

The Origin of the Term "Dismal Science" to Describe Economics ¹

Robert Dixon

Department of Economics

University of Melbourne

Parkville

Victoria 3052

AUSTRALIA

Generations of students and the reading public have been taught: (a) that it was Thomas Carlyle who called economics (political economy as it was then known²) "the dismal science" and (b) that he did so as a reaction to the pessimistic predictions of Malthus in relation to population growth and its consequences. I will demonstrate that proposition (a) is true but proposition (b) is, strictly speaking, false. I will also demonstrate that Carlyle first used the term in the context of a debate which was unrelated to Malthus's writings on population³ (indeed unrelated to Malthus at all) and that the specific context is not only interesting but also uplifting. For both reasons, the origin of the term "dismal science" is worth exploring with students. In addition, in an Appendix I provide information on the origin and original meaning of the term 'Captain(s) of Industry'. This is another of Carlyle's inventions.

CARLYLE AND MALTHUS

Many writers have linked the origin of the term "dismal science" to Carlyle's⁴ reaction to Malthus. Barber, for example, writes: "The influences flowing from [Malthus's] findings [on population] were largely responsible for provoking Carlyle to label political economy as 'the dismal science'" (Barber, 1967, p 68); "It was with Malthus and Ricardo that Economics became the dismal science" (Galbraith, 1977, p 35); "[A]fter he had read Malthus, Carlyle called economics 'the dismal science'" (Heilbroner, 1986 p 78); "There was a final if unintentional, Malthusian legacy, one for which he was responsible along with Ricardo. Economics would hereafter be associated with the atmosphere of unrelieved pessimism and gloom, and economists would be given the name and reputation (by way of Carlyle) that survives to this day, that of Respectable Professors of the Dismal Science" (Galbraith, 1987, p 81); "Thomas Carlyle, after reading Malthus, called political economy the 'dismal science'" (Oser and Brue, 1988, p 91); "[Malthus's] prediction of misery led Carlyle to call economics 'the dismal science'" (Staley, 1989, p 59); "One of the earliest and most famous definitions of economics was that of Thomas Carlyle who in the early 19th century termed it the "dismal science. What Carlyle had noticed was the anti-utopian implications of economics. Many utopians, people who believe that a society of abundance without conflict is possible, believe that good results come from good motives and good motives lead to good results. Economists have always disputed this, and it was the forceful statement of this disagreement by early economists such as Thomas Malthus and David Ricardo which Carlyle reacted to." This last quotation is taken from the popular

CyberEconomics WWW site developed by Robert Schenk.⁵ Many other examples could be given but I hope that the reader will readily agree that the notion that the origin of the term "dismal science" lies in Carlyle's reaction to Malthus is so widespread that it has become part of the folklore of our discipline.

In what follows I want to show three things. First, Carlyle did not, strictly speaking, use the phrase "dismal science" in relation to Malthus' population doctrine. Second, he instead first used the phrase in the context of discussing the relationship between (White) plantation owners and (Black) plantation workers in the West Indies where he felt that the laws of servitude (which he admired) should dominate over the laws of supply and demand (which he did not admire). Third, after that time, both in his own published works and in a very revealing letter to John Ruskin, Carlyle continued to use the term "dismal science" as a term of abuse but here also it is clear that he was objecting to what he understood to be the general thrust of Political Economy at the time (and especially its emphasis on supply-and-demand, laissez faire etc) and that Malthus is not mentioned in any of these works.

To begin with, there are only two references to Malthus in Carlyle's thirty-one volumes of *Collected Works*⁶ and I have been unable to find even a single reference to Ricardo. Even where he does refer to Malthus, in no case, strictly speaking, does he ever link Malthus or Malthusian doctrine to the phrase "dismal science". This is not to say that Carlyle was entirely supportive of Malthus's ideas (let alone the approach adopted by the political economists to any topic) but on some issues they would have agreed. For example, Carlyle supported such policies as the abolition of or reduction in Poor Relief and the use of Workhouses.

