

**TWO WAYS TO INTERPRET THE WORLD – TH. R. MALTHUS AND
„L'ABBÉ PIERRE” –**

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Abstract:

Both priests, both – but in different ways- interested by human destiny especially of the poor one. There are 160 years between them. What do they have in common in the way of thinking what was the differences there? Almost nothing in common, almost everything dissimilar. What is interesting to see is that the first one we mentioned, Thomas Robert Malthus – entered long time ago into the economic history thoughts. Sometimes bright, sometimes a visionary... The other „l'abbé Pierre” is about to enter in the universal patrimony leading a current of thinking and acting that is focusing on the brothers that are poor, for the better of those marginalized, ignored and hungered, most of the time humiliated. Taking in consideration nowadays model of development, it seems that the future is imperious necessary. I wrote about both, but more about Malthus (see for example the chapter from my book, „Istoria gândirii economice de la fiziocrați la sfârșitul secolului XX”, Edit. Continent, Sibiu-București, 1999) and less than “l'abbe Pierre” (see Dan Popescu „Jurnal economic” Edit. Continent, Sibiu-București, 2007) in a way of economic history of thought, a way based on acting and facts.

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Writing about the abbe Pierre in Romania before 1989 was very hard. However, writing in a neuter manner about Malthus was possible. And after that moment, the (incorrect) haste towards ultraliberal profit schemes, the

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unjustified and absurd critique of the state institutions which helped the cunning, the corrupt, the cynical „fish” huge wealth in „dark waters”, all these combined with a barely visible, neglected, minimized social, with lack of information- „he was not and still is not worth the effort” not few have said- have placed abbot Pierre outside the scope of most researchers’ study. Given the aforementioned circumstances it was actually not possible for him to be placed in the „a le une” of economic research. I have never adhered to such a trend of brutal, visceral repudiation of the social only because we were coming from „socialism” and wanted something many of us did not even know what it was. As a proof, I have included the abbe Pierre together with Malthus in the scope of my present day research. It is natural for Malthus to deserve this. And so much more for abbe Pierre. And I am doing this in a year marking the 246th anniversary of Malthus’ birth and 58 years since „l’abbe Pierre” launched his dramatic and touching appeal which was so full of hope. The French magazine „Historia” has recently commemorated both researchers with two succinct and isolated articles. This is how I got the idea. But my enquiries and the association I have made were and still are different from the lines in the prestigious French publication. In addition to this, my considerations are naturally closer to the economic realm...

So, Thomas Robert Malthus (1766 - 1834), an important name and chapter in my textbook of economic doctrines and in my related research papers. Together with David Ricardo he belongs to the pessimistic faction of the classical liberal school of economic thought. As I was saying, he was born in February 1766 in a middle class family from Surrey, England. The sixth of eight children, he himself having many children. A situation which makes us look at his words attentively and point out, together with the late academician professor Vladimir Trebici, the the good can be separated from the rest. And reconsider what not few doctrinaires from our country and from other places have considered as being a bad thing, or at best, an exaggeration. Let’s consider these things as a warning, perfectly valid then and nowadays. Le’s see.

Malthus will be highly educated at Cambridge, where, in 1793 he will even receive tenure. However, he will become an Anglican clergyman in 1789. A generous and wise priest, but also an attentive researcher, trying to be- although not always with success- cautious, lucid. Malthus will stand out as a researcher, among others, through his empirical research and the conclusions drawn- so valuable through their content and scope, through their realism and

importance. At that time - the end of the 18th century- England had been for several decades at the forefront of the industrial revolution, but there were still many obstacles to the emergence of a large mechanistic, capitalist industry. In particular, from a human point of view we are talking about the large concentration of workers living in misery, sending their 6-7 year old children and 7-8 month pregnant wives to work in mines and factories, being constantly threatened by unemployment (though most often cyclical), under specific economic dynamics. These urban crowds, usually less adapted and poorly educated, would also become addicted to alcohol, prone to rage and violence, posing the danger of extensive social unrest. Not very concerned with the capitalist mechanisms which triggered such behaviour, although I do not believe he could have understood them, Th. R. Malthus will embrace the concept of „dangerous classes” in vogue then, but to a certain extent also now among the wealthy. He will shift the blame to the poor and the marginalized. As they own no assets, they are to blame for the the evils of society. Moreover, Malthus believes somehow correctly, poverty and its companions - ignorance, alcoholism, violence- „arouse the fecundity of couples”. As compared to any living body constantly seeking to propagate its species more than the amount of food it has at its disposal, man as a rational being should check such an instinct. Almost impossible

... So other motivations are found for misery, but its victims continue to remain the culprits. In this direction, in 1798 the researcher-priest will publish „An Essay on the Principle of Population”, without signing the paper. It didn't „agree” at all with his ecclesiastical status. The book will spark extensive debate, and in 1803 Th. R. Malthus will republish an expanded variant of the 1798 volume with ample comments on pages, this time with his signature. He was already on the path to his vocation as a researcher, a vocation surely stronger than that of priesthood; a year later he will get married and become professor of political economy at the important East India Company College. A position he will hold until his death in 1834. He will bring out two more editions of his book, resigning more and more from the moral side of his considerations to the sometimes relatively scientific one. The book will be soon translated into French, at Geneva, and then into several other languages.

