

## **Chapter 14. The Malthusian Marriage System in Perspective**

We are now in a position to stand back from the details and to consider the answers to the questions posed in the opening chapters. First, we can see how the Malthusian marriage system worked in England to provide a boost to economic growth. The marriage structure was composed of a number of interlinked features, the most important of which was the fluctuating age at marriage. This allowed marriage age to rise to a late level in periods when population growth would have been a hindrance to capital accumulation, and to drop when labour was needed. Combined with this was a selective marriage pattern, producing at times a large proportion who never married, for whom there was an established role. Marriage was not automatic, it was a choice, the outcome of cost-benefit calculations for both men and women. This optional marriage was based on the absence of the normal strong positive or negative rules about whom one should or should not marry. The kinship, caste, class and geographical rules which circumscribe marriage in the majority of societies were weak. The one hard and fast rule was that the young couple should be able to form an independent unit at marriage. The funding of marriage meant that resources for this independence came both from the wider society, through job prospects, and from the savings of the couple and their parents. Marriage was viewed as something one 'saved up for', which one could only 'afford' at a certain point.

As we have seen, the major purpose of marriage was to satisfy the psychological, sexual and social needs of the individuals concerned. Children were a consequence rather than a cause of marriage, a by-product of the sexual union. To be 'married friends' was, for many, the ideal. Ultimately, therefore, marriage was based on a blending of, or compromise between, economic necessities on the

one hand and psychological and biological pressures on the other. The union was held to be based on a personal attraction - physical, social and mental - to beauty of shape and beauty of temperament. Marriage was a game, with strategies, tactics, prizes and penalties. The courtship was elaborate: testing" and drawing the couple together. Ideally 'love' would convincingly resolve the complex equations whereby individuals tried to balance a whole set of criteria - wealth, beauty, temperament and status - against which they would measure the prospective partner. The wedding and subsequent married life reflected the premises upon which the system was based, showing that the heart of the matter was the deep attachment of one man to one woman.

The influence of this pattern on the relation between economics and demography was considerable. Above all, the fact that marriage was not embedded in kinship or status, that it was a choice, and that it was ultimately about individual satisfaction, meant that marital age was flexible. There was an invisible threshold of expectations below which people were unwilling to risk marriage - a threshold which it was sometimes easier, sometimes more difficult, to reach. After a period of economic growth the controls relaxed, and some people might decide to turn the new affluence into marriage. Others decided to hold out and move up socially. There was, at the least, that lag between economic expansion and population growth that Malthus advocated and that demographic historians have now established did occur. Marriage had become divorced from biology and was an option, a weighing of costs. This is the 'Malthusian revolution', which formed one of the necessary background features for England's industrial progress in the past, and which is sweeping the world today. Industrialization and urbanization are often linked to the system, but there is no necessary connection between them. Hence, the Malthusian system can spread in areas which are neither urban nor industrial; similarly, as we saw in Ibadan, the presence of industry and urbanization does not necessarily bring about the Malthusian regime.

We can see how a particular demographic regime was produced by a peculiar marriage pattern, but we are then left with the elusive and equally complex question of what 'caused' the marriage pattern. A few hints and suggestions have been given in the preceding chapters. We may draw these together and advance others at a more speculative level. Probably the most convincing general theory is that the Malthusian marriage system 'fitted' perfectly with the particular

socio-economic formation known as capitalism. About this Malthus himself was in no doubt. He wrote his work as a rebuttal of the Utopian Godwin, who had argued that the abolition of private property and the equalization of wealth would lead to a balanced and harmonious world in which trouble and strife would fade away. Put in later terms, he advocated the substitution of socialism for capitalism. Abolish the ethics and institutions of capitalism, and all would be well. Malthus' reply was that the central features of capitalism guaranteed stability and happiness. In the strange kind of metamorphosis that Bernard Mandeville has illustrated, 'private vice' was transformed into public benefit; the private passions and the instituted inequalities of life were the only guarantee that war, famine and disease would not re-emerge. If Godwin gained the day, if wealth was redistributed, private property abolished, and the revolution ushered in, as Rousseau and others had urged, disaster would ensue.. The 'natural passion between the sexes' would go unchecked, the productive tension between affluence and children would be destroyed, all would marry young, and soon mankind would be cast into misery as population outstripped resources.

Thus Malthus saw that the four essential underpinnings of this regime were an accumulative ethic which justified and glorified the endless pursuit of gain; the ranked, but mobile, society which meant that people were constantly scrambling up and down a ladder of fortune; private property, which was protected by government and law; and a generally elevated standard of living which would give people that taste for bodily comforts which would tempt them to forego immediate sexual gratification and delay marriage until they could afford it. The most important of these was that constant drive which has received - many names from its critics: the 'acquisitive ethic' (Tawney), the 'spirit of capitalism' (Weber), 'possessive individualism' (Macpherson). Malthus argued that if the four elements were present, his regime would automatically follow. If they were abolished, then, as in present-day China, the only way in which population could be held in check was through draconian and discriminatory laws and public control.

Put in another way, Malthus was saying that the marital and family system that he advocated was the natural corollary of what today

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1 Mandeville *Fable*.

