

Progress and the planet's limits: some lessons for the 21st century from the debate between Godwin and Malthus

Ernest Garcia

UNIVERSITAT DE VALÈNCIA

ernest.garcia@uv.es

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ABSTRACT

A debate emerged at the end of the 18th century; essentially, the same one we are now discussing regarding the limits of growth. Condorcet (1793–1794) asserted that human improvement would never stop. He ruled out the possibility of the finitude of the planet becoming a barrier with arguments that, in today's language, refer to hopes that threats are distant in the future and of ecoefficiency, dematerialisation, and postmaterialism. Condorcet invented sustainable development as a side thought! Godwin (1793) supported the idea and added that unending progress would be possible only by abolishing government, property, marriage and their associations in order to liberate the individual, thus creating a world without war, crimes, law courts and government, disease, anguish, melancholy, resentment, death, or sex. It is hardly surprising that this anarchist and individualist paradise on earth is similar to the Christian concept of heaven: the dominance of spirit over matter has been a basic belief of industrial society since its very beginning. Malthus (1798) rose against these dreams, saying that nature represents an insurmountable obstacle to their realisation, that necessity and the "imperious law of nature" restrains every organism, even humans, "within the prescribed bounds"—an idea that earned him Darwin's praise and the enmity of many social philosophers. Malthus argued that Godwin's vision of society, although beautiful, was unfortunately based on three errors: (1) that all social ills come from institutions; (2) that eliminating property would give rise to unending wealth; and (3) that equal sharing will always solve material shortages. Even in its literal terms, this debate anticipated a lot of today's current discussion about sustainable development and degrowth, as well as the ecology–equity relationship.

Keywords: progress, limits of growth, Godwin, Malthus..

Corresponding author: Ernest Garcia. Facultat de Ciències Socials. Universitat de València. Av. dels Tarongers, 4b, 46022 València.

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The multiplication of men is called Population. Increasing the earth's produce is called Agriculture. These two principles of wealth are intimately related to each other.
(Mirabeau, *L'Ami des hommes*, 1759)

Nature! —no!
Kings, priests and statesmen blast the human flower
(Shelley, *Queen Mab*, 1813)

In the last years of the 18th century and the first of the 19th, Godwin and Malthus discussed the scope and limits of progress: Godwin (1793) maintained that the perfection of humanity would have no limits provided that there were no obstacles to the truth and that property, government, marriage, and other artificial constructions were abolished. Malthus (1798) replied that Godwin had erred in assuming that the cause of social calamities was merely institutional, and that the combination of the laws of nature and the human propensity to reproduce implied that poverty and inequality could never be completely eliminated. After an exchange of texts and some meetings between them (Avery, 1997, p. 69), Malthus qualified his point of view, directing it towards a compromise solution that took shape in his second (and successive) editions of his essay on population (Malthus, 1989). He maintained from then on that although property, government, and marriage could not be abolished, nor could poverty be completely eliminated, that conscious demographic control, together with adequate laws, could lead to a social situation with a broad middle class, with a few rich and a few poor, that would allow progress to be maintained without it colliding with the limits of the nature.

This is suggestive of a crude anachronism: the revised position of Malthus could be described today as moderately ecosocialist. Or, if preferred, 'ecoreformist'. Ecologist because he maintained that control of the pressure exerted upon the planet would be required if we were to avoid exceeding its capacity to provide resources. Reformist because he considered measures aimed at reducing inequality and increasing welfare to

be desirable, although he claimed that such measures would not go to the extreme of abolishing property and government. Ecoreformist because he maintained that excess ('overshooting') ruins even the best intentions, and that changes introduced in social organisation could only produce real improvements in life by considering this factor. In fact, some Marxists in the 1960s and 1970s described these ideas as the last trick of the "cunning priest"—the epithet is a legacy of Marx—and presented him as an ancestor of Keynes and a herald of social democracy and the welfare state. In other words, according to his critics, he was guilty of some of the most refined tricks that capitalism had been able to contrive the perpetuation of (Dangeville, 1978).

On the other hand, Godwin (1801) admitted that, without a remote doubt, at some point in a future the threat of overpopulation could make limitations on family numbers mandatory in order to maintain a stable population, although he imagined that the predominance of spiritual pleasures (derived from progress) over carnal ones would make this restriction painless. Unfortunately, this initial space of commitment was not subsequently extended or consolidated by its authors or their respective followers. Decades later, Godwin himself wrote a large tome with the aim of disqualifying the theory of the Malthusian population, this time without nuances or any intention of reaching compromises. Goodwin's long essay on population (1820) was theoretically weak and has almost been forgotten, but the misunderstandings and lack of comprehension have endured a long time and continue to this day.

