

Thomas Malthus (1766-1834)



"In October 1838, that is, fifteen months after I had begun my systematic inquiry, I happened to read for amusement Malthus on *Population*, and being well prepared to appreciate the struggle for existence which everywhere goes on from long- continued observation of the habits of animals and plants, it at once struck me that under these circumstances favourable variations would tend to be preserved, and unfavourable ones to be destroyed. The results of this would be the formation of a new species. Here, then I had at last got a theory by which to work".

Charles Darwin, from his autobiography. (1876)

This often quoted passage reflects the significance Darwin affords Malthus in formulating his theory of Natural Selection. What "struck" Darwin in *Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798) was Malthus's observation that in nature plants and animals produce far more offspring than can survive, and that Man too is capable of overproducing if left unchecked. Malthus concluded that unless family size was regulated, man's misery of famine would become globally epidemic and

eventually consume Man. Malthus' view that poverty and famine were natural outcomes of population growth and food supply was not popular among social reformers who believed that with proper social structures, all ills of man could be eradicated.

Although Malthus thought famine and poverty natural **outcomes**, the ultimate reason for those outcomes was divine institution. He believed that such natural outcomes were God's way of preventing man from being lazy. Both Darwin and Wallace independantly arrived at similar theories of Natural Selection after reading Malthus. Unlike Malthus, they framed his principle in purely natural terms both in outcome and in ultimate reason. By so doing, they extended Malthus' logic further than Malthus himself could ever take it. They realized that producing more offspring than can survive establishes a competitive environment among siblings, and that the variation among siblings would produce some individuals with a slightly greater chance of survival.

Malthus was a political economist who was concerned about, what he saw as, the decline of living conditions in nineteenth century England. He blamed this decline on three elements: The overproduction of young; the inability of resources to keep up with the rising human population; and the irresponsibility of the lower classes. To combat this, Malthus suggested the family size of the lower class ought to be regulated such that poor families do not produce more children than they can support. Does this sound familiar? China has implemented a policy of one child per family (though this applies to *all families*, not just those of the lower class).



authors



references