here he describes Malthus as "a scholar of the first form in Adam Smith's school" (Sanders, 1970, p 262) and thus as one of a number of writers (including Jeremy Bentham who he describes as "a rhinoceros – strong and clumsy") whose work he does not hold in high esteem. (Interestingly, Carlyle was a teacher at Kirkaldy Burgh School in Fife in 1816 - 18. This was the town where Adam Smith was born and spent his childhood. In fact Smith had been a student at Kirkaldy Burgh School.)

⁵ In this work, which is full of humour and wit, Carlyle presents a satire of unbelief and materialism and proposes in their stead a creed based on German transcendentalist philosophy (he refers to it as "Natural Supernaturalism"). Utilitarianism and liberalism are two of his main targets because (according to Carlyle) they aim to replace religion with the "cash-nexus".

⁶ *Sartor Resartus* was first printed in book form in Boston in 1836 (under the sponsorship of Ralph Waldo Emerson) and only later (in 1838) was it published as a book in England.

⁷ Unless otherwise indicated, all references to Carlyle are to the widely available *Collected Works* edition.

⁸ In Carlyle's view over-population in Europe can be dealt with by emigration - an emigration be led by modern day Alarics equipped "not now with the battle-axe and war-chariot, but with the steam engine and plough-share" (p 184). As is well known Malthus considers emigration as a possible outlet but consistently rejects it as being "perfectly inadequate; but as a partial and temporary expedient" (p 353 of Vol 3 of *Collected Works*).

expressed here are essentially the same as those first presented five years earlier in *Sartor Resartus*.⁹

I think it understandable that Carlyle would find Malthus's ideas - especially as expressed in the first edition of his work on population - as rather "dismal".¹⁰ Malthus himself noted in the Preface to the first edition of his *Essay on the Principle of Population* that: "The view which he [the Author] has given of human life has a melancholy hue, but he feels conscious that he has drawn these dark tints from a conviction that they are really in the picture, and not from a jaundiced eye or an inherent spleen of disposition." (Malthus, 1798, p ii of the *Collected Works* Volume 1). Later in the work Malthus again refers to the "melancholy picture" (ibid, p 70) which is painted in the book. However by the second edition (which was published in 1803) Malthus was expounding his "hopes as well as fears about the course on which British society appeared to be embarked" (Winch, 19877, p 36). In the Preface to the second edition Malthus writes, "I have endeavoured to soften some of the harshest conclusions of the first essay" (1803, Volume 2, p ii).¹¹ In the concluding pages of the second (and later) editions (the chapter bearing the interesting title - 'Of our rational expectations respecting the future improvement of society') he writes, "On the whole, therefore, though our future prospects respecting the mitigation of the evils arising from the principle of population may not be so bright as we may wish, yet they are far from being entirely disheartening" (p 575 of Volume 3 of the *Collected Works*).¹² All the same, the fact of the matter is that Malthus' writings on population are dismal, as Carlyle had said. The language used by Malthus himself demonstrates this. We repeatedly find words like "misery", "evil", "evil consequences" "formidable obstacles" "squalid and hopeless", "wretched state" "wretchedness", "wretched misery" and "squalid poverty". The reader

⁹ And again, he proposes emigration as the, to him, obvious solution to the population problem.

¹⁰ Given the focus on this paper my account focuses on those passages in Malthus which can be construed as 'pessimistic' rather than those that can be construed as 'optimistic'. A referee has pointed out that a more comprehensive and balanced account of Malthus's views may be found in Winch (1987 and 1996).

¹¹ He may have softened some of the conclusions but the language used suggests an even more dismal and melancholy outlook. For example, the word "wretched" is not used in the 1st edition but appears 19 times in the 6th edition; the word "miserable" appears 18 times in the 6th edition c.f. only 2 times in the first while the word "misery" (one of the three "checks") is mentioned 40 times in the 1st and 50 times in the 6th edition.