In this sense, I think it is interesting to point out that many aspects of the aforementioned exchange of ideas are still present in open debates in the context of the economic crisis that began in 2008 (in 2007 in Spain, when the housing bubble was 'burst'). These debates are far from being over, with the very precarious 'economic recovery' noted in the most recent period being of hurtful inequalities. What we might call 'Malthus' second thoughts' are now repeated by the scattered survivors of political ecologism, who are increasingly scarce and are increasingly marginalised. On the other hand, Godwin's convictions resonate in many of the slogans of social and political protest even in the face of economic difficulties. On more than one occasion, his ideas and even his language, have reappeared in the most unexpected contexts: from some sophisticated academic proposals inviting reconciliation between Spencer and Marx (individualistic liberalism with communism) to fashionable jargon in which terms such as 'the common', 'the people', or 'the multitude' are presented as conceptual novelties, apparently without being clearly aware of their numerous, complex, and conflicting precedents. The following provides some observations and comments on all of this.

CONDORCET AND THE ELEMENTS OF THE MODERN IDEA OF PROGRESS

The object of the discussion between Godwin and Malthus was social progress: its scope and its limits. A hope that Condorcet had expressed in an extraordinarily clear way in his great manifesto, the *Esquisse*, written in 1793–1794 while hiding trying to elude the guillotine. This text synthesised the social theory of the Enlightenment which had led to the French Revolution, with an unmistakable declaration of faith in a better future. He maintained that, by examining universal history, reasoning and facts could be used to show "that nature has set no limit to the perfection of human faculties; that the perfectibility of man is in reality undefined; that the progress of this perfectibility [...] has no more limit than the duration of the globe upon which

nature has thrown us". He adds: "Without a doubt, these advances may follow a more or less rapid progression, but they will never be retrograde as long as the Earth occupies the same place in the system of the universe".

For him, in the future this would involve, above all, three things: "the destruction of inequality among nations; the progress of equality within the same people; and finally, the real perfection of man". According to his first [statement], "all nations must one day reach the state of civilisation to which the most enlightened, freest, most unprejudiced peoples, such as the French or the Anglo-Americans, have arrived". Thus, we reach the moment "in which the sun will only illuminate on the Earth free men, who will not recognise more sir than their own title; that tyrants and slaves, priests and their stupid or hypocritical instruments will exist only in history and in theatres". [emphasis added by the editor] Later, the text considers the possibility that the finiteness of the planet will one day stop the expansion and advancement of humanity, so that it will reach a point at which "the number of men will exceed the means at its fingertips, which will necessarily result, if not in a continuous diminution of well-being and of the population, then in a truly backwards step, or at least a type of oscillation between the good and the bad".

Condorcet conjured this nasty spectre with three arguments: The first was, in any case, a very distant possibility in time. Second, was that in this remote future, knowledge would have advanced in an unimaginable (and very advanced) way, such that increases in productivity would allow a growing population to be maintained, so that more and more means of subsistence and satisfaction could be obtained with less land and effort and fewer resources. With regard to the latter, even if such a moment arrived, reason would have advanced as much as sciences and arts would have, and so society would be prepared to spontaneously control births, understanding that its obligation to yet unborn human beings is not to bring them into existence, but rather, to happiness

and rejection of the puerile idea of loading the earth with useless and unhappy beings: “Thus, there could be a limit to the possible mass of subsistence, and therefore to the largest possible population, without this resulting in premature destruction, so contrary to the nature and social prosperity of some beings who have received [the gift of] life” (Condorcet, 1793–1794 [2005], p. 40, 194, 198, and 207).

It is worth remembering these three arguments—(1) the large and empty planet; (2) eco-efficiency; and (3), post-materialism—because they have been reiterated again and again by those who try to minimise the threat of natural limitations to development: from Marx and Proudhon, the Pope, modernising sociologists, developmental economists, and a whole panoply of capitalist, socialist, or industrialist apologists, among others (Garcia, 2016).