The first reference which Carlyle made to Malthusian doctrine is in a work titled *Sartor Resartus* ('The Tailor Re-clothed') which was published as a series of articles in *Fraser's Magazine* in 1833-34.⁷ In the latter part of this work he refers to the ideas of a man who is such a "zealous" follower of Malthus that he has a "deadly fear of population" (Volume 1 of *Collected Works*,⁸ p 180f). Although he does not use the word "dismal" or the phrase "dismal science", Carlyle writes that: "Nowhere, in that quarter of his intellectual world, is there light; nothing but a grim shadow of hunger" (p 181). Carlyle goes on to explain that over-population in Europe can be dealt with by emigration (but a strange emigration, one to be led according to him, by modern day Alarics⁹ equipped "not now with the battle-axe and war-chariot, but with the steam engine and plough-share" (p 184)).

The second of the two references to Malthus is in a pamphlet titled *Chartism*¹⁰ first published in late 1839. Carlyle writes: "The controversies on Malthus and the 'Population Principle', 'Preventative Check' and so forth, with which the public ear has been deafened for a long while, are indeed sufficiently mournful. Dreary, stolid, dismal, without hope for this world or the next, is all that of the preventative check and the denial of the preventative check" (Volume 10, p 419). Notice that Carlyle is not so much objecting to Malthus's views in particular, but to any debate which focuses only the material conditions of life. Carlyle, here and elsewhere, objects to that way - what he claims is political economy's way - of looking at 'man'. Notice also that, although the word "dismal" is used, Carlyle does not here (or anywhere else where he talks about Malthus) use the phrase "dismal science".

Speaking of Malthus, I should emphasise that no one, not even Malthus himself would say that his ideas - especially as expressed in the first edition of his work on population - were not dismal. Malthus himself noted in the Preface to the first edition of his *Essay*

on the *Principle of Population* that: "The view which he [the Author] has given of human life has a melancholy hue" (Malthus, 1798, p ii of the *Collected Works* Volume 1). By the second edition (which was published in 1803), however, the melancholy hue had gone, replaced by a softer spiel and also by the recognition of preventative checks. In the preface to the second edition Malthus writes, "I have endeavoured to soften some of the harshest conclusions of the first essay" (1803, Volume 2, p ii) and the work as a whole, and especially the concluding chapter are more optimistic than the first edition. In the concluding chapter of the second (and later) editions (the chapter being titled 'Of our rational expectations respecting the future improvement of society') he writes, "On the whole, therefore, though our future prospects respecting the mitigation of the evils arising from the principle of population may not be so bright as we may wish, yet they are far from being entirely disheartening" (p 575 of Volume 3 of the *Collected Works*). This is Malthus being optimistic!!

CARLYLE AND THE TERM "DISMAL SCIENCE"

Well, if not in relation to Malthus, when did Carlyle first use the phrase "dismal science", and in what context? He first used the phrase¹¹ in an article titled 'Occasional Discourse on the Negro Question' published in *Fraser's Magazine* in December 1849 and reprinted in the form of a separate pamphlet in London in 1853 with the title 'Occasional Discourse on the Nigger Question'.¹² It deals with the labour situation in the West Indies where the white planters were complaining that following the emancipation of the slaves they were unable to obtain enough labour (at the prevailing wages and conditions of work) to carry on their business.¹³ Carlyle puts the view that 'work' is morally good and that if a "Black man" will not voluntarily work for the wages then prevailing he should be forced to work. He writes of those who argued that the forces of supply and demand rather than physical coercion should regulate the labour market¹⁴ that: "the Social Science ... which finds the secret of this Universe in supply and demand and reduces the duty of human governors to that of letting men alone ... is a dreary, desolate, and indeed quite abject and distressing one; what we might call ... the dismal science" (Volume 11, p 177). He mentions the term "dismal science" in a derogatory way a number of times later in the work, where it is lumped together with other unwelcome (to Carlyle) features of the political scene as "ballot boxes", "universal suffrages" and "Exeter-Hall Philanthropy".¹⁵ At one point he tells us that it is unwise to have a situation where "supply and demand [is] the all-sufficient substitute for command and obedience among two-legged animals of the unfeathered class" (p 186). He writes that the one who is "born lord" (p 205) of the other must compel the one "who is born to be a servant" (p 193) to work and if necessary compel them to work by the "beneficent whip" if "other methods avail not" (p 202). Carlyle says that "decidedly you [the Negroes] will have to be servants of those that are born wiser than you, that are born lords of you; servants to the Whites, if they are (as what mortal can doubt that they are?) born wiser than you" (p 205). In short, Carlyle was of the view that compulsion, rather than market forces should regulate the supply of labour on plantations in the West Indies because the laws of supply and demand are not appropriately applied to the relationship between White and Black as they are contrary to "their mutual duties" (white = master and black = servant) as ordained by "the Maker of them both" (p 207). In Carlyle's opinion: "declaring that Negro and White are unrelated, loose from one another, on a footing of perfect equality, and subject to no law but that of supply and demand according to the Dismal Science", "is clearly no solution" to the problem (ibid). Instead, Carlyle offers life-long servitude "after the manner of the old European serfs"

