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THOMAS MALTHUS AND NIKOLAI CHERNYSHEVSKII: STRUGGLE FOR EXISTENCE OR MUTUAL HELP?

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Abstract

This paper compares and contrasts dystopian counterfactual thought experiments in Malthus' *Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798) on the one hand and the utopian vision of the future in Chernyshevskii's novel *What Is to Be Done?* (1863) on the other hand. Chernyshevskii's future forecast appears in Vera Pavlovna's fourth dream (Chapter XVI) and arguably constitutes Russia's answer to Malthusian theories, an interpretation that is supported by the novelist's critical writings. Malthus' vision of the future is based on the assumption that a constant struggle for existence between individuals is inevitable within human society: he believes that there will always be a shortage of food and other natural resources, since population grows much faster than food production. With reference to closely related theories by Darwin and Kropotkin, the present article argues that for Černyševskij, in contrast, one of the most fundamental principles underlying interpersonal relations is mutual help, which leads to cooperation and teamwork for the sake of the common good. The method used for this analysis is interdisciplinary, combining critical tools from the disciplines of literary studies and philosophy. While numerous studies have been devoted to Vera Pavlovna's fourth dream, the novelty of the above approach lies in reappraising this famous chapter by reading it as a thought experiment. This experiment plays through the Malthusian scenario of population growth and results in a completely different outcome. Such an analysis sheds light both on Chernyshevskii's model of the future and on the epistemic value of literary thought experiments within a wider cultural and scholarly context.

Keywords: *Th. Malthus; N. Chernyshevskii; Ch. Darwin; P. Kropotkin*

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In this paper, I compare and contrast Malthus' *Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798) and the utopian vision of the future in Černyševskij's famous novel *What Is to Be Done?* (*Čto delat'?*, 1863). Černyševskij's future forecast appears in Vera Pavlovna's fourth dream (Chapter XVI) and some of its key passages arguably constitute the Russian novelist's answer to Malthusian theories. The latter are conveyed via a series of counterfactual thought experiments that Malthus conducts in the course of his *Essay*: in other words, systematic and intrinsically plausible narratives based on unreal assumptions. Malthus' dystopian vision of the future implies that a constant struggle for existence between individuals is inevitable within human society: he argues that there will always be a shortage of food and other natural resources, since population grows much faster than food production. With reference to closely related theories by Darwin and Kropotkin, I will attempt to show that for Černyševskij, in contrast, one of the most fundamental principles underlying interpersonal relations is mutual help, which leads to cooperation and teamwork for the sake of the common good. The method used for this analysis will be interdisciplinary, combining critical tools from the disciplines of literary studies and philosophy. While numerous studies have been devoted to Vera Pavlovna's fourth dream, the novelty of my approach lies in analysing this famous chapter as a thought experiment that plays through the Malthusian scenario of population growth and results in a completely different outcome. Such an analysis sheds light on Malthus' pessimistic anthropology, on Černyševskij's model of the future, and on the wider epistemic value of thought experiments. In this context, let us keep in mind that according to Ernst Mach, an underlying distinctive feature of most thought experiments is variation, or the playing through of multiple alternative scenarios: "As we can see, the fundamental method of the thought experiment is the same as that of the physical experiment: that is, the method of *variation*. Via a variation of circumstances, continuous if possible, we can expand the scope of the idea (expectation) that is associated with them [...]." ¹ For the purposes of this paper, I will also assume that a (literary) thought experiment aims to produce some kind of reader response and has a specific scholarly or ideological hypothesis as its starting point, which it attempts to confirm and/or undermine using a range of stylistic and rhetorical means.

While thought experiments are typically employed in the social and natural sciences, ² Thomas Malthus is one of the first to conduct a series of counterfactual thought experiments in vivid narrative form, as noted by Riccardo Nicolosi (Nicolosi 2013: 55): in the *Essay on the Principle of Population*, these experiments typically relate the downfall of an initially perfect imaginary society, so as to demonstrate the mechanisms of population growth that prevent human society from achieving homogeneous prosperity and universal happiness. The *Essay* postulates a constant tension between food production and population growth (Malthus 1993: 13):

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