

THE
PRINCIPLE OF POPULATION.

THE theory of Malthus has obtained such general acceptance among those who aspire to be regarded as authorities in Political Economy, that the man who ventures to oppose it is frequently looked upon as totally ignorant of that science, if not as incapable of reasoning. And yet the opponents of the theory are perhaps as numerous as ever, while outside the charmed circle of Political Economists the doctrine in question has had hardly any influence. It is, moreover, worthy of note that the defence of the theory has often begun and ended with 'You have misunderstood us.' When any theory is generally misunderstood, we may suspect that it has not been stated with sufficient clearness and precision. And it will not be difficult, I think, to show that this is the case with the Malthusian doctrine.

Succinctly stated, this doctrine is, that population has a tendency to increase faster than the means of subsistence. This proposition appears to be resolvable into three: viz., population has a tendency to increase; the means of subsistence have a tendency to increase; and the former tendency is stronger than the latter. There

is, however, no reason to think that the means of subsistence have in themselves any tendency to increase or to diminish—that the earth is becoming either more or less suited to the wants of man independently of the results of human labour expended on it.* The second and third propositions, therefore, resolve themselves into the assertion that equal increments of labour applied to land do not produce equal increments in the produce of the soil. This proposition, together with the tendency of the population to increase, constitutes the essence of the theory of Malthus. The two questions to be considered therefore are, first, Has population a tendency to increase? and second, Is it true that equal increments of labour applied to the soil must produce a constantly diminishing return?

The first of these questions is stated with a total want of scientific precision. Population has no tendency to increase or to diminish, or to do anything else, for the simple reason that population is not a cause but an effect. There are causes which tend to increase the population no doubt; in fact every birth increases it. But there are also causes which tend to diminish the population; and in fact every death diminishes it. The true causes at work in the case are births and deaths; or rather the causes which produce or prevent births, and the causes which produce and prevent deaths. In particular countries, though not as regards the whole globe,

* There are probably causes in operation which will ultimately tend to diminish the means of subsistence, but up to the present I doubt if their effects are appreciable.

the causes which produce or prevent emigration or immigration must also be considered. We may speak if we choose of either of these sets of causes as counter-acting the other; but the fact is that both of them are equally positive in their character. Deaths do not simply prevent or retard births: they carry off the population as positively as births produce it. If births continued while deaths ceased the earth would soon be over-populated; but if deaths continued while births ceased the human race would soon become extinct. There are thus two counter-tendencies, one of which if unchecked would increase the population beyond all reasonable limits, and the other of which if unchecked would soon reduce it to absolute zero. But when it is said that one of these sets of causes tends to prevail over the other, what is the meaning of the assertion? Is it meant that it actually prevails, and that the population of the earth is in fact increasing? The Malthusians repudiate this interpretation of their doctrine, and it is plain that as a matter of fact the population is increasing in some places and diminishing in others; and even in the same locality the aborigines are often diminishing in number while the foreign settlers are increasing. But if the actual prevalence of one set of causes over the other is not asserted, I can attach but two other meanings to the fundamental thesis of Malthusianism, viz., either that the population does in fact increase when man is in what may be termed his normal condition, or that the tendency to increase is becoming stronger with the lapse of time, so that it may be expected ultimately to become everywhere prevalent.

The former, I think, comes nearest to the real meaning of the Malthusian. He selects some country in which the rate of increase is very rapid as representing the normal condition of the human race. He infers that man in his normal state has a tendency to increase with at least that degree of rapidity; and then he shows that, if this rate of increase continued, the population would soon be in excess of the means of existence.

The people of North America, and particularly of the United States, are usually referred to as representing this normal state of society, and as exhibiting the rate of increase which would be realised if all mankind were placed in the same conditions. Here, independently of immigration, the population—or rather the white population—doubles itself in every thirty years; and in particular districts this thirty years is said to be narrowed to fifteen. Having shown that the human race *can* increase at this rate, it is inferred that if all hindrances were removed it *would* do so. The first question, therefore, that occurs to us is whether North America can be taken as representing the normal state of mankind. Would it be possible in fact for all mankind to live under the conditions which are there realised? The answer must, I think, be in the negative. In the first place the healthiness of the climate is above the average. I think it may be fairly doubted whether the rate of increase would even approach the actual figure if the ravages of yellow fever extended to the whole country instead of being confined to some of the southern districts. Then the occupations of the people are unusually healthy. They are mainly