¹² Malthus does go on to say "and by no means preclude that gradual and progressive improvement in human society, which, before the late wild expectations on this subject, was the object of rational expectation" (ibid).

is told of “the grinding law of necessity, misery, and the fear of misery” (Volume 1, p 65) and of “the absolute impossibility ... that the pressure of want can ever be removed” (p iv) and one cannot fail to mention that memorable passage: “It has appeared, that from the inevitable laws of our nature some human beings must suffer from want. These are the unhappy persons who, in the great lottery of life, have drawn a blank” (Volume 3, p 338).¹³ Various countries are described as “dreary” while their population, and their circumstances, are described as “squalid”, “wretched”, “miserable” and “hopeless” (Volume 2, p 102). This is, as Carlyle describes it 1839 in *Chartism*, “dreary, stolid, dismal, without hope for this world or the next” and “dreary, desolate, and indeed quite abject and distressing” (these are also amongst the terms Carlyle uses to describe the dismal scene in his 1849 *Fraser’s Magazine* article “Occasional Discourse on the Negro Question”).

Carlyle and Sismondi

It does not seem to be widely known that it was Thomas Carlyle who translated Sismondi’s article “Political Economy” for David Brewster’s *Edinburgh Encyclopaedia*.¹⁴ Although Sismondi wrote the piece in 1815, Carlyle’s translation did not appear until December 1824 (this means Carlyle was working on this well before he wrote the 1849 *Fraser’s Magazine* article) and was reprinted in later editions of the *Encyclopaedia* on both sides of the Atlantic.¹⁵ The last of the seven parts of Sismondi’s work is titled ‘Of Population’ and, not surprisingly, it includes a discussion of Malthus’ views on (over) population. Sismondi tells his readers that it was “Mr. Malthus [who]

¹³ It should be noted that in the penultimate chapter of the book Malthus ventures to suggest that if “prudential habits” were more general among the poor then, “if the lower classes of society were thus diminished, and the middle classes increased, each labourer might indulge a more rational hope of rising by diligence and exertion into a better station; the rewards of industry and virtue would be increased in number; the lottery of human society to consist of fewer blanks and more prizes” (Volume3, p 567f).

¹⁴ For the evidence, see the correspondence in Sanders, *Letters*, Volume 1 p 259n (especially the correspondence between Brewster and Carlyle) and p 229. Carlyle was favourably disposed towards Sismondi having read and enjoyed his histories. He also needed the money he would earn from making the translation and the entrée into the literary world it would bring. *Letters*, Vol. 12, p 157, reprints a letter from Jane Carlyle to a friend dated June 1840 in which she mentions that “Carlyle does want excessively to see Sismondi. The translation of a book of his was one of his [Carlyle’s] first literary exploits.”

¹⁵ The page references given below are for the Kelly’s Reprints of economic classics edition which appeared in 1991. The content is identical to that of Carlyle’s original translation except for a few, very minor alterations, mostly involving the changes of a word from plural to singular or vice-versa.

awakened public attention to this calamity under which nations have long suffered” (Sismondi, p 102)¹⁶ and that “[too great] an increase of the population is a national calamity; the earth consumes those whom it cannot feed. The more numerous births are, the more will mortality display its ravages, and this mortality, the effect of misery and suffering, is preceded by the lengthened punishments not of those who perish only, but of those who have struggled with them for existence” (p 98). “At the present day, almost the whole of Europe, [is] unable to maintain a superabundant population, ... which, before dying of poverty, will diffuse its sufferings over the whole class of such as live by the labour of their hands” (p 101f). In language reminiscent of Malthus himself, Sismondi writes not only of “wretchedness” (p 113), but of families being “plunged into the most dreadful wretchedness” (p 105) and of the observer having to behold “extremes of wretchedness” (p 111). He writes of a population “abandoned to all the horrors of want” and “years of suffering” (p 110). “One blushes for the human species, to see how low on the scale of degradation it can descend; how much beneath the condition of animals it can voluntarily submit to maintain life” (p 111). Even by comparison with Malthus there is an enormous amount of “suffering”, “hunger & suffering” and “universal suffering”. There is also much “perishing”, “wretchedness”, “calamity” and “dying of poverty”. Sismondi’s Europe abounds with “victims” and “miserable creatures” who have to suffer their “cruel lot” – notice the similarity in language to that of Malthus. It is quite apparent that if Carlyle did not get the impression from Malthus’s own writings and the public discussion of them that it was a dreary and dismal business, then reading and translating Sismondi’s article would

