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Frederic Bastiat on Population and Economic Progress

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Frédéric Bastiat on Population and Economic Progress

Are there alternatives to the operation of the Malthusian positive check to keep the race between growth of population and increase in the means of subsistence even? What are the prospects that the race could actually be won and material progress achieved? Few practitioners of the dismal science in the early phases of European capitalism gave more optimistic answers to these questions than did Claude-Frédéric Bastiat (1801–50) in his posthumously published Harmonies économiques. *Bastiat—described by Schumpeter as "the most brilliant economic journalist who ever lived"—was an ardent advocate of laisser faire and a believer in the universal compatibility, indeed complementarity, of individual interests in a competitive society. Although neither original as a thinker nor innovator as an economic analyst, he was a sharp-eyed observer of contemporary economic and social trends. The excerpt presented here is the concluding section in the chapter "Population" that appeared as Chapter 16 in the second edition of* Harmonies. *Having given a generally sympathetic presentation of Malthusian doctrines, in this section Bastiat turns to their vigorous criticism. In his attack on Malthus, Bastiat's emphasis on a social-historical interpretation of the notion of subsistence is especially noteworthy. Bastiat sees human wants as expanding with civilization's progress in an ever increasing spiral. The "means of existence" are not a fixed quantity—they "depend upon one's way of life, on public opinion, on* habits." *Once a better material position is acquired, downward movement on the social ladder is contemplated with repugnance and resisted through the exercise of foresight and by "resort to the infallible means of preventive limitation." While Bastiat plainly doubted the effectiveness of the preventive check in its Malthusian variant, he had no difficulty in envisaging the effective working of the preventive check in forms other than the "practice of chastity." Glossing over the means, he emphasizes the motivational forces—"towards self preservation and the protection of one's family"—as all-important. Since he could not envisage situations in which these forces would drive individuals toward behavior that would be socially less than benign, Bastiat's conclusions on the relationship between population change and economic and social progress were uniformly sanguine. Many of the trends he anticipated were indeed confirmed by subsequent developments in industrial societies. However, their general validity remains as controversial as it was 130 years ago.*

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Up to this point we have confined ourselves entirely to the theory of Malthus; but it seems to me that there is one attribute of man to which he, like most authors, has not attached the importance it deserves. It plays a very great role in the phenomena of population, it solves a number of the problems that this great question raises, and it renews in the soul of him who loves mankind the assurance and confidence that an incomplete understanding of political economy might have shaken. This attribute, which, moreover, is included in our notions of reason and foresight, is *perfectibility*. Man is perfectible. He is capable of improvement or degeneration. If, in a strict sense, he is capable of remaining stationary, he is also capable of moving up or down the endless ladder of civilization. This is true of individuals, of families, of nations, and of races.

Malthus did not fully appreciate this capacity for progress and was consequently led to pessimistic conclusions, and these in turn have aroused public opinion against him. And, indeed, since he envisaged the *preventive check* in something of an ascetic form and therefore, we must admit, one not likely to be widely accepted, he could not expect that it would have much effect. Hence, it was his belief that the *repressive* (or, as he called it, the positive) *check* would be the decisive one; in other words, vice, poverty, war, crime, etc.

In my opinion, there is a fallacy in this reasoning; for, as we shall see, the action of the preventive force is not confined solely to the practice of chastity, an act of self-denial, but also and above all, it finds expression in a state of well-being, in an instinctive tendency towards self-preservation and the protection of one's family.

Population, it has been said, tends to keep at the level of the means of subsistence. Let me note that for this term, the *means of subsistence,* once universally accepted, J. B. Say has substituted another term that is much more accurate: *the means of existence*. At first glance it would appear that *subsistence* alone is involved in this question. Such is not the case. *Man does not live by bread alone,* and a study of the facts shows clearly that population stops increasing or declines when the sum total of all the means of existence, including clothing, housing, and the other things that climate or even habit render necessary, becomes insufficient.

We must say, therefore: Population tends to keep at the level of the *means of existence*.

But are these means a fixed, absolute, uniform quantity? Certainly not. As civilization improves, man's wants become greater, even for his mere subsistence. Considered from the point of view of man as a perfectible being, the means of existence, among which must be included the satisfaction of

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moral, intellectual, and physical wants, permit of as many varying degrees as there are in civilization itself, that is, an infinite number. Undoubtedly, there is a lower limit: the satisfaction of hunger and a certain amount of protection against cold are basic necessities for the maintenance of life; and we can observe life at this level among the Indians in America and the poverty-stricken in Europe. But as for an upper limit, I know of none; there is none. Once natural wants are satisfied, others arise that are artificial at the beginning, if you will, but which in their turn become natural through the force of habit, and, when they are satisfied, others arise, and still others, with no discernible end.