2 Tawney, *Religion*; Weber, *Protestant Ethic*; Macpherson, *Possessive Individualism*.

would be called market capitalism. Where capitalism flourishes, he argued, so will the particular set of traits he analysed. Thus the system of marital choice, the weighing of costs and benefits, the battle between biology and economics, the constant striving and manoeuvring which dragged mankind painfully up the spiral of wealth - all these were the familistic dimensions of a particular economic and political system. In making this connection, of course, Malthus was not alone. While he justified capitalism as one of the only bulwarks against 'misery', just as Hobbes had justified Leviathan, so other writers saw the close 'elective affinity' between the particular kinship and marriage system and capitalism.

Marx highlighted the capitalistic assumptions in Malthus' work in a number of ways. He pointed out that in absorbing Malthus' ideas, Darwin extended to the whole of life the 'free' world of competitive capitalism. In a letter to Engels, Marx wrote: 'it is remarkable that Darwin recognizes among brutes and plants his English society with its division of labour, competition, opening up of new markets, 'inventions' and Malthusian 'struggle for existence'. (3) It is Hobbes' *bellum omnium contra omnes*. Or, as Bertrand Russell wrote more recently,

'from the historical point of view, what is interesting is Darwin's extension to the whole of life of the economics that characterized the philosophical radicals. The motive force of evolution, according to him, is a kind of biological economics in a world of free competition. It was Malthus' doctrine of population, extended to the world of animals and plants, that suggested to Darwin the struggle for existence and the survival of the fittest as the source of evolution.' (4)

Given Darwin's private speculations and the way they exemplified Malthus, it is tempting to argue further that Darwin projected on to the animal kingdom the same kind of analysis he used in his own reproductive choice.

The connection between capitalism and the 'modern' marital system was made more explicitly by Engels. He pointed out that monogamy was a necessary if not sufficient cause of modern 'sexlove', as he called it, but that it took time to develop into modern individual-choice marriage. 'Before the middle ages we cannot speak

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3 Meek, Marx and Engels, 95, 198.

4 Russell, History of Philosophy, 753.

of individual sex-love ... All through antiquity marriages were arranged for the participants by the parents, and the former quietly submitted.' The 'mutual love', presupposing equality and consent between the partners, and 'intensity and duration' were still a long way off. In medieval bourgeois society 'the question of fitness was unconditionally decided, not by individual inclination, but by family interests. In the overwhelming majority of cases the marriage contract thus remained to the end of the middle ages what it had been from the outset: a matter that was not decided by the parties most interested.' (5)

Then, in the late fifteenth century, the 'time of geographical discoveries', came 'capitalism'. This created a new world: 'by changing all things into commodities, it dissolved all inherited and traditional relations and replaced time hallowed custom and historical right by purchase and sale, by 'free contract'. But to make 'contracts', people must be 'free' and 'equal', and hence 'the creation of these "free" and "equal" people was precisely one of the main functions of capitalist production.' Engels argued that while marriages became 'contracts', legal affairs, the principle of freedom to contract inevitably placed the decision in the hands of those who would have to honour the contract - the couple themselves. 'Did not the two young people who were to be coupled together have the right freely to dispose of themselves, of their bodies, and the organs of these?' So the 'rising bourgeoisie', especially those in Protestant countries, recognized the 'freedom of contracting a marriage'. 'In short, the love match was proclaimed as a human right. 6 Another irony was that the richer people were - that is, the higher their social class - and the more property at stake, the less room for manoeuvre there really was. Yet the majority of the population began to base their marriage on 'love'. Thus romantic marriage is a by-product of the rise of capitalistic, contractual and individualistic societies. Since this occurred, according to the Marx-Engels chronology, in north-western Europe from the later fifteenth century, this is where we shall find the phenomenon. The Malthusian marriage system emerged triumphant between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries in one part of Europe, and then spread outwards. This is the view that is now implicitly accepted by many investigators. For instance, we are told that romantic love 'entered middle-class life by the seventeenth

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5 Engels, *Origin of the Family*, 84, 92, 95.

6 *Ibid.*, 96, 97, 98.

century ... when industrialization caused the middle class to grow rapidly in size and power, its ideals of love and marriage began first to colour and then to dominate western thinking.'<sup>(7)</sup>

The connection between the marriage system and capitalism has been developed in other ways. One argument is that by a curious paradox the central emotional feature, 'love', is a necessity where capitalist economic structures have developed most fully. At first sight, sexual passion and 'love' seem to be totally at variance with what is needed by capitalism. Max Weber observed long ago that 'being one of the strongest non-rational factors in human life', sexual drives are 'one of the strongest potential menaces to the individual's rational pursuit of economic ends'.<sup>(8)</sup> Yet, by a subtle shift, love and sex were domesticated, the force was channelled, and it became one of the central dynamic elements in the capitalist system. Weber saw that as societies became more bureaucratic and 'rational', so at the heart of such systems grew an impulsive, irrational and non-capitalistic emotion at the level of the individual. Just as he had caught the paradox of otherworldly mysticism leading to capitalistic accumulation, Weber hints at the way in which love marriage lies at the heart of rational capitalism:

'the erotic relation seems to offer the unsurpassable peak of the fulfilment of the request for love in the direct fusion of the souls of one to the other. This boundless giving of oneself is as radical as possible in its opposition to all functionality, rationality, and generality. It is displayed here as the unique meaning which one creature in his irrationality has for another, and only for this specific other ... The lover ... knows himself to be freed from the cold skeleton hands of rational orders, just as completely as from the banality of everyday routine.'<sup>9</sup>

Freed from the constraints of the wider world, from the power of family, class and custom, and moved to make a leap of faith where calculation is either impossible or discouraging, the lover selects his life-long mate. In a modern way, it could be argued that 'rational, profit-seeking individuals would never marry at all except for the "institutionalized irrationality" of romantic love.'<sup>(10)</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Hunt, *Love*, 266-7.