as the best solution because in such a regime, "it ought to be rendered possible, for White men to live alongside Black men, and in some just manner to command Black men, and produce West Indian fruitfulness by means of them" (p *ibid*).

John Stuart Mill¹⁶ who responded to Carlyle in the next issue of *Fraser's Magazine* on behalf of those who support "the rights of Negroes" (Mill, 1850, p 87). Mill points out that the 'law', which propels Carlyle, is "the law of the strongest", "a law against which the great teachers of mankind have in all ages protested" (p 87) and says that history teaches us that human improvement comes not from the tyranny of the strongest but instead from the struggle against such tyranny. Mill says if people are to be compelled to work because 'work' is so good for them then surely "we would not hold from the whites, any more than from the blacks, the 'divine right' of being compelled to labour" (p 92).¹⁷ Mill especially objects to Carlyle's notion "that one kind of human beings are born servants to another kind" (p 92) and says that if, as Carlyle asserts, "the gods will this, it is the first duty of human beings to resist such gods" (p 87). Mill ends his piece by expressing regret that Carlyle had offered substantive support for the institution of American slavery "at a time when the decisive conflict between right and iniquity seems about to commence" (p 95). By providing such support, Mill concludes, Carlyle has done "much mischief" (*ibid*).

These then are the circumstances in which Political Economy (or Economics) was first labelled "The Dismal Science". However, whilst this was the first, it was not the last time Carlyle used the phrase "dismal science".

The phrase "dismal science" crops up repeatedly in Carlyle's later works and especially in his *Latter-Day Pamphlets*. In one of these, published in February 1850, titled *The Present Time*,¹⁸ Carlyle refers a number of times to the "Professors of the Dismal Science" (Volume 19, pp 52-4). He refers disparagingly to "the laws of the Shop-till" and says, "this Universe is not wholly a Shop" (p 53). In another pamphlet published in April 1850 titled *The New Downing Street*¹⁹ he refers time and again to "the Gospel of M'Crouty" (Volume 19, p 181). In criticism of this 'Gospel' he writes, "Is there no value, then, in human things, but what can write itself down in a cash-ledger?" (p 182) and later he refers to M'Crouty as "this Professor of the Dismal Science" (*ibid*). Denis O'Brien has pointed out that Carlyle used the name M'Crouty to refer to a contemporary of his, an economist named John Ramsey McCulloch²⁰ (O'Brien, 1970, p 99). The term "dismal science" appears next in the sixth volume of Carlyle's *History of Friederich II of Prussia, called Frederick the Great*, published in 1865. In this work Carlyle defines "Political economy" as "meaning thereby increase of money's-worth" (Volume 26, p 325). He goes on to criticise the "Dismal Science" for advocating policies (such as free trade) which it purports to be appropriate at all times and in all places whereas, according to Carlyle, economic policies have to be tailored to the place and time (p 327). Carlyle also uses the term "dismal science" in a letter to John Ruskin²¹ dated 29 October 1860. In this letter he praises Ruskin for attacking political economy in his work *Unto this Last* published²² in book form in 1860. Carlyle refers to "those unfortunate Dismal Science people" who "will object that their Science Expressly abstracts itself from moralities, from &c &c: but what you say, and show, is incontrovertibly true, that no 'Science' worthy of men (and not worthier of dogs or of devils) has a right to call itself 'Political Economy' ... on other terms that those you shadow out for it [i.e. if it abstracts from morality]" (Cate, 1982, p 89). In all of these examples of Carlyle's use of the phrase dismal science it is clear that the term is used to refer to the "utilitarian doctrines of political economy" (Cate, 1982, p 89, n1) in general and not to the pessimistic prognostications of Malthus in particular.²³