¹⁶ Sismondi was of the view that “the demand for labour which the capital of the country can pay, and not the quantity of food that a country can produce, regulates the population” (p 104). It is (unsustainable) increases in the demand for labour which results in a “superabundant population” and this is more often than not the result of government action. In such times “the duty of governments to succour so much wretchedness cannot be doubtful, for they are almost always the cause of this wretched population’s being created; but, at the same time, they ought not to forget that it is their part to save from indigence the miserable creatures already in existence, though at the same time discouraging them from perpetuating their race. Assistance given to the poor has often done the contrary” (p 105). He then goes on to talk about the “diminution of the demand for labour by the substitution of machines for men” (p 122) and concludes that technical and structural change have “multiplied wretchedness” (p 116) because they cause unemployment. The “misery of the savage is not equal to that of a poor man without employment in a civilised society” (p 122). Writing this, I am reminded of Kenneth Boulding’s Utterly Dismal Theorem: “If the only check to population is misery, the result of any improvement is ultimately to enable a larger population than before to live in misery, so that resource-improvement actually increases the sum of misery” (Boulding, 1955, p 197).

definitely have led him to that view (or, at the very least, reinforced any ideas he may have already formed).

Concluding remarks

While it may be true that the first place we find Carlyle using the exact phrase “dismal science” is in his 1849 *Fraser’s Magazine* article “Occasional Discourse on the Negro Question”, we should not overlook the fact that well before 1849 he had formulated and (and had published) the view that political economy was a “dreary” and “dismal” science. I have shown above that that this language was first introduced in the context of his reaction to Malthusian (over) population doctrine. Clearly, Carlyle’s reasons (and those of Ruskin¹⁷) for belittling political economy went well beyond any opposition he, and those whose political views he supported, may have faced in the late 1840’s from Mill and Cairnes, who were both prominent in the anti-slavery movement. Moreover, the (exact) phrase “dismal science” is not restricted to Carlyle’s piece on the Negro question. It crops up repeatedly in Carlyle’s later works and especially in his *Latter-Day Pamphlets*. In one of these, published in February 1850, titled *The Present Time*, Carlyle refers a number of times to the “Professors of the Dismal Science” and makes disparaging remarks about their “laws of the Shop-till” (Volume 19, pp 52-4). In another pamphlet published in April 1850 titled *The New Downing Street* he refers time and again to “the Gospel of M’Croudy” (Volume 19, p 181). In criticism of this ‘Gospel’ he writes, “Is there no value, then, in human things, but what can write itself down in a cash-ledger?” (p 182) and later he refers to M’Croudy as “this Professor of the Dismal Science” (ibid).¹⁸ The term “dismal science” appears next in the sixth volume of Carlyle’s *History of Friederich II of Prussia, called Frederick the Great*, published in 1865. In this work Carlyle defines “Political economy” as “meaning thereby increase of money’s-worth” (Volume 26, p 325). He goes on to criticise the “Dismal Science” for advocating policies (such as free trade) which it purports to be appropriate at all times and in all places whereas, according to him (Carlyle), economic policies have to be

¹⁷ I have said more about Ruskin and his views in Dixon (1999 and 2002).

¹⁸ Denis O’Brien has pointed out that Carlyle used the name M’Croudy to refer to John Ramsey McCulloch (O’Brien, 1970, p 99).

tailored to the place and time (p 327). It should also be noted that many prominent economists were not entirely opposed to Carlyle's view of political economy. Marshall, for example, wrote in his *Principles* that if the "older economists" had made it clear that they were concerned with money or purchasing power or material wealth only because "in this world of ours it is the one convenient means of measuring human motive on a larger scale" and "not because money or material wealth is regarded as the main aim of human effort" the "splendid teachings of Carlyle and Ruskin as to the right aims of human endeavour and the right uses of wealth, would not then have been marred by bitter attacks on economics, based on the mistaken belief that that science had no concern with any motive except the selfish desire for wealth, or even that it inculcated a policy of sordid selfishness" (1920, p 22, my emphasis). In his *History of Economic Analysis* Schumpeter asserts that Carlyle has to be seen as an artist rather than a scientist and he says that Carlyle "overlooked the fact that all science is 'dismal' to the artist" (1954, p 410). He goes on to say that "he [Carlyle] was not wholly in error, the utilitarian economists fully deserved all the stripes that Carlyle administered".

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