GODWIN’S VERSION: ENLIGHTENED FAITH WITH AN ANTI-SYSTEM RHETORIC

At about the same time that Condorcet was writing his *Esquisse*, on the other side of the English Channel, Godwin was developing his own doctrine about unending social progress. On the one hand, this doctrine distilled the rationalist faith of the Enlightenment to its purest essence, postulating an “axiom of the omnipotence of truth” that is embodied in a summary political program: “The path of improvement of humanity is to a great extent simple: speaking and acting with truth” (Godwin, 1793, p. 886; 494–495). On the other hand, it explores a possible interpretation of some Rousseauian ideas about the goodness of nature and the corruption derived from culture. According to this interpretation, to make deployment of the truth possible it would be enough to destroy the obstacles that oppose it, thus making human reconciliation with their true nature possible; everything happens to suppress the main institutions and to abolish government, property, marriage, and associations. Thus, paradise would be created on Earth—a world quite similar to Christian

heaven—where there would be no wars, no crimes, no ministers, no courts, no illness, no anguish, no sadness, no resentment, no death, and no sex (Godwin, 1793, p. 871–872).

Because the ideal is for each man to govern himself without any external restrictions, and since even the best government is an evil, the main objective should be as little government as compatible with the maintenance of social peace, said Godwin (1793, p. 185–186). This opinion has allowed many anarchists to consider him as one of their predecessors. It has also made the supporters of minimal state intervention in economic and moral affairs, *libertarians*, and more than a few neoliberals generally sympathetic to his views. His vision of government also exhibits distrust in pluralist democracy: Why make choices if someone wiser can tell the truth and others recognise it? (Godwin, 1793, p. 578–579).

Godwin’s views were also not too distant from communist ones. In particular, libertarian communism, although numerous and significant traces are detectable in other schools, for example, in the work of Engels. Both the establishment of a “cultivated equality” (Godwin, 1797, p.157) and the sharing of all goods would become possible once everyone understands that such a situation is the best response to self-interest, and once the abundance brought by progress in knowledge had made it possible for everyone to receive according to their needs. Thus, the progress of reason would cause no pleasure to be found in excess, power, or fame, and so everyone would unreservedly accept that the only justification for appropriating something would be that they truly needed it. Godwin argued that no one would be interested in accumulating wealth, when the time comes that one needs something, all they have to do is to ask their neighbour (Godwin, 1793, p. 835–836). This state of affairs would be even more easily accepted because, once material subsistence is guaranteed—which will not require more than half an hour’s work a day—no one will look for anything but to cultivate their spirit (Godwin, 1793, p. 833–836).

Finally, Godwin was an extreme individualist. A feature that is evident, on the one hand, in a peculiar philosophy that identifies personal utility with justice and the truth (Godwin, 1793, p. 121 and p. 495). On the other hand, and above all, in a criticism without nuances of the association, described as “an instrument of a very dangerous nature” (Godwin, 1793, p. 212). A critique that announces the elimination, in the ideal society of the future, of common work, common meals, jury trials, concerts given by more than one musician, all theatre except original monologues, marriage, and surnames. Curiously, or perhaps not so much, attacks on cooperation are combined with a defence of coercive control exercised by the community, in a disturbing (and, by the way, very current) mixture of rabid individualism and praise of gossip and delation. Faced with the obvious objection that such an atomised world would have difficulties functioning in, Godwin appeals to unrestricted deliberation in small circles, generating consensus among those already mobilised to search for the truth.

Distrust of the collective makes Godwin a strangely current thinker. Detailing all the connotations of this feature would require another article, but it seems appropriate to at least point out some current proposals which would more or less directly make sense to relate to it. This is the case of the vindication of the anarchic egoism that has recently allowed Stirner, among others, to emerge from oblivion; of some sophisticated academic elaborations that suggest that a fusion of Spencer and Marx should be explored; of the characteristic individualism of some groups aligned in the most extreme and violent factions of animalism; of some poststructuralist speculations inspired in varying degrees by Foucault; or a fashionable jargon in which terms such ‘the people’, ‘the common’, or ‘the multitude’ often occur; terms that always refer to individuals, or aggregates of individuals, groups in better or worse ways, and never to collective subjects.