agricultural, and manufacturing or mining industry can never be carried on without a larger percentage of deaths than occurs in the agricultural and rural districts. Further, there is such a demand for labour, and children become helpful at so early an age, that they are looked upon as a source of profit rather than as a burden; and (as even Malthusians have remarked) a widow with several children is regarded as possessing a fortune and is sought after accordingly. Where children are a source of profit, births will be considerably in excess of the average. For these and other reasons, I do not think the people of North America can be regarded as representing the human race in general in relation to the present question. But there is a special reason why the Malthusian should not so regard them. It will, I think, scarcely be denied that since the first settlement of the United States the means of subsistence have increased more rapidly than the population. This, say the Malthusians, is quite consistent with our theory. Notwithstanding the general tendency of population to increase more rapidly than the means of subsistence, we never denied that under special circumstances and within certain limits the means of subsistence might increase faster than the population. True: but how can you take as the type of the normal condition of mankind a country in which the means of subsistence is increasing more rapidly than the population? Is not such a state of things, on your own showing, altogether exceptional? But if we are to exclude countries in which this exceptional condition prevails,

we must exclude not only North America but England, and almost every other country in which any considerable increase of population has been established by statistics. In fact, the world may at present be almost divided into countries in which the means of subsistence is increasing quite as fast as the population, and countries in which we have no proof that the population is increasing at all. But the state of the former countries is, according to the Malthusian, exceptional, while no evidence in favour of his theory can be derived from the latter.

An universal tendency to an increase in the population has not, in my opinion, been established. The proof hardly extends beyond the Caucasian race and the temperate zone. In numerous instances, districts once populous are now lying almost deserted without apparently any deterioration of the soil. True, there have been wars, pestilences, and famines in these districts; but the Malthusians assert that these calamities only bring the principle of population into full swing, and that in the natural course of things all traces of them are obliterated in a comparatively short time—the country having by that time again peopled up to the means of subsistence. The modern Egyptians, though behind the Europeans in civilization, are probably quite as civilized as the inhabitants of Thebes, with its hundred gates. The modern Turk is as civilized as the Ninevite or Babylonian of old. The Governments of modern times are probably not more oppressive and exacting than their predecessors. Why, then, do not the valleys

of the Nile, the Euphrates, and the Tigris teem with their former millions of inhabitants? But we have a very striking case in point in the Sandwich Islands. The present population is believed to be about one-fourth of what it was when Captain Cook discovered them a century ago. There have been no great wars, famines, or pestilences since then, and no extensive emigration. The population seems to be dying out from mere paucity of births—a cause which apparently does not affect European settlers in the very same locality. Had the Sandwich Islands been the first country in which a census was taken at regular intervals, we should probably have had a school of Political Economists contending that the human race had a tendency to die out, and that the wisest legislation could do no more than postpone the catastrophe. That some races have a greater tendency to multiply than others cannot, I think, be doubted, however the fact may be explained. The slaughter of successive hosts of barbarians by the Romans had little or no effect in preventing the advent of fresh invaders from the very same quarters; while there are other instances in which a slaughter and devastation, apparently smaller in amount, has permanently reduced the population, or at least where the gap thus made in it has not yet been filled up.

I now turn to the second element of the theory—namely, that the produce of the soil does not tend to increase in proportion to the amount of labour bestowed on it. Here it must, of course, be admitted that the soil

of the world is not capable of producing an indefinite amount of food, and that, therefore, if the human race continued to increase indefinitely, a point would ultimately be reached at which the produce of the soil would no longer suffice to supply the wants of the population. But no one probably imagines that we are as yet even approaching this state of things, and it is possible that however rapid the increase of the human race might be, some physical change in the condition of our planet would render it incapable of supporting human life before this final Malthusian period was arrived at. But it is one thing to say that equal increments of labour must ultimately fail to produce equal increments in the means of subsistence, and another thing to say that they do not do so at present. No one, in my opinion, has proved that the point at which equal increments of labour will fail to produce equal increments of food has as yet been reached in the greater part of the world, and until then the population can have no general tendency to increase faster than the means of subsistence (unless, indeed, on the assumption of increased idleness). That two men on a desolate island could in general procure more than double the quantity of food that one man could procure, will, I think, be conceded; and the same thing holds good for considerably larger numbers. The full advantages of the division of labour can only be experienced where there is a pretty dense population. Every advance in the art of agriculture leads to increased production from a given quantity of labour. How vast, for instance, was the improvement