<sup>8</sup> Watt, *Rise of Novel*, 74, paraphrases Weber.

<sup>9</sup> Gerth and Mills, *Max Weber*, 347.

<sup>10</sup> Greenfield's argument in Lasch, *Haven*, 144.

It is not difficult to see that although the passion of romantic love is 'irrational', it has many parallels with the 'irrational' passion for endless accumulation, the driving desire to possess, which is also at the heart of capitalism. Not only is there a linguistic congruence between the idea of wishing to 'purchase' objects in a market and the desire to completely 'own' or 'possess' another human being, but the emotions can be harnessed and inflamed by those trying to 'sell' other goods. Thus the 'selling' of consumer goods through mass advertising, and the passions between people, are used to reinforce each other. As Jules Henry puts it, 'without the pecuniary exploitation of romantic love and female youth and beauty the women's wear, cosmetics and beauty-parlour industries would largely disappear and the movies, TV and phonograph -record business would on the whole cease to be economically functional.' (11) Both romantic love and capitalistic activity are based on individual choice, possession, property and 'free enterprise', as Brain argues.' (12)

Another way of perceiving the connection between market capitalism and the Malthusian marriage pattern is to examine the contrast between pre-capitalist and capitalist organizations of the domestic economy and their effects on attitudes towards childbearing. It has been pointed out that where we have a non-capitalist 'domestic mode of production', with the family farm or business as the basic unit of both production and consumption, there reproduction will often expand production and consumption. The fact 'that the family is the basic unit of work' in the Punjab, for instance, encourages fertility. (13) The peasant family is 'distinguished by a higher birth rate'. The 'very fact of giving birth to a child is regarded as a fact of significance to the farm as far as its future continuity is concerned.' (14) We are told that 'the objectives of the enterprise are primarily genealogical and only secondarily economic.'

But all this changes with the rise of capitalism. 'As the capitalist system of production has come to dominance a growing separation of the kinship from the economic order has prevailed.' (15) No longer were kinship and economics linked. No longer was it the larger families who were rich, as it had often been in peasant societies. (16) No more was it the case, as in the domestic mode, that wealth flowed

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11 Quoted in Haviland, *Cultural Anthropology*, 212.

12 Brain, *Friends and Lovers*, 246.

13 Mamdani, *Myth*, 132.

14 Galeski, *Basic Concepts*, 58, 63.

15 Franklin, *European Peasantry*, 1, 2.

16 Galeski, *Basic Concepts*, 63.

automatically upwards, from children to their parents, through the concept of a joint fund. Now reproduction and production came into conflict: people had to make the kind of choice which Malthus and Darwin outlined. They had to balance their individual standard of living against their desire to have children. In this situation, many chose to restrain their fertility by marrying only when or if they could 'afford' to. The major change in many parts of the world 'has been that from family production to capitalist production within a labour market external to the family', for 'family-based production is inevitably characterized by high fertility; and a fully developed system of capitalist production ... is ultimately just as inevitably characterized by low fertility. (17) With the arrival of capitalism, the society is no longer held together by status, but by contract that is, by the market, by an impersonal law, a centralized state. This provides a framework which permits a certain disengagement from the family, enabling free-floating individuals to enter the labour market early, and parents to maintain their independence and security through savings.

The association between the capitalist and Malthusian systems outlined by Malthus, Marx and Engels is attractive. Yet there is one major objection - namely, temporal incompatibility. Put bluntly, the marriage system emerged too early. This is not the place to detail the origins of the various features of the marriage system, but we can briefly sketch in some outside dates for the two phenomena. The capitalist revolution', by the standard chronology that we have inherited from Marx and Weber, is widely believed to have occurred sometime between the second half of the fifteenth century and the end of the seventeenth. Thus of the later fourteenth century, Marx writes, 'the mode of production itself had as yet no specific capitalistic character', and the 'capitalistic era dates from the sixteenth century.'"(18) For Engels, as we have seen, it dates from the 'discoveries', that is, the end of the fifteenth century. Yet if we look at the various features of the marital system, none seem to have emerged in the period between 1450 and 1700.

If we look at the rules of marriage, most of them go back to before the fourteenth century. Age at marriage is difficult to estimate, but late marriage may be a very old characteristic indeed. Tacitus in describing the Germanic peoples in the first century AD wrote, 'the young men are slow to mate, and thus they reach manhood with

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17 Caldwell, 'Education', 247, 225." Marx, *Capital*, i, 689, 669.



vigour unimpaired. The girls, too, are not hurried into marriage. As old and full-grown as the men, they match their mates in age and strength.'(9) Certainly, there is no strong evidence to show that women, in particular, married at or near puberty in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Nor is there evidence of a revolutionary change to the wider West European marriage pattern in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The rule of monogamy was demonstrably ancient. Again, the Germanic peoples who invaded England had long been monogamous, (20) and the Christian Church merely reinforced this cultural premise. One substantial change introduced by the Church was the forbidding of easy divorce, but this occurred well before the fifteenth century. Such a block to divorce, combined with monogamy, may lie behind another change from the Germanic roots - the relatively tolerant attitude towards adultery. This, and the growing acceptance of the remarriage of widows and widowers, were features not present in Tacitus' description. But again they were clearly well established by the thirteenth century, at least.