To me, none of this seems to be the same, although I am intrigued by its simultaneity. It is as if they were

divergent expressions of a recent anthropological mutation, the unforeseen inheritance of the welfare state and consumer society having generated its own human sub-species that, for lack of a more precise term, I have been calling the ‘post-democratic individualist’. It is possible that, now that the socialism of the 19th and 20th centuries—that of the working classes and organised social movements—is on its way to extinction,¹ an ideal bridge that connects these past and present historical phases is being built. On that journey back to the past, the words of Godwin reappear from oblivion, although not always consciously so. Not all his reincarnations are coherent, because a lot of them are openly irrational, and this does not square off with this English philosopher’s unconditional faith in the truth. But it is not so strange that his fingerprints can be detected in so many different directions. Something similar happens with other authors from the end of the old system and the beginning of the new industrial world. In them there are, in a nutshell, many of the later manifestations of the, therefore, nascent society, even some that turned out to be very opposed to each other. Thus, perhaps, there is an interpretation of Rousseau which is compatible with each modern ideology. That is why Saint-Simon was able to simultaneously initiate socialism, positivism, and technocracy, etc.

MALTHUS’ REPLY: THE PLANET’S LIMITS AND ITS SOCIAL EFFECTS

An aversion to the collective is not the only feature that allows us to discover traces of Godwin in several of the current movements that are intended as alternatives to the system. Godwin’s individualism, and in the same sense, his raw

1 Since manufacturing production has moved to Asia, perhaps the organised labour movement is doing so too. The huge general strike of 2 September 2016 in India could be interpreted in this way. In this case, the assessment formulated in the text would apply only, or above all, to the geographical area of the North Atlantic. I think that this point needs to be further discussed.

ecological unconsciousness, should also be added. Almost all the social philosophies formulated within the framework of industrial civilisation have shared the thesis that all the collective problems of human beings are due to technological limitations or organisational imbalances. They have believed, therefore, that if there is a social problem, whatever it may be, either an invention, institutional reform, or a revolution (which, for that matter, is the same thing) will be able to remedy it. This implies that the idea that nature can impose limits that cannot be overcome—either through techno-scientific development or through political action—was simply inconceivable. Godwin is not special in this sense, although, if anything, his thesis is a primal and especially pure vision of that faith:

Under a wise and honest administration of human affairs, I have no doubt that the power of men to multiply, even to very large [numbers], may for centuries become the source of an immeasurable increase of happiness on the face of the earth (Godwin, 1820, p. 453).

Malthus replied that this is an idyllic picture that nobody would stop embracing with enthusiasm if it were viable, but that unfortunately, it is not. Thus, he pointed out that Godwin had erroneously made three assumptions: (1) that all social ills are caused by man-made institutions; (2) that common ownership guarantees the satisfaction of all needs; and (3) that equal distribution always suppresses scarcity.

In chapter 10 of the first edition of *Essay*, Malthus (1798, p. 173–209) recalls that Godwin maintained that political regulations and established forms of property are the source of all misfortunes and the hotbed of all crimes that degrade humanity. He pointed out that, if that were true, then it would be reasonable to expect a complete eradication of social evil, because anything built by human beings can also be overthrown by them. (Marcuse [1968] inspired the rebellious students of the 1960s with the same criteria as Godwin: no projects to reorganise social life is utopian in a society of material abundance and

dominion over nature; everything that is not imposed by natural necessity is possible; subjectivism has a long life). Outraged activists shouted “*No hay pan pa tanto chorizo*” (literally translated as ‘there’s not enough bread for so much sausage’ and reminiscent of the idiom ‘pork barrel politics’) in the streets during the crisis that closed the first decade of the 21st century. The rarely verbalised implication of this phrase is that, by putting [figuratively] weight on from all these *chorizo* sausages, the bread (or, more precisely, except perhaps for some more reflective minorities, the rivers of milk and honey), would again become abundant, as they were in the good times of consumption. Malthus (1798, p.13–17), the naturalist sceptic, without discussing the criterion, remarked that natural necessity has a long hand and imposes costs that resist even the most determined will. Thus, he introduced his controversial thesis that, if the available resources permit it, the population tends to grow above these limits, generating an unavoidable tension between society and nature (an affirmation that earned him the praise of Darwin and feelings of hate from almost all sociologists).