Since then, and probably, most probably from now on, there has been and will be an extensive debate among researchers: for or against Malthus' ideas? And we must complement these ideas regarding the „population law” as

the English researcher called it, with those which reinforce his considerations about the population status (the poor one in particular, actually the largest part of the population). This population increases numerically much more quickly- by geometric progression- as compared to the production of goods necessary for living, which increases in an arithmetic progression. The researcher looks only at the level of production and technology from his time, does not „look up” any further into the future. And for Malthus, the only preventive check which can break such a „population law” was the „moral restraint”, especially for the poor, destitute ones, chastity in celibacy and sexual abstinence in marriage. Going to the sterilization of poor women or those from poor couples.

Here is a theory which, from my point of view, is not so much flawed in the parallel Malthus makes between the population dynamics and the comparative dynamics of food resources. How deeply vulnerable are the meanings and implications the former priest is thus revealing. He is more of a photographer of reality than an analyst, an examiner of its mechanisms and evolution. Let me explain. On the basis of some empirical studies conducted mainly in England, studies which he generalizes starting from the demographic structure of a country which consists of more than 90% poor people, couples or not, but extremely prolific, while the food supply he is also analysing is seen to increase at a much lower rate, Th. R. Malthus is strongly against procreation in any family, official or not, which does not own any resources. So he will write: „A man who is born into a world already possessed, if he cannot get subsistence from his parents on whom he has a just demand, and if the society do not want his labour, has no claim of right to the smallest portion of food, and, in fact, has no business to be where he is.” However, Malthus, the „moralist” will not request that the state should restrict the poor’s right to get married. They may get married but they may not have children...

There are several positive elements at Malthus: a) the fact that the researcher-priest notices this dysfunction, which can be generalized given the aforementioned demographic structures, between the rapid growth in the poor population, so in population in general, and the much slower growth in the necessary food resources. Sequential, but a real discrepancy. A serious alarm signal still valid today, from which various authorities could have learned and can still learn, and from the perspective of which they could have taken action and still can. As a matter of fact, various judicious policies of birth control

from different countries prove that Malthus' ideas have not been useless. What is happening in the present as regards the libertarian measures of birth control proves that what we are dealing with is more a way of living, a type of individual sexuality than a „population law”. Which does not mean that at a national, community or global level measures shouldn't be taken to increase food production and reduce starvation in the world. b) Malthus is one of the first economic thinkers to introduce the biological factor into the development equation, thus launching, from his perspective, the concepts so extensively discussed today, especially bio-economy, eco-economy, durable development, sustainable development. And many more others ...

However, I note, we note that Malthus does not conceive of poverty, of famine, of misery as an economic-social, socio-economic disease with detailed genesis and emergence mechanisms at a national and global level. He regards them as something „given”, which the world can get rid of by physically reducing the number of the poor, by eliminating them literally. Or this idea has been and still is outside the current norms of human civilization, of human behaviour and practice. Can we, could we, will we be able to eliminate poverty by physically eliminating the poor, as Malthus forecast, together with abstinence, sterilization, by promoting repressive methods such as wars? Or have the poverty and misery generating mechanisms which stem from the economic and the social, from the social and the economic, (as the two areas reinforce each other), continued „to produce themselves” and will continue to do so in the future? Obviously, this is what happened in the past, is happening, will be happening. It is clear today- and it has been clear for some time- that there is an individual responsibility for poverty, ignorance, humiliation, marginalization, but there is also a social one. The pro-natality policies, be they relative or absolute, in several developed countries, based precisely on an increase in production, on development, have strongly infirmed and are infirming Malthus in his last considerations. Let me point out another aspect. More than 100 years before Malthus, the great French Enlightenment philosopher Montesquieu wrote: „If I know of something that is useful to me but detrimental to my family, I remove it from my spirit. If I know of something that is useful to my family but detrimental to my country, I try to forget it. And if I know of something that is useful to my country but detrimental to Europe, to humankind, I look upon that „something” as a crime.” How suggestive. To a large extent, this is how the world with all it has had good was constituted- when it was constituted- and is still being

constituted. How far Malthus was from such deep thoughts. In total contrast to the Malthusian and Neomalthusian ideas (Malthus has had and continues to have followers in modern times) stand abbot Pierre's thoughts.