Rules concerning whom one should not marry were probably also very early established. No substantial evidence has yet been produced to show that there were ever strong kinship rules, any form of 'elementary structure', concerning whom one *should* marry. Certainly by the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries such a structure, if it had ever existed, was gone. Likewise, evidence of rules forbidding marriage between different ranks in the social hierarchy is difficult to find from early on, and is certainly absent by the fourteenth century. The customs concerning marriage payments are particularly well documented. As Blackstone long ago noted, the custom of dower and jointure, of portion and gift, was derived from very early Teutonic customs.(21) The crucial system of balanced payments, the absence of 'bridewealth', and the curious intermediate system which lay between the extremes of full 'community' and full 'lineality', are very early established. They can be shown in Anglo-Saxon laws and customs and were certainly widespread in the thirteenth century.

The very ancient origins of these rules - at the earliest, with the Anglo-Saxon cultures that invaded England, at the latest by the fourteenth century - was related to the apparently early establishment of a particular view of marriage which was consistent with them. This

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19 Tacitus, *Germania*, 118 .

20 Ibid., 116.

21 Blackstone, *Commentaries*, ii, pt 1, 128, note 24, also p.138.

one body and one life. Her thoughts must not stray beyond him or her desires survive him.' (23)

This almost sounds like the present-day marriage service, which is not surprising, for this service is based on the sixteenth -century wording, which in turn is taken from old Teutonic custom. As Maitland pointed out, the marriage rituals of the church 'have borrowed many a phrase and symbol from ancient Germanic custom'. (24) Certainly the companionate view of marriage was the formally and informally accepted one by the fourteenth century, and possibly before.

Finally there is the question of 'love' as a basis for marriage: the origins and rise of romantic love. There is considerable disagreement about this topic, but since it is so important to our argument it is worth examining some of the theories that have been put forward. One of the earliest locations for its emergence is southern Europe in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Marc Bloch summarized the argument that romantic love started in the 'courtly love' traditions of southern France. This 'courtly love' had at first 'nothing to do with marriage, or rather it was directly opposed to the legal state of marriage, since the beloved was as a rule a married woman and the lover was never her husband.' But this 'all-engrossing passion, constantly frustrated, easily jealous, and nourished by its own difficulties', was nevertheless a 'strikingly original conception', an 'idea of amorous relationships, in which today we recognize many elements with which we have now become familiar.' It had little to do with religious values, and the 'Arab influence', Bloch thinks, is as yet unproven. Yet it 'made the love of man and woman almost one of the cardinal virtues ... it sublimated - to the point of making it the be-all and end-all of existence - an emotional impulse derived essentially from those carnal appetites whose legitimacy Christianity only admits 1. order to curb them by marriage.' It flourished, Bloch tells us, in the lyric poetry which 'arose as early as the end of the eleventh century in the courtly circles of southern France' .(25) Love was somehow connected to the weakness of the Church and the strength of an heretical laity. This allowed the emergence of a new secular morality, of which 'courtly love' was a part. These themes have been expanded by subsequent investigators.

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23 Tacitus, *Germania*, 116-18 .

24 Pollock and Maitland, ii, 370.

25 Bloch, *Feudal*, ii, 3 09, 3 10.

While agreeing on the place and time, De Rougemont links courtly love more explicitly to heresy: 'it was not Christianity that caused passion to be cultivated; it was a heresy of Eastern origin . . . Passionate love ... is rather a by-product of Manichaeism'; it is in Catharist heresy that love originated .(26) C. S. Lewis in *The Allegory of Love* is equally confident about the date and place, and equally unsure about the reasons. 'Every one has heard of courtly love', we are told, 'and every one knows that it appears quite suddenly at the end of the eleventh century in Languedoc.' There can be no doubt about its novelty: it was absent from classical antiquity and from the Dark Age literature. Thus 'French poets, in the eleventh century, discovered or invented, or were the first to express, that romantic species of passion which English poets were still writing about in the nineteenth century.' But as to the causes, Lewis admits himself baffled: 'the new thing itself, I do not pretend to explain', though it is one of the three or four 'real changes in human sentiment' in human history. None of the theories - Germanic, Celtic, Byzantine, Classical or Arabic - is satisfactorily proven. Lewis is not even sure whether the feeling came first and then the literature, or the other way round.(27)

Apart from the absence of any convincing explanation of the location of the phenomenon, there are a number of criticisms which have been made of a theory that links the modern love marriage to Provençal love poetry invented at the end of the eleventh century. One is that the dating is wrong. We are told that 'in recent years Peter Dronke and others have argued with much cogency that the sentiments reflected in the lyrics and romances of the twelfth century were not entirely novel. (28) Secondly, the portrayal of 'courtly love' as being exclusively concerned with adulterous love and detached from marriage may be mistaken, as Sarsby argues, citing Chretien de Troyes' *Erec et Enide* which celebrates newly married love .(29) The various criticisms of the courtly love interpretation have been summarized recently by Ferdinand Mount. He points out that adultery is not at the heart of courtly love, that 'courtly love' is in fact a vacuous concept, and that many of its themes can be found much earlier. Again citing Dronke's work, he shows that sexual passion and marital love are widely found in Anglo-Saxon and Celtic poetry.

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26 De Rougemont, *Passion and Society*, 326, 292.