Hence, with every step that man takes along the road of civilization, his wants become more extensive, and his means of existence, which we may call the point at which the great *laws of increase* and *limitation* meet, keep pace with his wants. For, although man is capable of degeneration as well as improvement, he naturally turns away from the one and aspires toward the other. His efforts tend to keep him from falling back from the heights that he has already won and to raise him even higher; and *habit,* which has so well been called second nature, acts like a valve in our arteries to block any backward movement. It is therefore quite natural that man's habitually progressive tendency should manifest itself also in the control he exercises over his own multiplication and impel him to apply to this problem his best moral and intellectual efforts.

The consequences of man's being thus constituted are many; we shall confine ourselves to mentioning just a few of them. First, we readily admit with the economists that population and the means of existence reach an equilibrium; but since the means of existence are capable of infinite fluctuation and vary with the civilization and the habits of life that produce them, we cannot agree, as we compare different peoples and classes, that population is proportional to *production,* as stated by J. B. Say, or to income, as affirmed by M. de Sismondi. Furthermore, since every step up the ladder of culture implies a higher degree of foresight, the moral and preventive check must more and more neutralize the action of the brutish and repressive check, according as progress is achieved in society or in any of its segments. It follows that any social progress contains within itself the seed of still further progress. *Vires acquirit eundo,* since improved standards of living and greater foresight engender one another in indefinite succession. Similarly, when, for whatever reason, mankind retrogresses, want and improvidence exert a cause-and-effect action upon each other, and the decline would never be halted if society had not been provided with that self-healing faculty, the *vis medicatrix,* which Providence has implanted in all living organisms. We may observe, in fact, that during every stage of a period of decline the action of the law of limitation in its destructive form becomes progressively more painful and more readily discernible. At first there is merely a backward movement, a decline in the standard of living; later come poverty, hunger, disorders, war, death—painful but unfailing methods of instruction.

We should like to pause here long enough to demonstrate how this theory

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explains the facts, and how, in turn, the facts support the theory. When, in the case of a nation or a class, the means of existence fall to that lower level at which they become one with the means of mere subsistence, as in China, in Ireland, and among the poorest classes in all countries, the least fluctuation in population or food supply is recorded in the mortality rate. The facts in this instance confirm the inferences of science. For a long time now Europe has not experienced a famine, and the elimination of this scourge has been attributed to a multitude of causes. A number of them do exist, undoubtedly, but the one most generally responsible is that the *means of existence* have risen, by reason of social progress, far above the means of subsistence. When years of scarcity come, many satisfactions can be sacrificed before any curtailment of food is rendered necessary. Such is not the case in China or in Ireland. When men have nothing except a little rice or a few potatoes, with what will they buy other foods if the rice or the potatoes happen to fail them?

And finally, there is a third consequence of man's perfectibility, which we must point out here because it refutes the pessimistic side of Malthus' theory. We have attributed to him the formula: Population tends to keep at the level of the means of subsistence. We should have said that he went far beyond this, and that his real formula, the one from which he derived such distressing conclusions, is this: Population tends to *increase faster than* the means of subsistence. If Malthus had merely meant by this statement that in the human race the power to beget life is greater than the power to sustain it, there could have been no possible argument. But this is not what he meant. He declares that, taking into consideration absolute fertility, on the one hand, and, on the other, the means of limiting it in the form of either repression or prevention, we find that the result is nonetheless a tendency for population to increase faster than the means of subsistence. This is true of all living species, except man. Man is an intelligent being and can make unlimited use of the preventive check. He is perfectible; he seeks to improve his situation; he finds decadence repugnant. Progress is his normal state; progress implies an increasingly enlightened use of the preventive check; hence, *the means of existence increase more rapidly than population*. This result is not only to be deduced from the theory of perfectibility, but is also confirmed by the *facts,* since everywhere we find the range of man's satisfactions widening. If it were true, as Malthus says, that for each increase in the means of existence there is a corresponding and greater increase in population, the poverty of our race would necessarily be constantly on the increase, and civilization would stand at the beginning of time, and barbarism at the end. Just the opposite takes place. Hence, it follows that the law of limitation has been powerful enough to hold the rising tide of population below the rate at which goods and services are produced.

We can see from the foregoing how vast and difficult the question of population is. It is no doubt regrettable that a precisely formulated answer has not yet been given to it, and naturally I regret even more that I myself cannot be the one to give it. But do we not see how incompatible the subject is with the narrow limitations of any dogmatic axiom? And is it not a vain and idle

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thing to try to express in the form of a set equation the relations of data that are essentially variable? Let us recall what these data are.