effected when horses and cattle were first trained to take part in agricultural operations ; and the same improvement goes on with every new agricultural implement that is invented. Even improvements in other manufactures are here beneficial ; for by lessening the amount of labour required for manufacturing operations, they allow a larger proportion of the total labour of the country to be applied to the cultivation of the soil. The arts of agriculture are advancing, and are likely to continue to advance during a period of which no one can foresee the end, and the effect of every advance is to increase the amount of food which can be produced by a given quantity of labour. But it is said that when we require to raise more food, in order to meet the wants of an increasing population, we must either take less fertile land into cultivation, or cultivate fertile land beyond the point where equal increments of labour will produce equal increments of food. Strictly speaking, this can only be true where the art of agriculture is stationary. Where it is advancing, the wants of an increasing population can often be supplied with little or no increase in the amount of labour devoted to agriculture ; and railways, canals, &c., have a similar effect in enabling food to be transferred with less labour from the place where it is produced to the place where it is consumed. But even apart from this, the truth of the proposition is questionable ; or rather, as elsewhere remarked, by 'fertile land' the Political Economist does not mean the same thing with the vulgar. He regards for example, the situation of the land as an element in

its fertility, land adjoining a town being considered more fertile than land of the same quality in a rural district, because its produce can be conveyed to the consumers at less expense and with less deterioration. Understanding 'fertile lands' in this sense, it is evident that railways, canals, and other means of communication actually increase the fertility of the lands in remote and rural districts, for they enable the produce of these lands to be conveyed to the market with less cost and deterioration; and the same thing is accomplished by the shifting or spreading of the population. Every town or village that springs up in the interior increases the fertility of the surrounding land, because its produce can now find a market with less labour and expense in conveying it to the consumers. Some lands, again, possess a very high natural fertility, but in order to utilise it require a preliminary outlay which the early settlers cannot afford. When capital becomes more plentiful and interest lower, the cultivation of these lands is immediately undertaken. It is, therefore, by no means universally true that every extension of cultivation involves a resort to less fertile lands. The lands in question may be resorted to, simply because they have become (in the economical sense) more fertile than they were—because they have become at least as fertile as some of the lands already in cultivation. In this sense, the discovery of a valuable gold mine adds enormously to the fertility of the surrounding lands, and will probably diminish the fertility of the land adjoining the nearest towns, since a portion of the town popu-

lation will be drawn away to work the gold mines. It may be an abuse of language to employ the term *fertile* in this sense, but it is the only sense in which it is universally true that every extension of cultivation involves a resort to lands of less fertility; and even thus it is only true that it involves a resort to lands which were formerly less fertile. When Edinburgh was the largest town in Scotland, the adjoining land (if at all of fair quality) was the most fertile in that country. Now the land adjoining Glasgow has supplanted it, and perhaps in some future age the most fertile land may be that which lies around Dundee or Aberdeen.* The extension of cultivation, therefore, by no means involves the necessity of resorting to inferior soils; and in America, for instance, the land newly taken into cultivation is often superior in quality to that which has long been in use, while even its present defects of situation will soon be alleviated or removed. The labourer is not compelled to apply his labour to less fertile land in the popular sense of that term, though he may have to go in search of fertile land, instead of finding it ready to his hand. The world, however, is wide. The amount

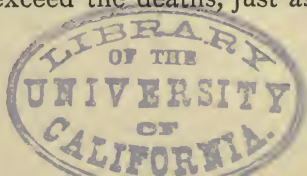
* In no state of society is it true that none but the most fertile land (in the economical sense) would be cultivated. Suppose a country in which the land is physically of the same quality throughout, while the population occupies a town, a village, and a detached house. The land surrounding the town is, economically speaking, the most fertile; but, notwithstanding this, the villagers would find it more to their advantage to till the land adjoining the village than to bring all their supplies from the neighbourhood of the distant town. And in like manner the isolated householder would till a spot adjoining his house rather than fetch his food from a distance. That spot would be the most fertile *to him* and his family, though not to any one else.