CONCLUDING REMARKS

I have outlined above the true circumstance in which Political Economy (or Economics) was first labelled "The Dismal Science". It is a circumstance we should draw to the attention of our students.²⁴ They, like us, can be proud to be associated with the profession which was the target of Carlyle's scorn.

APPENDIX

In his *Past and Present* published in 1843, Carlyle²⁵ compared the "leaders" of the present - those at the top of the social hierarchy only interested in amassing fortunes - with a fictional medieval abbot who devoted himself selflessly to the people and institutions under his charge and brought about social improvements in them.

Although he does not use the term "dismal science" in this book²⁶ we do find throughout denunciations of laissez-faire economics and utilitarian ethics.²⁷

This work was especially of interest as in it Carlyle introduces to the world the phrase, now a commonplace, "Captains of Industry". The phrase appears near the end of the book. Having described the chaos which besets the world Carlyle says to these captains: "It is to you I call: ye know at least this, That the mandate of God to His creature man is: Work!" (Volume 10, p 337). It is the duty of these captains to "reduce [the workers] to order", to just subordination." As a result, "Not as a bewildered bewildering mob; but as a firm regimented mass, with real captains over them, will these men march". "All human interests, combined human endeavours, and social growths in this world, have, at a certain stage of their development, required organising: and Work, the grandest of human interests, does now require it" (p 333). It is this obedience, based on hero worship on the part of the employees, which will replace the supply and demand principle in the task of 'organising labour'.

REFERENCES

- Barber, W. 1967. *A History of Economic Thought*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- Blaug, M. 1996. *Economic Theory in Retrospect*. Fifth edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Carlyle, T. 1849. Occasional Discourse on the Negro Question. *Fraser's Magazine*, 40 (December): 670-9. Reprinted in *Collected Works of Thomas Carlyle*. Volume 11, 171-210.
- Carlyle, T. 1896-1899. *Collected Works of Thomas Carlyle in 31 Volumes*. Edited by H. D. Traill. London: Chapman and Hall.
- Cate, G. 1982. *The Correspondence of Thomas Carlyle and John Ruskin*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Galbraith, J. 1977. *The Age of Uncertainty*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Galbraith, J. 1987. *A History of Economics*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- Heffer, S. 1995. *Moral Desperado: A Life of Thomas Carlyle*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson.
- Heilbroner, R. 1986. *The Worldly Philosophers*. Sixth edition. London: Penguin Books.
- Hutchison, T. 1994. *The Uses and Abuses of Economics*. London: Routledge.
- Malthus, T. R. 1798. *An Essay on the Principle of Population*. First edition. Volume 1 of *The Works of Thomas Robert Malthus*. Edited by E.A. Wrigley and D. Souden. London: W. Pickering.
- Malthus, T. R. 1803. *An Essay on the Principle of Population*. Second edition. Volumes 2 and 3 of *The Works of Thomas Robert Malthus*. Edited by E.A. Wrigley and D. Souden. London: W. Pickering.
- Mill, J. S. 1850. The Negro Question. *Fraser's Magazine*, 41 (January): 25-31. Reprinted in *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*. Edited by J. Robson. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. Volume 21, 87-95.
- O'Brien, D. 1970. *J R McCulloch: A Study in Classical Economics*. London: George Allen & Unwin.
- Oser, J., and S. Brue. 1988. *The Evolution of Economic Thought*. Fourth edition. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Sanders, C. 1970. *The Collected Letters of Thomas and Jane Welsh Carlyle*. Volume 1. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Staley, C. 1989. *A History of Economic Thought: From Aristotle to Arrow*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Vanden Bossche, C. 1991. *Carlyle and the Search for Authority*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press.