1 The *law of increase,* i.e., the absolute, potential, physiological capacity of the human race to propagate life, without reference to the difficulties of sustaining life. This first datum, which alone can be measured at all accurately, is the only one in which accuracy is unnecessary; for of what importance is the theoretical upper limit of population increase, if it can never be reached under the actual conditions of human existence, which require man to live by the sweat of his brow?

2 There is, therefore, a *limit* to the law of increase. What is it? The means of existence, it is said. But what are these means? An indeterminate sum total of satisfactions. They are variable, and therefore the limit we are seeking to determine varies with them according to place, time, race, social rank, manners, public opinion, and habit.

3 Finally, what is the force that holds population within these constantly changing bounds? As far as man is concerned, it has two components: the *repressive* check and the *preventive* check. Now, the action of the first of these, to which, by its very nature, no exact measurement can be applied, is, furthermore, entirely subordinate to the action of the second, which, in turn, is dependent on the degree of civilization attained, habits, religious and political traditions, property and labor relations, family arrangements, etc., etc. It is therefore impossible to establish between the law of increase and the law of limitation an equation by which the actual population can be deduced. In algebra a and b represent known quantities that are numbered, measured, and of fixed proportions; but *means of existence, self-control,* and the *mortality rate*—three key data in the problem of population—are themselves variable and are made even more so by the amazing variability of the subject to whom they refer, man, that creature who, according to Montaigne, is so marvelously inconstant and diverse. It is therefore not surprising that in seeking to make of this equation something more exact than its nature permits of, economists have managed to create more disagreement than unity of opinion, for there is not one term in the formulas they employ that is not open to a host of objections, based both on theory and on fact.

Let us now proceed to consider a few practical applications, for in practical application we find both the clearest explanation of the theory and the true fruit of the tree of economic knowledge.

Labor, we have said, is the sole article of exchange. In order to secure a utility (unless Nature gives it to us gratis), we must go to the pains of producing it or repay with equivalent pains the persons who have taken the pains for us. Man creates absolutely nothing. He can merely arrange, reorder, or transport for a useful end things already existing. He performs none of these acts without taking pains, and the fruit of his pains is his property. If he surrenders it to another, he has the right to receive in return a service judged to be equivalent after free bargaining. This is the principle of value, of compensation, of exchange; and simple though it is, it is nonetheless true. In what

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we call *commodities* there exist varying degrees of *natural utility* and of *man-made utility*. The latter, in which alone the idea of labor is implicit, is the sole subject of human transactions; and, without in any way taking exception to the famous and useful formula of J. B. Say: "Products are exchanged for products," I accept the following as being more scientifically accurate: *Labor is exchanged for labor,* or rather, *services are exchanged for services.*

This does not mean that a given amount of labor is exchanged for another on the basis of the time or effort required to perform it, or that he who offers an hour's pains or expends a quantity of effort sufficient to register one hundred degrees on the dynamometer can always demand that a like amount of effort be expended for him in return. *Time spent* and *effort exerted* are two of the elements that have a bearing on the appraisal of labor, but they are not the only ones. There are also the questions of how disagreeable the work is, how dangerous, how difficult, how much it requires in the way of intelligence and foresight, and even how successfully it has been performed. Where free and voluntary transactions are the rule, where property rights are completely assured, every man has complete control over his own labor, and is therefore free to exchange it at his own price. His willingness to accept the demands of the other party to the transaction ends at the point where it is more to his advantage to retain possession of the product of his own labor. There is also a limit to his demands. This is the point at which the other party to the transaction finds it to his interest not to make the exchange.

There are in society as many economic strata, so to speak, as there are gradations in the established rates of compensation. The most poorly paid of all types of labor is that which least rises above the purely mechanical, animal level. This is in accord with providential intent and is at once just, useful, and inevitable. The unskilled laborer soon reaches that *limit to his demands* to which I have just referred, for there is no one who cannot perform this purely mechanical type of labor; and he himself is soon pushed to the *limit where he must accept others' demands,* for he is incapable of performing for himself the intelligent labor that his wants require. The *time spent* and the *muscular strength expended,* which are attributes of matter, are the only bases for determining the remuneration due this kind of physical labor, and that is why it is usually paid *by the day*. All industrial progress consists in replacing, in every product, a certain amount of *man-made,* and consequently *onerous, utility* by the same amount of *natural,* and consequently *gratuitous, utility*. It follows that, if there is any one class in society whom free competition is more likely to benefit than any other, it is the laboring class. What would be its lot if the forces of Nature and the techniques and tools of production were not constantly employed, thanks to competition, in making available to all *gratis* the results of their combined action? The mere day laborer is not capable of putting heat, gravitation, and elasticity to his own use. He does not invent the techniques, nor does he possess the tools, by which these forces are exploited. When these discoveries are first made, their inventors are very well paid for their labor, which requires a high degree of intelligence. In other words, this