27 Lewis, *Allegory*, 2, 9, 4, 11, 22.

28 Brooke in Outhwaite, *Marriage*, 30

29 Sarsby, *Romantic Love*, 17ff.

Thus, the interpretation that courtly love was invented in the twelfth century is suspect. (30)

There had also been another difficulty, which was recognized by G. M. Trevelyan. If courtly love was the origin of modern love marriage, how was it transformed from its basically anti-marriage stance, into the foundation of marriage? Basing his account on C. S. Lewis, Trevelyan accepted that 'the great gift of the medieval poets to the Western world was this new conception of the love of man and woman as a spiritual thing.' But, he asked, 'could this thrice-precious concept of the medieval poets be allied, by a further revolution, to the state of marriage? Could the lovers themselves become husband and wife? Could the bond of young love be prolonged till age and death?' He believed that this 'further revolution' did, in fact, occur in England, 'in the gradual evolution of the idea and practice of marriage'. But the fact that 'in France, for instance, the arranged marriage is still [ 1944] normal' suggests that it was not an inevitable change'. (31)

Thus Trevelyan documents a second revolution which he believes occurred in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries: 'among the-poor, it is probable that marriage choice had always been less clogged by mercenary motives', and so for the common folk, among the peasantry in the 'Middle Ages, love matches were normal. It was among the higher groups that there had to be a softening, and here 'in the fifteenth century things were slowly moving.' Already in the popular ballad literature of the late fifteenth century, 'the motif of the love marriage was more and more making itself heard.' By the time we reach the 'age of Shakespeare', 'literature and the drama treat mutual love as the proper, though by no means the invariable, basis for marriage.' Yet parental compulsion continued, so that 'the slow and long contested evolution towards the English love match goes on throughout our social history, until in the age of Jane Austen and the Victorians free choice in love is accepted as the basis of marriage, even in the best society.(32) In this chronology, love matches move upwards through the social ranks. What is lacking in Trevelyan's account is any explanation for the change. He points out that it is a revolution and a peculiar one, but then assumes in the best 'whig' fashion that it was bound to happen. Not only has Trevelyan posed

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30 Mount, *Subversive Family*, 93-103

31 Trevelyan, *Social History*, 67, 68 .

32 Ibid., 69-71.

yet not answered the problem of the transmission of courtly love, but he has also tacitly accepted something very important - namely, that for the 'common folk' love matches were normal for centuries before the Reformation. If this was so, it is something that needs explanation.

Finally, we may look at some of the economic and social preconditions which have been suggested as a background to the calculative attitude toward having children. It has been advanced that in England children, like marriage, were not essential. For most they were a luxury, and this fits in with those purposes of marriage that we have outlined. In contrast to most societies, where maximum childbearing is of benefit to the parents, children were a mixed blessing. It has been argued that this was due to a number of structural features in English society. One of these was that parents could not automatically absorb their children's surplus value, their earnings. Put in another way, children had protected property rights - in what they were given and in what they inherited or earned - even against their parents. Children were separate economic individuals. We have traced this feature back to the thirteenth century, but it is likely to go back even further, to Anglo-Saxon law. Since it is totally contrary to Roman law, it is difficult to see where else it could have come from. This was linked to another feature, namely, that property descends, but never ascends. Parents cannot automatically inherit their children's property. This is again an established principle by at least the thirteenth century. These aspects of the separate property of children become especially important when there is widespread wage labour outside the home. When children earn money outside the family, then they are faced with the real choice of whether to direct their income back to their parents and kin. Such a situation, based on the three institutions of servanthood, apprenticeship and wage labour, was established by the thirteenth century at the latest.

The separation of children and parents from an early age, which is embodied in these customs and institutions, led to a situation where the family no longer acted as an undivided unit of production and consumption. Before marriage, and particularly after marriage, children did not automatically invest their wealth back into a family fund from which they automatically inherited. Parents could disinherit children, while children could, in a sense, disinherit their parents, by refusing to maintain them. These separate, nuclear, neolocal patterns appear to have been established quite early,

probably becoming widespread by the fourteenth century, if not long before. They were able to persist because the family was not the pivot of the political, economic or religious system.

A powerful, unified, political system had been built up by the later Anglo-Saxon kings and consolidated by the Normans and Angevins. This stable order meant that public peace and the control of violence were in the hands of chosen officials, rather than the family's. This was reinforced by the early adoption of the wide-scale use of money and the development of markets, which meant that many services usually provided by kin could be provided by others. This also is apparent by at least the thirteenth century, if not long before. In particular, one of the major functions of children - that of protection against risks of various kinds - had been largely eroded. Political risk was kept in check by the state and by a tough, early system of common law, aided by England's position as an island, which protected it from foreign invasions. Economic risk was minimized by early affluence and a relatively flexible monetized economy. The difficulties of old age were met not by stress on children's responsibility, but by a double response. First, through the medium of money, people, could save for their old age and buy the services they needed from the profits of their accumulated capital. Secondly, for those who through accident or miscalculation had not been able so to provide, the Church, the guilds and the manor took on the responsibility for poverty. This non-familistic provision we also know stretches back into the thirteenth century and earlier.

No doubt the exact timing of many features of the system could be disputed, some placing them later, others earlier. What is difficult to see is that any of them could have changed radically in the period between 1450 and 1750. If the marriage system was a 'product' of capitalism, as is usually suggested, we would have expected a slight delay - with many of the transformations occurring in the later sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. There is little evidence of this.