... So, the abbe Pierre. His name was Henry Groues. Born in 1912. A monk, ordained priest in 1938. With a strong, active and brave involvement in the French Resistance against the Nazis. In the Resistance he was known as „l'abbe Pierre". Decorated after the liberation with the „Cross of War with Palms", a high distinction, and elected deputy in the first post-war French National Assembly, between 1945-1951. He had already made himself a mission of honour- especially from the perspective of his ecclesiastical position- he said he had to fulfil this position in this way, too- to help the poor, to support them, to lift them up, to offer them hope, a different horizon. This was the man, loyal to God, to his fellow human beings, modest, helpful ...

... We are in Paris, in January 1954. Siberian cold weather, thermometers often „going" below -15C, and even more severe frost being forecast for the whole month of February. Fulfilling the mission he had undertaken, together with a few friends, fellows in the „Emmaus" charity, and with journalist friends, the abbe Pierre would walk the frozen streets of the Capital every night, bringing the poor, through their words and the small packages offered, a little comfort and much human warmth. There were very many people who needed it. In the whole France, and so much more in Paris, there was an unprecedented housing shortage. There had been several decades of inactivity in this respect, and there had been the large destructions of the Second World War. There had been a strong rural exodus, but also a slight improvement in birth rates. There was a lot of poverty and housing was expensive. As a matter of fact, on those days in late January 1954 temperatures started to drop towards -30C. The price for lodgings was going up, those who did not pay the rent or the mortgage were evicted from their houses without much talk, and very many people could not even dream of a dwelling place to give them some shelter. So the streets were full in the night- most markedly at that time- by the „sans login". The problem had been evident for several years, but now, under the circumstances described above, it had acquired terrifying dimensions. Abbe Pierre had been for some years the leader of a small social organization, of cotton, dressings and construction to help these people- the „Emmaus". Things were moving slowly. At the start of that January 1954, when problems were „overflowing", he tried first to take political action, by introducing in Parliament an amendment bill for the rapid, emergency building

of some dwellings. On the same night the bill was rejected by the deputies-writes Axelle Brodiez-Dolino, the author of a remarkable book „Emmaüs et l'abbé Pierre”, Presses de Sciences Po, 2009 from which I took over some of my information- a small child died of cold in one of the Emmaüs locations, where they were already doing what could be done at that time, with the means they had available. L'abbé Pierre published in „Le Figaro” an open letter to the minister. In the absence of a political answer- the minister did not answer- he acted as he saw fit. On the one hand, he appealed to the journalists, and at the same time, at night, on the streets of Paris he would distribute soup, coffee, bread and blankets to those who spent the night in the street. „Once you had distributed the aid, you could not say „have a nice evening” or „good night” to people who were dying on the frozen asphalt” abbot Pierre remarks.

So, we are just at the beginning. As a result of l'abbé Pierre's efforts, which made a strong appeal to the public opinion, his association was offered a vacant plot of land at the „foot” of the Paris Pantheon. There, on Friday, 29 January 1954 in the afternoon, the priest and his friends put up a large size military tent, with insulating straw on the floor, and equipped with catalytic stoves which could prepare large quantities of tea. Together with his friend Rober Buron, minister of Overseas Territories- so some politicians were „answering”- abbot Pierre welcomed the first homeless people who arrived to the tent. And one day later, Saturday 30 January, madame Larmier, the owner of the Rochester Hotel, announced l'abbé Pierre that, under the circumstances, she was able to offer the „sans logis”, the „couche-dehors”, the vacant rooms in her hotel, rooms which she made sure would not be few.

... It was already a first-time event: the first steps which proved that Emmaüs and l'abbé Pierre were starting to mobilise society in its entirety in order to help the poor. On Sunday 31 January, l'abbé Pierre together with the journalist George Varpraet, will give seven lectures on the situation of the „street people”, and on the very same evening, with the help of the Cityhall, the first Committee of emergency help for homeless people will be formed in Paris, a fraternal aid center will be opened and many nocturnal tours will be made in order to collect the homeless and take them to shelter. However, things were not by far solved. On the same night, in front of the „du Chatelet” theater, a 66 year old woman was found almost frozen, and died shortly after being taken to a police station. She had been evicted on the previous evening for not paying the rent, as the prefect was reminding the police to continue evicting those who did not pay. Here is Victor Hugo and his *Les Misérables*,

so close. On the same night, 8 more adults and 3 babies died of cold in France.