of fertile land which still remains uncultivated is enormous, and even at the most rapid rate of increase the labourer will be able for centuries to find fertile land to work upon, provided that he is willing to go in search of it. But it may be said that in an old country, like England, at all events, an increase in the population will necessitate the recourse to less fertile soils, or to the stimulation of fertile soils beyond the point where additional labour will produce a proportionate return. To this contention, however, more than one answer may be given. First, as already noticed, improvements in the art of agriculture may suffice to produce the needed supply without applying labour in a less remunerative manner than at present. Secondly, in consequence of improvements in the other arts a smaller proportion of the population may suffice to perform the non-agricultural work, leaving an increased proportion available for agricultural operations. Thirdly—what has to a large extent occurred—we may produce manufactured articles, and exchange them for the products of the labour of other nations employed on more fertile lands; and improvements in the manufacturing arts may enable us to make this exchange with undiminished advantage, notwithstanding our increased population. The labour of ten factory hands may exchange for as much foreign-grown corn when our population is fifty millions, as it did when our population was ten millions. Lastly, we have the resource of emigration. In Ireland, during the last thirty years, the births have always exceeded the deaths, but the population has

continually decreased, owing to the persistence of emigration; and the result has been that the condition of the home population has improved, while the emigrants are, in general, better off than if they had remained at home. Of course, there is a limit to the advantages of emigration. If the population of the world doubled, even once in a century, a period would ultimately be reached in which every country would be over-populated, and no more room would be left for emigrants. But, to all appearance, this period is still excessively remote; while all the known facts are consistent with the assumption that there is in certain climates or in certain races a natural tendency to decrease, and that the population of some countries can only be kept up by emigration from other quarters of the globe in which different conditions prevail.

Summarily, then, it has not been proved that there is any tendency in the human race in general to increase except in the sense that there are causes which, if they acted alone, would increase it; in which sense it is equally true that it has a tendency to diminish, since there are causes which, if they acted alone, would diminish it. Neither has it been shown that the tendency to increase is, in fact, stronger than the tendency to diminish, except in particular cases, and cases which, from their very nature, must be regarded as exceptional. The history of these cases, in fact, has generally been, that advancing civilisation has increased the means of subsistence, and the increase in the means of subsistence has been followed by an increased population, the rate

of increase in the latter instance almost invariably falling short of the former. Nor has it been shown that equal increments of labour have hitherto failed to extract equal increments of produce from the soil. There are indeed instances in which this is the case; as, for example, when the tiller of the soil, ignorant of the principles of agriculture, sows the same crop year after year with an equal, or even an enhanced, amount of labour, and reaps in return a continually decreasing harvest. But the question relates to the due application, not to the misapplication, of labour. And here all that has been proved is, that a point must ultimately be reached at which increasing labour will cease to afford a proportionate return, and will, perhaps, cease to afford any return at all. But that we have, even in England, approached this point has not been proved; while, if it had been reached, we might still support our increasing population, not by the application of additional labour to the soil, but by exchanging our manufactures for food produced in foreign countries under more favourable conditions. Consequently, if the meaning of the assertion, that population has a tendency to increase faster than the means of subsistence, is, that there is a serious danger that it will, in fact, increase faster, the existence of this danger has not been established. And if this be not its meaning, what *does* it mean? Does it imply anything more than that people are born, and that if they did not die the population of the world would become excessive; or that, in some places and under some circumstance, the births do, in fact, exceed the deaths, just as



the deaths exceed the births in other places, and under different conditions? If Malthusianism is reduced to this, it is probably the most barren truism that was ever sought to be imposed on the world under the guise of a scientific discovery.

But the Malthusian will perhaps say that, at all events population tends to increase up to the means of subsistence, and always keeps pressing upon the means of subsistence. Population has, as already remarked, a tendency to increase not merely up to the means of subsistence but above them, but it has likewise a tendency to diminish and, in fact, to disappear altogether. Such tendencies may be thrown out of account on both sides. But if it is meant that population does in fact increase up to the means of subsistence, the statement is not true. There are many countries in which the means of subsistence are in excess of the population, and in which this excess is actually increasing. Then, what is meant by saying that population keeps constantly pressing against the means of subsistence? Judged by a rich man's standard, the majority of the population in every country would, no doubt, be classed as poor; but where is the civilized country in which the labouring population has to be satisfied with the bare necessities of existence? Or can the Malthusian point out a civilized country in which the condition of that class is degenerating, in consequence of an increase in their numbers, without any accompanying decline in agriculture, trade, or manufactures? Where the means of subsistence are shortened the population will, no doubt, usually press