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labor of theirs is rated as equal to a tremendous amount of unskilled labor; that is, the thing they produce is *expensive*. But competition intervenes; the price of the product falls; the harnessing of the services of Nature benefits no longer the producer, but the consumer; and the pay for the labor involved approximates that of labor whose pay is reckoned in terms of its duration. Thus, the common store of gratuitous utility steadily increases. Products of all kinds tend to assume, and do in fact assume, more and more every day, that form of *gratuitous utility* under which we enjoy water, air, and light. Thus, the general standard of living tends to rise, and inequalities tend to diminish; therefore, apart from the action of the law of population, the lowest class of society is the one that, potentially, should improve most rapidly. But we have said, "apart from the action of the law of population," and thus we return to our subject.

Let us imagine a basin into which an inlet, which keeps growing in size, pours an increasingly large stream of water. If no other factors are involved, the level of water in the basin will steadily rise; but if the sides of the basin are flexible, so that they can expand or contract, it is obvious that the water level will depend upon the combined action of these two factors. The level will fall, no matter how much larger a volume of water the inlet pours into the basin, if the basin's capacity increases even more rapidly; it will rise if the circumference of this reservoir widens at a relatively slower rate, and it will rise even more rapidly if the sides of the reservoir remain the same, and still more if they contract.

This illustration aptly depicts the stratum of society to which, admittedly, the great mass of humanity belongs, and gives us an indication of the probable fate in store for it. Its remuneration, that is, the objects that can satisfy its wants and provide its sustenance, is represented by the water flowing through the variable inlet. The flexible sides of the reservoir represent the increase or decrease of population. It is certain that the means of existence reach it in constantly increasing amount, but it is also certain that its circumference can expand even more rapidly. Consequently, the way of life which this class enjoys will be more or less favorable, on a higher or a lower plane, in proportion as the law of limitation, morally and intelligently applied as a preventive check, holds within bounds the maximum physiologically potential reproduction. There is a limit beyond which the numbers of the working class cannot rise: the point at which the sums available for their remuneration are not sufficient to support them. But there is no limit to their possible progress, which depends upon only two factors, and one of these, wealth, is steadily increasing, while the other, population, can be controlled at will.

All that we have just said about the lowest stratum of society, which performs the hardest and most unskilled type of labor, applies as well to all the higher strata, whose relative status is in inverse ratio, so to speak, to the degree of physical and unskilled labor that their work requires them to do. Considering each class apart from the others, we find that the same general laws apply to all. In every one of them there is the same conflict between the

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physiological power of reproduction and the moral power of self-restraint. The only variable from one class to another is the point at which these two forces meet, the height at which the scale of remuneration and the mores of each particular class fix that limit on population which we call the *means of existence*.

But if we consider the various social strata, no longer individually, but collectively and in their mutual relations, I believe that we can discern that the two forces have precisely the opposite tendency, and this is certainly the explanation of the actual situation of mankind. We have demonstrated how all economic phenomena, and especially the law of competition, tend to level all classes. Theoretically this seems to us incontestable. Since no special advantage of Nature, no ingenious technique, none of the implements by which these techniques are put to use, can remain the permanent monopoly of their producers as such; since the product of their labor, by an inevitable dispensation of Providence, tends to become the common, gratuitous, and consequently equal heritage of all mankind; it is clear that the most impoverished class is the one that derives the greatest *relative* advantage from the admirable operation of the laws of social economy. Just as the poor man is treated as generously in regard to the air he breathes as the rich man, so he becomes the rich man's equal in regard to all that part of the value of commodities which is constantly being eliminated by progress. There is, then, in mankind a basic tendency toward *equality*. I do not mean here a tendency to desire equality, but a tendency to achieve it. Nevertheless, equality has not been achieved or else is being achieved so slowly that when we compare two widely separated ages we can hardly discern that any forward steps have been taken at all. They are, indeed, so little in evidence that many observers refuse to admit their existence, although mistakenly, to be sure. What stands in the way of this intermingling of classes at a common and steadily rising level?