¹ Robert Dixon (e-mail: r.dixon@ecomfac.unimelb.edu.au) is a reader in economics at the University of Melbourne. The author thanks John Creedy, Alan Gunther and Guay Lim for their advice and assistance.

² In what follows I will treat the terms 'economics' and 'political economy' as being synonymous. This is questionable.

³ Carlyle would have been only three years of age when Malthus's *Essay on Population* was first published (in 1798).

⁴ Thomas Carlyle (b. 1795, d. 1881) was an influential Scottish historian and essayist, whose major works include *The French Revolution* (1837) and *Oliver Cromwell's Letters and Speeches. With Elucidations* (1845). As time went on Carlyle moved more and more away from democratic ideas. His *Latter-day Pamphlets* poured out all his contempt on the philanthropic and humanitarian tendencies of the day.

⁵ At the URL <http://ingrimayne.saintjoe.edu/econ/Introduction/Defintns.html>

⁶ To the extent that the index to Carlyle's *Collected Works in 31 Volumes* is reliable; there are no references to Ricardo in any of Carlyle's writings and only two to Malthus (or at least to Malthusian ideas), these are the two I give in the text. I have only been able to find one reference to Malthus in the twenty-six volumes of the *Collected Letters of Thomas and Jane Welsh Carlyle* and that is in a letter dated 7th of June 1820. The term "dismal science" does not appear in this letter, instead, he names Malthus - who he describes as "a scholar of the first form in Adam Smith's school" (Sanders, 1970, p 262) - as one of a number of writers (including Jeremy Bentham) whose work he does not hold in high esteem. (Interestingly, Carlyle was a teacher at Kirkaldy Burgh School in Fife in 1816-18. This was the town where Adam Smith was born and spent his childhood. In fact Smith had been a student at Kirkaldy Burgh School.) There are no references to Carlyle in the *Collected Works* of either Malthus or Ricardo.

⁷ In this work Carlyle satirises unbelief and materialism and proposes in their stead a creed based on German mysticism. Utilitarianism and liberalism are two of his main targets because (according to Carlyle) they destroy the existing institutions of society and replace religion with the "cash-nexus".

⁸ Unless otherwise indicated, all references to Carlyle are to the widely available *Collected Works* edition.

⁹ Alaric was chief of the Visigoths from 395 and leader of the army that sacked Rome in August 410, an event that symbolised the fall of the Western Roman Empire.

¹⁰ Chartism was a British working-class movement which sought parliamentary reform. A Chartist convention had met in London in February 1839 to prepare a petition for Parliament seeking universal (manhood) suffrage amongst other things. In his pamphlet Carlyle says that Chartism and other reform movements would not exist had the traditional ruling class not neglected its duty. According to Carlyle, the most appropriate relationship between man and master is to be found in a form of Feudalism where both master and servant have clearly defined duties towards each other. (This would also likely result in fewer demands for political reform!)

¹¹ There are only three entries for "dismal science" in the index to Carlyle's *Collected Works*. The earliest entry is to the 'Negro Question' pamphlet.

¹² On Carlyle's racism, see Vanden Bossche (1991, pp 133-41, and especially p 136). In a recent biography of Carlyle, the author describes Carlyle's later works including his *Negro Question* paper in the following terms: "Fundamentally, he wanted to assault the priggishness and smugness of the liberal and philanthropic consensus that believed the lower orders could be reformed and improved and entrusted with greater responsibility; Carlyle believed no such thing" (Heffer, 1995, p 274).

¹³ Whilst the slave trade (by and between British colonies) had been abolished in 1807 it was not until 1833 that Acts for the emancipation of those who were already slaves were passed by the British Parliament. The Acts provided for compensation to West Indian slave owners.

¹⁴ A good reference on Carlyle's pro-compulsion stance *vis a vis* the views of the laissez faire economists can be found in Vanden Bossche, 1991, p 133f.