The term *common* has reappeared in most contemporary ideologies, sometimes acquiring an almost magical aura. Then perhaps it would be interesting to revisit some of the term’s history. Godwin argued his proposal to abolish private property, maintaining that this could only be justified for objects that were ‘necessary’ for the welfare of each person: “my right exists at the same time as my need” (Godwin, 1793, p. 856). Thus, land should be open to be cultivated by whoever wants to do so. Progress would lead to a situation in which the same notion of property would become a type of anachronism, because whoever wanted something, would only have to ask their neighbour, thus obtaining it without any further paperwork. “To each according to his needs”, has been repeated in the communist tradition ever since, albeit more or less nuanced.

In the Godwinian version there were not many nuances. This version rests on a double argument.

On the one hand, that the sharing of goods must generate material abundance: land for all and so on until, with the work strictly distributed, half an hour a day would be more than enough. On the other hand, moral and intellectual progress would lead to self-containment, to people voluntarily choosing a simple life. (The sum of the community of goods and the 'best with less' attitude has had a long life as an alternative ideal). Malthus replied that the unrestricted application of the principle that 'everyone has the right to everything they need' inevitably leads resources that are abundant today to become scarce tomorrow, ultimately reproducing and aggravating the misery. His reply, the "tragedy of unregulated public goods", has also proved to be very durable.

The politically non-progressive origin of the idea (in Townsend, 1786 [1817], and others) meant that the existence of the tragedy of public goods in the ideological traditions of the left has been almost clandestine. But it has always been more or less present, imposing nuances and restrictions on the uncontrolled Godwinian idealism. Even a libertarian communist like Kropotkin, analysing the experience of Paris Communes, qualified the formula "each according to their needs" and proposed its interpretation thus: "provide a lot what abounds and ration that which is scarce" (Kropotkin 1887, p. 12–13). In any case, this supposes accepting the presence of scarcity and requires an authority capable of establishing rationing.² The authority can be statist or self-managed, but it must exist, and the rule that everyone take what they want, or ask their neighbours, would no longer be conceivable.

In the second half of the 20th century, theoretically and empirically observing the limits of growth, ecologists realised that without an effective system of regulation and control, a tragic fate for common patrimony would indeed become inevitable. Regardless of whether their political orientation was more sympathetic to

liberalism (Hardin, 1968) or to socialism (Harich, 1978), the conclusion was shared: the scarcity of resources can only be managed, not eliminated. Harich maintained that the limits of the planet made Babeuf's communism necessary, not Marx's. Manuel Sacristán put it this way: the ecological crisis implies that communism cannot be a libertarianism of abundance, but rather, an egalitarianism of scarcity.

In its most recent reappearance, the invocation of 'the common' seems to have lost all trace of the 'preventionism' that, perhaps confusingly, has accompanied the alternative movement for most of its history. It is as if exasperation had made all restrictions, not purely political ones, unthinkable. "It's not a crisis, it's a scam". Then let us finish with the scammers, and the crisis will vanish from thin air. But the problem is, the situation is not exactly like that. While it is true that the scenario that started to unfold in 2007—and which is still far from being over—contains a scam, it also represents a crisis. It is one of the most cyclical convulsions of capitalism, and is especially irritating due to the prominence of global casino gangsters, looting bankers, and corrupt politicians. But it is also one of the first 'overshooting' crises, one of the consequences of the ecological excess of industrial civilisation which will tarnish everything in the 21st century. Losing sight of this invokes the darkest of the Malthusian ghosts: the ethics of the lifeboat (Hardin, 1974); the eventuality not only that rationing is inescapable, but that the rations too become scarce. In this sense, environmentalism's warning was always more preventive than repressive: it's better to act before it's too late! (Garcia, 2015).

In short: it would be useful to put the commitment between Godwin and Malthus (fostered more than two centuries prior and before being long interrupted) back on the agenda. Facilitate access to what is abundant, ration what is scarce, and act in time to avoid shortages to become unmanageable and in so allowing equal distribution to convert into another recipe for disaster. However, if someone ventures into that territory and shouts "Is anyone there?", the only audible answer will be silence.

² Szuba (2014) explores the implications of this criterion for policies against climate change.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Ernest Garcia (Alicante, 1948) is a senior professor of sociology at the University of València. He is the author of *El trampolí faustic: ciència, mite i poder en el desenvolupament sostenible* (1995; 'The Faustian springboard: science, myth, and power in sustainable development'), *Medio ambiente y sociedad: La civilización industrial y los límites del planeta* (2004; 'Environment and society: Industrial civilisation and the limits of the planet'), and *transitioning to a post-carbon society: Degrowth, austerity, and wellbeing* (2017).