Such a conclusion is not entirely negative. If capitalism is not a cause of the marriage system, as Malthus, Marx and Engels argued, then it may be tempting to suggest the reverse - that the individualistic family and marriage system, and its consequent 'rational' demographic pattern, was a necessary, if not sufficient, cause of capitalism. But if that was the case, what caused the marriage system? Can we accept that a particular religious ethic, combined with particular tribal customs, caused an explosive mixture which first led

to a revolution in sentiment, and later provided the basis for a new socio-economic order? There may be something in this, but there is a modified alternative which fits better with the evidence and preserves what intuitively seems to be the extraordinary 'fit' between the marital system, capitalism and individualism. This emerges if we examine the hitherto assumed chronology of capitalism a little more closely.'

We may take as three of the indices of the development of capitalism: the establishment of the concept of private, fully alienable, property; the widespread use of monetary values and the dominance of market forces; the wide-scale presence of wage labour. Elsewhere I have examined each of these at length and argued that all three can be traced back to the thirteenth century at least. There is certainly little evidence for the supposed transformation from a basically communal - property, subsistence, agrarian 'peasant' society into a capitalist one in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as suggested by the Marx-Weber chronology. If my argument is accepted, then we are in a better position to see that there is a much deeper and longer association between the Malthusian marriage system and other features of the society. They could both be seen as parts of that 'bourgeois arch, which stretches from the twelfth century to our own time'.<sup>(34)</sup> The absence of any signs of a real peasantry in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries would thus be both cause and effect of the demographic and family system. Malthus and Marx would be right, but over a much longer period than perhaps the latter, at least, realized.

Once we re-date the capitalist revolution, or rather admit that there does not seem ever, in recorded history, to have been a sudden revolution at all in England, then the pieces fall into place. Taking Malthus' system's four central desiderata, we find that all of them were considerably developed in England by the end of the fourteenth century, and probably well before. A study of the activities and principles of traders, merchants and artisans as well as large and small landholders in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries is enough to convince us that the central acquisitive ethic, the desire for profit, was widespread. The very extensive penetration of money and monetary values, and the desire to pursue economic gain largely as an end in itself, are very clear to all those who are not blinded by a desire to prove some vast contrast between post-Reformation England and its

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33 Macfarlane, *Individualism*, passim.

34 Thompson, 'Peculiarities', 357.

Catholic past. This acquisitiveness fits with a system of widespread individual property, guaranteed by a developed system of law and powerful government which supported such an ethic. It also fits with a social structure in which there were many grades of status and wealth and in which it was relatively easy to move up and down. Malthus' 'ladder' for social climbing was already in place.

Finally, all this was set against a background of considerable and widely distributed affluence. The English were early noted for their rich diet, their opulent clothing, their leisurely ways, their comfortable houses and magnificent churches and cathedrals. Thus those economic, social and political preconditions for the Malthusian family system, that set of interrelated features which we label 'individualism' or 'capitalism', were already strongly developed. They had probably generated, and continued to maintain, that peculiar marital and demographic structure that was then 'exported' to North America and is now spreading to much of the world. Money, profit, contract, mobility, individualism, competition, had all asserted themselves. Behind the antique modes of speech and the different technology, there existed a recognizably 'modern' world.

History is hydra-headed; each problem we solve generates others. The implication of this argument is that we have a very old association between particular marital, demographic, political and economic systems that go back at least to the thirteenth century in England. Furthermore, it has been tentatively suggested that many of the roots lie much further back, in a particular amalgam of Christianity and Germanic customs. But if this was so, how was it that England, which was merely a small part of north-western Europe infiltrated by Christianity and Teutonic invaders in the fifth and sixth centuries, should have ended up so different from the rest of Europe? This again is a vast topic to which we can only give a brief, tentative, and superficial answer here.

Two points need to be established straight away. First, even in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when the differences were probably most marked, there was much more in common between England, Holland and Belgium, Germany, northern France and Scandinavia, than there was to divide them. From a demographic point of view, for example, they were all part of that 'unique west European marriage pattern' to which Hajnal has drawn our attention. Delayed and selective marriages were part of a much wider pattern. Likewise, as has been pointed out by Laslett, the whole of this



north-western area had a similar household structure, small and nuclear, consisting of parents, some unmarried children and possibly servants. (35) At a broader level, many of the deepest assumptions implicit in Christianity, and in particular a Protestant variety of it, united this part of Europe. Similarly, the economic ethics and institutions of England and Holland, for instance, largely overlapped. Thus from a perspective outside Europe, we are dealing in England with a phenomenon which is still very recognizably north-west European. On the other hand, as we have seen at the start, there were peculiarities about the English demographic regime and something must have led to the fact that it was in England that the first massive industrial and urban growth occurred. We cannot completely wipe away all differences. When Montesquieu visited England in 1729 he wrote, 'I am here in a country which hardly resembles the rest of Europe.' It is not difficult, if we look at other contemporary observers, to see what he meant. (36)

A second point to stress is that the differences may have been much smaller, if non-existent, earlier. De Tocqueville believed that the political and legal systems of the Middle Ages over the whole of France, England and Germany had a 'prodigious similarity', that 'in the fourteenth century the social, political, administrative, judicial, economic, and literary institutions of Europe' bore a close resemblance to each other. (37) In the light of certain deep differences that Marc Bloch, for instance, noted between England and France from at least the second half of the thirteenth century, it seems that De Tocqueville was in error about the timing of the divergence. (38) But his point about the 'prodigious similarity' of much of north-western Europe in the Middle Ages is undoubtedly valid. Both the similarities and one reason for the later divergence are suggested by Maitland in relation to legal changes.