¹⁵ Exeter Hall was a building in the Strand in London which was commonly used as a meeting place by philanthropic and religious organisations.

¹⁶ John Stuart Mill (1806-93), an English philosopher and economist whose main works include *Principles of Political Economy* (1848), *On Liberty* (1859) and *Utilitarianism* (1861). Mill wrote the response to Carlyle under a pseudonym, but his authorship quickly became public knowledge.

¹⁷ Mill is opposed to Carlyle's "gospel of work" because "Work is not a good in itself. There is nothing laudable in work for work's sake. To work voluntarily for a worthy object is laudable: but what constitutes a worthy object?" "[E]ven in the case of the most sublime service to humanity, it is not because it is work that it is worthy; the worth lies in the service itself and the will to render it" (Mill, 1850, p 90).

¹⁸ In this piece the failings of democracy and the evils of philanthropy are trotted out yet again. The main point of the pamphlet is to call for an organised regiment of the unemployed who would be compelled to work. Such compulsion is a fundamental "Right" according to Carlyle.

¹⁹ This pamphlet repeats earlier calls for paupers and the unemployed to be organised into "regiments" and made to work (this "is, in effect, a proposal for establishing slavery in England" Vanden Bossche, 1991, p 133). It also contains much on the relationship between the colonies and the home country where he argues that the colonies should be retained as a matter of duty and that the decision as to the future of colonial status should not be reduced to consideration of economic or financial costs and benefits to Britain. It is in this context that the professors of the dismal science are attacked.

²⁰ John McCulloch (1789 - 1864) was a prominent figure in the heyday of classical economics and taught political economy at University College, London.

²¹ John Ruskin (1819-1900), was an English writer, art critic, and social commentator.

²² Ruskin had written a series of essays on the nature of wealth. The *Cornhill Magazine* began to publish these in serial form in July 1860, but they roused so much opposition among its readers that the magazine's editor discontinued them after the October issue. Encouraged by Carlyle, Ruskin published them as a book under the title *Unto This Last* in 1862 (Cate, 1982, p 18ff). In this work he presented ideas very similar to those of Carlyle, supporting the rule of a good and strong man over all who were weak and incapable, and supporting "the natural law of protection and cherishing", over "laissez-faire".

²³ Indeed, as Blaug points out Carlyle throughout his life may be seen as "protesting against the narrow scope of political economy" (Blaug, 1996, p 283).

²⁴ Mill's article is short and very good value (Mill, 1850), it alone would provide the basis for a class discussion. There is also a good presentation of both Carlyle's and Mill's views in Heffer (1995, pp 275-79) which would also be very suitable for use in class or act as the basis for a lecture presentation.

²⁵ An excellent (and short) summary of Carlyle's *Past and Present* which would be suitable for the class use may be found in Heffer (1995, pp 228-31).

²⁶ Hutchison (1994, p 174 and elsewhere) claims that "political economy was described by Carlyle (in *Past and Present*, 1843) as 'The Dismal Science'." I have not been able to find the phrase in *Past and Present*. It does not appear in the index and I have not been able to find it in the text.

²⁷ Here again, Carlyle puts the view that the laws of supply and demand have to be subjugated to a greater law. For example: "Laissez-faire, Supply-and-demand, and so forth were not, are not and will never be, a practicable Law of Union for a Society of Men" (Volume 10, p 41). "All this Mammon-Gospel, of Supply-and-demand, Competition, Laissez-faire, and Devil take the hindmost, begins to be one of the shabbiest Gospels ever preached, or altogether the shabbiest" (p 229). "Laissez-faire, Supply-and-demand, - one begins to be weary of all that. Leave all to egoism, to ravenous greed of money, of pleasure, of applause: - it is the Gospel of Despair!" (p 230). "Supply-and-Demand, - alas! The man of Macedonia, speaking in vision to an Apostle Paul, "Come over and help us," did not specify what rate of wages he would give! Or was the Christian Religion itself accomplished by Prize-Essays, Bequests, and a 'minimum of Four thousand five hundred a year?'" (p 232f).