severely against what is left, until emigration or some other cause relieves the pressure; but this is a very different thing from the alleged augmented pressure of an increasing population. I doubt if any example of this latter kind can be adduced. I do not think, for instance, that the Irish people were poorer before the failure of the potato crop, with a population of eight millions, than they were in the time of Dean Swift, with a population of two millions. The means of subsistence were shortened by that failure, and then the population of Ireland was found to be pressing severely against the means of subsistence; but, up to that point, the pressure seems to have been no greater than it had been two centuries before. If uncivilised races do not enjoy more than the mere necessities of existence, the reason is that they do not seek for more, at least when any considerable amount of labour is necessary in order to procure it. If the North American Indian had the same desire for the decencies and luxuries of life that the European has, he would doubtless have found means of gratifying his tastes. But the Indians have been constantly pressing against their means of subsistence, simply because they never cared to possess means of subsistence in excess of their actual wants; and, if accident should supply such an excess, it would, doubtless, be wasted in a very short time. And the same observation will apply to almost all uncivilised races. Placed in the midst of plenty, they will barely perform enough work to save themselves from starvation; and they will be found to be pressing as hard against the means of subsistence

when their numbers are diminishing as when they are increasing. When half of them are carried off by war, or famine, or pestilence, the other half will be no richer than before; except that indeed the animals and fish, on which they feed, may multiply when there are fewer people to kill them. Population never presses as closely against the means of subsistence in civilised countries as in uncivilised; yet, in the former, the population is always more dense, and the soil is frequently less fertile. But, the Malthusian will reply, population has a *tendency* to press more closely against the means of subsistence in densely-populated countries than in countries where the population is thinner. Probably it has such a tendency; for the causes which tend to increase or to diminish the inhabitants of any particular country or district are so numerous, that population may be said to have a tendency to do almost anything. But if it has a tendency to press more closely against the means of subsistence, it has also a tendency to press less closely upon them, and the latter tendency appears to be in practice the more powerful. This mode of speaking of tendencies and counter-acting tendencies is, however, misleading. There are two sets of positive causes which tend to produce opposite effects, and the phenomena which we actually witness result from the joint operation of both. The Malthusian has not, I think, established any one of the three following propositions:—1. That the population of the world is, in fact, increasing more rapidly than the means of subsistence. 2. That it increases more rapidly when mankind is in the normal

state; or, 3. That, at some future period, it will increase more rapidly. Perhaps it may be said that if the rate of increase experienced in North America continued, the population of the world would, ere long, outgrow the means of subsistence, and that, under the same conditions, this rate of increase would continue. Doubtless it would continue under the same conditions: but one of these conditions appears to be, that the means of subsistence should continue to increase at least as rapidly as the population. A population which doubled itself, *under that condition*, in every fifteen years, would never lack the means of subsistence.

That the population of the world has been kept down by deplorable and preventable causes (among which war holds the first place) must indeed be admitted; and it follows, almost as a matter of course, that in the absence of these causes it would have been larger than it is. But it does not follow that it would have been too large. If, indeed, Malthus had shown that, notwithstanding the ravages of incessant wars, the population of certain countries had remained (on the average) stationary, and was apparently as large as these countries could (in the existing state of civilization) maintain, he would have gone a considerable distance towards proving his theory; for he would have shown to a considerable degree of probability that, in the absence of war, the population of these countries would have become excessive. But if it appears that the population of the countries which have been scenes of perpetual hostilities is declining, the Malthusian cannot refer to them in support of this theory,

for the fact that war has reduced the population affords no evidence that in the absence of war the population would have increased. There are many countries too in which population appears to be pressing closely enough against the means of subsistence, and which, notwithstanding, could support double the present population without any advance in their state of civilization; for there would be no difficulty in procuring double the quantity of land now in cultivation, which, under the same rude system of tillage, would yield double the produce, and thus support double the population in precisely the same way that the existing population is supported—in a sufficiently scanty manner, perhaps, but not more scanty than at present. True, a failure of crops would carry off twice as many people under these new conditions, but it would also leave twice as many behind. As already noticed, it would seem that uncivilized races, however sparse the population may be, will not keep any considerable distance ahead of the means of subsistence; and if this sparse population is declining, the means of subsistence will be suffered to decline in almost the same proportion. But can Malthus or his disciples point out an instance in which an uncivilized race, having enjoyed more than usual immunity from war, famine and pestilence, has, without any failure of crops or cattle, been reduced to the verge of starvation by the mere increase of its own numbers? That would indeed be a case in point: but I doubt whether it exists.