It would be possible to argue that in the eleventh century the legal systems of the whole of the northern half of Western Europe were almost identical, based almost exclusively on the Germanic law of the conquerors. But during the twelfth to sixteenth centuries much of

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35 Laslett, *Family Life*, 15; see also the contrasts within France, as in Flandrin, *Families*, 72.

36 Montesquieu, quoted in De Tocqueville, *L'Ancien Regime*, 89; see Macfarlane, *Individualism*, ch.7.

37 De Tocqueville, *L'Ancien Regime*, 18.

38 Summarized in Macfarlane, *Individualism*, 186.

northern Europe was reconquered by a renovated Roman law. As Maitland put it,

'Englishmen should abandon their traditional belief that from all time the continental nations have been ruled by the 'civil [i.e., Roman] law', they should learn how slowly the renovated Roman doctrine worked its way into the jurisprudence of the parliament of Paris, how long deferred was the 'practical reception' of Roman law in Germany, how exceedingly like our common law once was to a French coutume.' (39)

By the thirteenth century, England was beginning to look distinctly different from the rest of Europe, not because England had changed, but because Roman law had made no conquest there: 'English law was by this time recognized as distinctly English.' This feeling of contrast was heightened because, although 'Roman jurisprudence was but slowly penetrating into northern France and had hardly touched Germany' by the thirteenth century, many Englishmen thought that the whole of Europe now had written Roman law, which served to make a great contrast more emphatic'.<sup>(40)</sup> Certainly, by the sixteenth century England was an island carrying an old Germanic legal system, and lying off a land mass dominated by Roman law. The contrast is obvious in relation to criminal law - the absence of judicial torture, the use of juries, process by indictment.

But the consequences for economics and kinship, and hence demography, are no less important. We may briefly mention one of these contrasts, the concept of property, which has been described by Peter Stein and John Shand:

'the civil law tradition, reflected in the Codes of France, Germany, Switzerland, Italy and even the Soviet Union, tends to identify ownership with the thing owned, and to limit its definition of things to movable or immovable property, as opposed to more abstract rights. The common law, on the other hand, has developed from the tenures of medieval feudalism and has been more ready to analyse ownership in terms of bundles of rights, obligations, and inter-personal relationships arising from the control and enjoyment of property.' (41)

The more flexible English system enabled several individuals to have property rights in different parts of an asset. This difference was

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<sup>39</sup>Pollock and Maitland, i, cvi.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., i, 188.

<sup>41</sup>Stein, Legal Values, 216.

the basis for the early development of full private property. As the comparative jurist Sir Henry Maine argued, this was of fundamental importance. He believed that the modern concept of 'private property', held by the individual, the basis of the capitalist system, arose out of the difference. 'Nothing can be more singularly unlike than the legal aspect of allodial land, or, as the Romans would call it, land held in dominium, and the legal aspects of feudal land. In passing from one to the other you find yourself among a new order of legal ideas.' (42) The basis of this new system was the idea of the impartible, individually owned, estate which could be bequeathed to specific individuals.

In England there persisted over many centuries a concept of individual ownership that was not drowned by a resurgent Roman law. This meant that any individual - man, woman or child - could have absolute rights in their 'own' property, and the concept was fully established by the middle of the thirteenth century, at the latest. People could also have complete rights in themselves; in other words, they were not in the hands of the powerful Roman law concept of *patria potestas*. We have already seen the consequences of this for the marriage and demographic regimes. The separate property rights of children and their ability to enter into marriage contracts without parental permission were central to the Malthusian marriage pattern.

It was not that England changed, but that the laws and customs of its early conquerors were retained. Increasingly, this made it feel different, and this difference was compounded by two further factors. In Europe, Christianity was not a static phenomenon. During the crusades and monastic movements of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and during the resurgence known as the Counter-Reformation of the sixteenth, the Catholic Church established a deep hold on the political and social systems of much of Europe. The Roman Church was the ethical and spiritual counterpart to Roman law. Here again, England remained stranded. The establishment of a separate, Protestant, Church by Henry VIII was but one step in the distancing from a resurgent Catholicism. Through the work of Weber, Tawney and others, we know how this Protestantism shielded and even encouraged those capitalistic tendencies already present. Ultimately, it protected private judgement and independence of belief. The Inquisition, which destroyed huge trading networks and

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42 Maine. *Early Law*. 342.

corroded economic development throughout continental Europe, never took root in England.

A third and growing gulf was between the political systems. A dominating feature of English government, symbolized in Magna Carta and explained in Sir John Fortescue's *Learned Commendation of the Politique Laws of England*, written in 1461, was that England was a constitutional monarchy - the king was under the law. Ultimately the law was supreme: England was not an absolutist state. Despite the activities of Henry viii and the attempts of James i and Charles i, it remained so. Sir Edward Coke's defence of English liberties, in which he appealed to the long tradition of limited monarchy, helped to prevent the development of the absolutist monarchies that spread over much of the rest of Europe. Like England, Holland kept the resurgent Catholicism and absolutism at bay, which helps to account for the great similarities between the two countries. But in Spain with Philip ii, in France with Louis XIV, we see at its most extreme that growth of the absolutist state that has been charted by Perry Anderson. (43) In England alone, there was no large standing army, no centralized bureaucracy, no huge court, no theory that placed the king above the law. In England, consequently, there continued a tradition that had been widespread in earlier centuries over much of Europe.