So far away from Th.R.Malthus, who coldly concluded that „we must simply eliminate the poor”, on the next day l’abbe Pierre together with the journalist Verpraet will draft a touching appeal to the French public opinion, and read it at the central radio station. An appeal to solidarity and help. Here are a few fragments: „Dear friends, come help. A woman froze to death last night on the sidewalk of Sevastopol boulevard, clutching the notice through which, the day before, she had been evicted from her house for not paying the rent. Every night there are more then 2,000 people shivering in the cold, without shelter, without bread, almost naked. In front of this horror, the creation of emergency shelters is imperatively necessary. Hear me: in the last 3 hours, the first 2 aid centers have been created. They are filled to overflowing, we must open others everywhere. Tonight, in every town in France, in every quarter of Paris we must hang out lighted placards in the dark, at the door of every place where there are blankets, mattresses, soup, placards on which, under the title „Fraternal aid center”, these simple words should be written: „You who suffer, whoever you may be, come in, sleep, eat, regain your hope, here are people who love you, here we love you”.... In front of their brothers who die of misery, people should be united by one will: the will to do the impossible so that such misery will not last. Please, let’s love one another enough to build this as soon as possible. So much pain has given and continues to give us the wonderful thing which is: the shared spirit of France.

Each of us can help the homeless. We need tonight and at the latest tomorrow 5,000 blankets, 300 large American tents, 200 catalytic stoves. Bring them quickly to 2 Rochester Hotel rue la Boétie. The meeting with the volunteers and the trucks which will collect the homeless is tonight at 11 p.m. in front of the tent in Saint-Geneviève. Thanks to you no man or woman, no child will sleep on the asphalt or on the waterfronts of Paris tonight. Thank you.”

It was the priest’s Christian entreaty not to let his fellow human being die, to give him love and hope. It was the plea of the Resistance and of the political man to revive the „shared spirit of France”. Finally, it was the pragmatism of the former scout and of the journalist at l’abbe Pierre’s side. Shortly, the Rochester Hotel was inundated with donations: packages with warm clothes, quilts, pots, money, banknotes and even jewelry. „The generous spirit of France”, of the French had become to be felt. Many packages will

then be stored in several locations belonging to the administration, to the municipality, or to different associations. The idle railway station at Orsay will also be turned into a huge storeroom, in addition to four other idle underground stations: Saint-Martin, Liège, Rennes and Champ-de-Mars. The Cityhall of Paris will also offer places in schools and highschools. All these will be operational for almost one month and a half. Beds will be brought in, new shelters will be opened which will operate on an almost permanent basis.

The expected political answer will come, though late. On 4 February the Parliament will vote a program worth 10 billion old francs for the emergency building of 12 thousand dwellings... It was, the press said at that time and afterwards, a „genuine uprising of kindness”... In 1961, l’abbe Pierre was still known by 98% of the people randomly asked about him. He will come back in the spotlight after 1998, when the „new poor” and homeless appeared. He will travel all over the world, his viewpoints becoming, generating, developing into real institutions: in London, Brussels, Zurich, the United States and Canada, in Koln, in the Netherlands, India, Lybia, Africa, South America, Austria, etc. He will meet with president Eisenhower, Pandit Nehru, Indira Gandhi, Mother Teresa, Josua de Castro, Albert Schweitzer, and many more others. It was no longer only about doing generous deeds for the poor. It was more and more about creating the societal mechanisms to stimulate their integration, reinsertion, to help them become „employed”, regain their once lost identity. L’abbe Pierre was no longer only a name. He was also an institution, a way of thinking, of being, of acting. What a huge difference from Thomas Robert Malthus’ way of thinking and being. Millions and millions of people regained their hope- and many of them fulfilled it- thanks to l’abbe Pierre and those like him ...

I’m closing these notes thinking about Romania: I don’t think any political force will have any chance of succeeding without meeting at least two requirements: a) the development and reorganization of industrial production, the development of infrastructure, of job creating activities, the best therapy to reduce poverty, the physical and moral misery which is closing in on us; b) the obligation to hold accountable those explicitly or implicitly guilty for this terrible disaster of the country. Especially, in this way, „the money back to the people” from those who have stolen from all of us, with the factories, the fleet, the land, etc. And who, in 23 years have built nothing, have brought us to the state we are in now, with such low hopes, while a few, in sheer opposition to the collapse of the country and of the economy, have

accumulated huge fortunes at our expense, with almost no constructive effort on their side, based on corruption and favouritism. In this way, by not doing what we are supposed to do, in a few years' time we will not be very far from the poverty and misery of some countries in Africa ...