

POVERTY AND POPULATION

(To the Editor.)

SIR,—In penning these notes in criticism of Mr. Lester's article in August LAND VALUES let me say at once that I have not read Miss More's articles that Mr. Lester sets out to demolish.

Mr. Lester says: "Before sensible people can be persuaded that population either does or ever will press on the means of subsistence, making limitation of birth necessary if poverty is to be avoided, it will first have to be proved that all men enjoy equal opportunity to make use of those resources with which Providence has furnished mankind. It will have to be proved that no legal barriers came between man and the bounties of Nature's table. Before we can lay at the door of Nature a tendency to bring into the world more human beings than can be provided with food, clothing, shelter and warmth, we shall have to be assured that not a field, not a quarry, not a building site, not a mineral deposit, which men would use if free to do so remains unused."

"So long as we can look around and see locked-up resources on every hand it is idle indeed to write learned articles on the over-population peril. The remedy is not restriction of births, . . ." &c.

Might I ask Mr. Lester if he is asking the mothers, and the potential mothers, of our race to procreate up to their fullest capacity? Is there any need to labour the point that where the mother brings forth a dozen children in eighteen years yet rears only three to maturity that she has not done well? She, and the father too, has had all the misery and precious little of the joys of parenthood. The pressure against *their* means of subsistence has reduced the *gross* family increase of eighteen down to three, *nett*. Would it not be most immoral to tell these people that they had done well? It would have been ever so much better if these people could, or would, have limited their family to three or four. I don't see the least bit of good, individually, or nationally, that the bringing of these superfluous lives into the world did.

To me it reveals a tragic record of waste of life and happiness without one iota of compensation. It is surely too late in the day to go back to the bad old condition of things obtaining two generations ago!

The propaganda of Neo-Malthusianism has been carried to such an extent as to check the birth-rate of our country, thus, to my mind, doing more in recent years to limit misery than any other agency that I know of. It is reasonable to suppose that this propaganda, which appeals so effectively to the majority of rational men and women when they have thought out the problems of married life and society, will spread more and more as an increasing number of the workers are put in the way of studying those problems.

Alongside this, of course, society owes it to itself to take steps for the removal of all social and political inequalities. This duty is primary; and, once begun, all concerned will be more and more led to see the absolute necessity of intelligently limiting population, what time former social checks to rate of increase are removed.

Mr. Lester says: "In PROGRESS AND POVERTY Henry George gives the most masterly analysis and refutation of the Malthusian theory that has ever appeared in print. It is hard to think that any unbiased man can read it and not be convinced that the Malthusian theory is not proved by the reasoning with which it is supported . . ." &c. Furthermore, he says: "There is no evidence in Miss More's articles that she is familiar with George's arguments in any way but at secondhand." This is unfortunate, as if she subjected George's four chapters of Book II. to strict logical analysis she might find, as the present writer found how immovably fixed in reason Malthus' theorem was. To my mind George's chapters on "Population" and "Subsistence" cannot be described as Mr. Lester has written.

It is not perhaps desirable on the present occasion to take up George's examination of Malthusianism point by point, but one example of his "Analysis and Refutation" is characteristic in many ways of his whole examination.

Henry George, setting himself in opposition to the Malthusian doctrine, quite fairly states it as follows: "That population, constantly tending to increase, must, *when unrestrained* (italics mine) ultimately press against the

limits of subsistence, not as against a fixed, but as against an elastic barrier, which makes the procurement of subsistence progressively more and more difficult. And thus, wherever reproduction has had time to assert its power, and is unchecked by prudence, there must exist that degree of want which will keep population within the bounds of subsistence."

This correctness of statement is departed from by George in his very next paragraph where he says: "Although in reality not more repugnant to the sense of harmonious adaptation by creative beneficence and wisdom than the complacent no-theory which throws the responsibility for poverty and its concomitants upon the inscrutable decrees of Providence, without attempting to trace them, this theory, in avowedly making vice and suffering the necessary results of a natural instinct with which are linked the purest and sweetest affections, comes rudely in collision with ideas deeply rooted in the human mind."

It is only necessary to refer Mr. Lester to the preceding statement of the doctrine by Mr. George himself in order that he may see the mis-statement involved in this. The Malthusian doctrine does not assert that vice and suffering are the *necessary* results of a natural instinct. Its contention is that the instinct in question "when unrestrained"—a qualification, you will notice, Mr. George has dropped—leads to "vice and suffering." Can Mr. Lester deny this? Does he advocate the unbridled exercise of the sexual instinct? Does he say that this would *not* lead to vice and suffering?

Malthusians do not say that misery and profligacy are inevitable. On the contrary they point out how both may be avoided, not by eradicating or attempting to suppress "a natural instinct," but by regulating it in accordance with social needs. When exercised in accordance with an enlightened sense of duty, the instinct of sex *is* linked with the purest and sweetest affections. But, as there is but one step from the sublime to the ridiculous, so, between the most innocent domestic happiness and the coarsest brutality and penury, there is but the step which divides mastery *over* "natural instinct" from mastery *by* it.

In the same way George deals with John Stuart Mill's assertion that a "greater number of people cannot, *in any given state of civilisation* (italics again mine) be collectively so well provided for as a smaller." Mr. George denies this, and submits "the question to the test of facts." But he alters the question before so submitting it. "There is," he says, "no necessity for abstract reasoning, the question is one of simple fact. Does the relative power of producing wealth decrease with the increase of population? The facts are so patent that it is only necessary to call attention to them. We have in modern times seen many communities advance in population. Have they not at the same time advanced even more rapidly in wealth? We see many communities still increasing in population. Are they not also increasing their wealth still faster?"

And, may we ask, has civilisation not been advancing in these communities? "Is there any doubt," says Mr. George, "that while England has been increasing her population at the rate of two per cent. per annum, her wealth has been growing in still greater proportion?" Is there any doubt, I ask, that while this has been taking place England has progressed in the arts and knowledge of life that we call civilisation? And, if not, is Mr. George, while pretending to answer Mill, really evading the issue? The part of Mill's statement that I have italicised, he ignores. In the language of mathematics, he turns the constant in Mill's statement of the problem into a variable; and when a different result is brought out he fancies he has proved Mill's working to be incorrect!

To me it has always appeared that George's examination of Malthusianism in PROGRESS AND POVERTY was entirely unnecessary, and extremely faulty. I was in substantial agreement with Malthus before I became a Single Taxer. I think the one philosophy fits in and is the complement of the other; in any case I can see nothing in the one that precludes me working for the aims of the other.

Mr. Lester thinks Miss More has not studied George at first hand. Might I ask if he has studied Malthus in this way. There is much in his article that leads me to think he has not.

R. WHYTE.