Max Weber approvingly quoted Montesquieu's observation that there were deep connections between economic, religious and political developments in England. England had 'progressed the farthest of all peoples of the world in three important things: in piety, in commerce, and in freedom'.(44) This was even more obvious when the potential of a 'New England' had been realized in North America, where these connections were taken to their extremes. What is important for us is to realize that while the Malthusian marriage system was behind the peculiar demographic structure, behind that marriage system itself lay layer upon layer of political, legal, cultural and economic decisions which had by chance preserved some ancient features. Most dramatically, the success of the Armada in 1588 would have brought Roman law, Roman religion and absolutist monarchy. The subsequent course of world development would have been very different, for the major alternative to the English - the Dutch - might then also have been swamped. But enough of speculation. Let us

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43 Anderson, *Lineages*.

44 Weber, *Protestant Ethic*, 45.

return to where we started, to Malthus.

Whatever the outcome of arguments about the origins of the system, there are also arguments about the necessary connections between capitalism and the Malthusian demographic pattern. Malthus, Marx and Engels agreed that there was a connection. The difference between them was that while Malthus believed there was a necessary causal connection, Marx believed that it was to a certain extent accidental. Malthus argued that to abolish part of the structure was to abolish the whole. If one destroyed capitalism, inevitably the iron law of population would take over. Man would be faced inevitably with a return to maximum breeding, and hence to famine, war and disease as the only checks. This theory was as direct and deadly a threat to Marx's communism as it had been to earlier theories. The undermining effects of Malthus' theories for those who sought to abolish capitalism were recognized by the Scottish philosopher Dugald Stewart as soon as the *Essay on Population* appeared. 'The reasonings of Mr Malthus, therefore, in so far as they relate to the Utopian plans of Wallace, Condorcet and Godwin, are perfectly conclusive, and strike at the root of all such theories.' Marx recognized that his was one of 'all such theories'. He admitted that 'if this theory is correct, then again I can not abolish the law [iron law of wages] even if I abolish wage labour a hundred times over, because the law then governs not only the system of wage labour but every social system. (45)

Apart from abuse, the major answer to this threat by Marx and Engels was to argue that Malthus had merely established a specific, not a universal, connection. Writing to Marx in 1865, Engels argued, 'to us so-called "economic laws" are not eternal laws of nature but historic laws which arise and disappear. (46) Thus the law of Malthus was 'a law of population peculiar to the capitalist mode of production; and in fact every specific mode of production has its own special law of population, historically valid within its limits alone. An abstract law of population exists for plants and animals only. (47) So when Malthus 'asserted the fact of overpopulation in all forms of society' his conception was 'altogether false and childish', because he turned a natural fact into a social fact, without appreciating all the intervening

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45 Stewart, *Works*, viii, 207.

46 Marx, quoted in Meek, *Marx and Engels*, 118.

47 Quoted in Meek, *Marx and Engels*, 20.

variables which meant that in each different 'mode of production', in Marx's sense, population would act in a different way.(48) Thus, the Marxist eliminates the historical and specific Malthusian predictions when he abolishes capitalism. It is capitalism and not deeper, 'natural' laws that cause overpopulation.

Despite the invective and a few debating points, Marx's counter dismissal is not convincing, and Malthus still stands. De facto this has been recognized in China where, having for years declared that there is no population problem under socialism, in the 1970s the rulers were suddenly faced with soaring population, and recognized that there was indeed a problem. The Chinese were then forced into measures of law and repression which Malthus had predicted would be necessary if the balances of capitalism were not present; there ensued that suppression of childbearing through mass sanctions, laws and inducements which Malthus would have considered grossly immoral, not to say dictatorial. As William Petersen observes, 'when Marx's criticisms of Malthus' principles of population are examined, it becomes evident that neither Marx himself nor any Marxist has developed a population theory to replace the Malthusian one they rejected.'(49) A sneaking admission of defeat is contained in a letter from Engels to Kautsky: 'There is, of course, the abstract possibility that the number of people will become so great that limits will have to be set to their increase.'(50) This the Chinese have discovered.

Finally, it is important to stress that the Malthusian marriage system does not generate any particular population outcome. In England and North America in the nineteenth century it produced very rapid population growth as the equation between economy and personal emotions held at a certain level. Nor does the marriage pattern necessarily find itself linked to a particular technological system (industrialism), social system (urbanism), political system (democracy) or religion (Christianity). These tended to be associated by the nineteenth century in the mother country and to spread over Europe and North America. But the central ideology - a family pattern and individualistic philosophy - can float free. It can find echoes wherever people wish to pursue those ends which Malthus held up before them: equality of the sexes, physical comfort rather than misery, and responsibility for one's own decisions. In its wake

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48 Marx, *Grundrisse*, 605. 49 Petersen, *Population*, 93.

50 Quoted in Cassen, *India*, 300.

come all the associated costs: the destruction of wider groups and communities, the corrosion of loyalties, the calculative, rational view of life, that 'alienation' which Marx documented, the 'anomie' that Durkheim analysed. If Malthus is right, there is only a choice between war, famine and disease on the one hand, and individualistic capitalism on the other. If Marx is right, we can both have our cake and eat it. The two prophets stand locked in battle today as they did in the nineteenth century. This history of the Malthusian family system and its components is intended to explain to us how we came to be as we are, and to help those who still have to choose to know what the choice implies.