



METHODS

Malthus vs. Wordsworth: Perspectives on humankind,  
nature and economy. A contribution to the history  
and the foundations of ecological economics

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**Abstract**

In this paper, the view of humankind and nature upon which the thinking of Malthus is founded will be reflected on and contrasted with the opposed understanding of his contemporary Wordsworth. We show that the economic considerations of both are based decidedly on the premise of these views, and that their alternative interpretations of the contemporary economy and the relationship between economy and nature may thus be explained. From the comparison of Malthus and Wordsworth, we draw conclusions for modern ecological economics, identifying its Malthusian understanding of nature and reflecting on the capacities and limits implied for further research. We ascribe a central role in the conceptual history of ecological economics to Wordsworth and present his philosophical presumptions as a fruitful alternative for ecological economics. Finally, attention will be drawn to the principle importance of the philosophical foundations underpinning this field of research.

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**1. Introduction**

Two thinkers are to be compared in this essay: Thomas Robert Malthus (1766–1834) and William

Wordsworth (1770–1850). The comparison leads to new perspectives on the history and foundations of ecological–economic thought. This pertains to three issues in particular: (i) The interrelationship between ecological economics and classical economic theory. (ii) The understanding of nature and humankind upon which research in ecological economics is founded. (iii) The scientific self-image of this field of research. In

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addressing these points, we adhere to standard definitions and regard ecological economics as a subject which is concerned with the relationship between economy and nature, the causes of modern environmental problems and enquires after a sustained compatibility of economy and nature (Costanza, 1989, 1991; Proops, 1989: 60; Faber et al., 1996: 1ff; Edwards-Jones et al., 2000: 3).

The reference to Malthus in ecological economics is not new. This discipline has regularly been seen as standing in the tradition of classical economics (Christensen, 1989; Costanza et al., 1997: 19ff; Spash, 1999) and in this regard, has also been referred to Malthus (Christensen, 1989: 20; Daly, 1996: 3f; Costanza et al., 1997: 25f). However, the connection to Malthus has not yet been thoroughly explored. Here, this paper makes a contribution by reflecting on the relationship between ecological economics and Malthusian thought.

Malthus published his most important work *An Essay on the Principle of Population* in 1798. At the centre of this is his thesis that population growth is necessarily restricted by the limitations of the natural environment. Several contributions to ecological economics refer to this premise (see e.g. Daly, 1996: 119ff). It should be noted, though, that Malthus' economic thought is framed in a very specific philosophical and theological context, and is thus marked by a specific view of nature and humankind (see Section 2). An appreciation of this context and its meaning for Malthus, is necessary for a proper understanding of his economic considerations. In this way, however, the relationship between ecological economics and Malthusian thought is illuminated and also gains in significance.

In order to highlight this and furthermore, to present another horizon for the conceptual foundations of ecological economics, Malthus' views will be compared in this paper with those of his contemporary William Wordsworth.<sup>1</sup> In the same year as Malthus' *Essay* appeared, Wordsworth published the *Lyrical Ballads* together with Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1834). This is generally considered the begin-

ning of English Romanticism and Wordsworth is viewed as a distinguished poet of this movement.

Like Malthus, Wordsworth experienced the beginning of the modern economy (the industrial revolution) and modern economic thought (the classical political economy). As a result, he was witness to the same economic reality as Malthus; he provides, however, a very different interpretation. This is a direct consequence of the fact that Wordsworth's considerations on economics are imbedded in an entirely different philosophical context.<sup>2</sup>

Wordsworth's conception of nature and humankind enables him to offer an alternative account of nature in his considerations on economics, than is possible for Malthus and the classical thinkers in general. He is thus able to gain different insights into the relationship between nature and economy: he recognises a fundamental conflict between humankind and nature inherent in the ideological foundations of the modern economy. As a result of theoretical and philosophical reflections, he considers nature to be fundamentally endangered. Already at the end of the 18th Century, his thinking uncovers possible roots of the modern environmental crisis.<sup>3</sup> These are, in his view, already

<sup>2</sup> With 'philosophical context', we denote Wordsworth's considerations on nature, humankind and God, which he himself characterised as philosophical. His greatest literary project, "The Recluse" – of which he had finished only the parts *The Prelude* and *The Excursion* – he characterised as "[...] a philosophical poem, containing views of Man, Nature and Society." (Wordsworth, [1814]1936: Preface). Wordsworth's sources in the philosophical tradition are, however, difficult to identify. Most of his knowledge seems to come from his interaction with Coleridge and it is thus not easy to denote specific references (Fischer, 1974: 23). Nevertheless, several influences from Platonic thought (see e.g. Curtis, 1993: 61f), mysticism, English empirism and German idealism can be identified in Wordsworth's writings (see e.g. Stallknecht, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> We wish to point out that about 1800 there are several critical reflections on the modern economy and modern economic thought within literature. Several poets reflected on these economic developments and were especially concerned with the possible negative consequences for nature. In this respect, we should also mention the German romantic poet Novalis (1772–1801) (see Becker and Manstetten, 2004), and the American transcendentalist Thoreau (1817–1862) (see Becker, 2003). Some further important insights on possible causes of the modern environmental crisis can also be found in Goethe's *Faust* (see Binswanger et al., 1990). Concerning the general meaning of (Anglo-Saxon) Romanticism for environmental thought there is also ongoing research in (Anglo-Saxon) literary theory, labelled *ecocriticism*. For important contributions to this field of research, which also refer intensively to Wordsworth, see e.g. Bate (1991), Coupe (2000) or McKusick (2000).

<sup>1</sup> Our comparison of Malthus and Wordsworth is set against the background of today's ecological economics. Thus, it is not our aim to illuminate all aspects of the relationship between Wordsworth and classical political economy within this paper. On this issue see e.g. Connell (2001).

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