I do not believe that we need look elsewhere for the answer than at the various degrees of *foresight* that each class of society evidences in respect to the question of population. The law of limitation, as we have said, is available to all men in its *moral* and *preventive aspects*. Man, as we have also said, is perfectible, and, as he progresses, he makes more intelligent use of this law. It is therefore natural that the more enlightened a class, the more effective the measures it adopts, the more considerable the sacrifices it imposes upon itself, in order to maintain its own population at a level in keeping with its *means of existence*.

If the science of statistics were sufficiently advanced, it would probably turn this theoretical conjecture of mine into a certainty by showing that early marriages are less frequent in the upper than in the lower strata of society. Now, if such is the case, it is easy to understand how, in the great market place of society where all classes offer their respective services to the highest bidder, where all types of labor are exchanged, unskilled labor is always in greater supply than skilled, intelligent labor. And this explains the persistence of that social inequality which so many other powerful forces constantly tend to eliminate.

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The theory that we have just expounded in this brief fashion leads to this practical observation, namely, that the best forms of philanthropy, the best social institutions, are those that, working in accord with the providential plan as the social harmonies reveal it to us—which is equality along with constant progress—succeed in distributing among all ranks of humanity, and especially the lowest, the gifts of knowledge, reason, morality, and foresight.

We say ''institutions,'' because the fact is that foresight springs as much from the necessities of one's situation as from purely intellectual considerations. There are certain systems of property or, rather, of production, that encourage, more than others, the acquisition of what the economists call a knowledge of the market, and consequently of *foresight*. It seems certain, for example, that sharecropping, much more than the system of renting land at a fixed rate, encourages the lower classes to apply the preventive check to the rising tide of population. A family of sharecroppers is in a far better position than a family of day laborers to realize the inconveniences of early marriage and of excessive reproduction.

We speak, too, of ''forms of philanthropy.'' For indeed, charity, while it can be of immediate and local benefit, can have only a very limited effect, if not, in fact, a bad effect, upon the permanent well-being of the working class; for it does not develop, may indeed paralyze, the very virtue most able to improve working-class conditions, namely, the virtue of *foresight*. The encouragement of wholesome attitudes, and above all of habits that indicate a certain amount of self-respect, is the greatest and most lasting service that can be rendered the lower classes.

The *means of existence,* we cannot repeat too often, are not a fixed quantity; they depend upon one's way of life, on public opinion, on *habits*. On every rung of the social ladder there is the same repugnance to moving a step down from the position to which one has become accustomed as can be felt by those on the lowest rung. Perhaps, indeed, the anguish experienced by the titled nobility at the sight of their scions' being lost among the bourgeoisie is keener than that felt by the bourgeois whose sons become manual laborers, or by the manual laborers whose children are reduced to beggary. The *habit* of certain comforts, of a certain dignity in one's way of life, is therefore one of the strongest of incentives for the exercise of foresight; and if the working class once rises to a certain level of satisfactions, it will be unwilling to descend, even though, in order to preserve its position and to maintain a wage scale in keeping with its new habits, it must resort to the infallible means of preventive limitation.

It is for this reason that I regard as one of the most admirable examples of real philanthropy the decision apparently made by many manufacturers and landowners in England to pull down their mud and thatch cottages and to erect in their place brick houses that are clear, spacious, well-lighted, well-ventilated, and appropriately furnished. If this measure were to be generally adopted, it would raise the tone of the working class and turn into real wants what are now only items of relative luxury; it would raise that limit which we call the

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means of existence, and, consequently, the *wage scale* at its lower level. Why not? The poorest class in civilized countries is far above the poorest class among savage peoples. It has risen so far; why should it not rise even higher?

Yet we must entertain no illusions. Progress can be made only slowly, for it must be, to some degree, *general.* We might imagine that it could be achieved rapidly in one part of the world, if different peoples did not influence one another. But such is not the case. There exists for the human race a great law of *solidarity,* which applies to progress as well as to decline. If in England, for example, the condition of the workers were to be noticeably improved as a result of a general rise in wages, French industry would have a better chance of outstripping its rival, and by its success would slow down the trend toward improved conditions on the other side of the Channel. It would seem that Providence is unwilling that one people should rise beyond certain limits above another. Thus, in the great whole of human society, as in its most minute details, we always find that there are admirable and unyielding forces that tend, in the last analysis, to turn over to the masses what were once individual or group advantages, and to bring all such special cases down to a common level, which, like the ocean when the tide is running, is both everywhere even and yet constantly rising.

In summary, given perfectibility, which is man's distinctive characteristic, and the action of competition and the law of limitation being known, the destiny of the human race, at least here on earth, may, it seems to us, be predicted in these terms: (1) a simultaneous rise in the level of all classes of society, or in the general level of mankind; (2) a gradual elimination of all class differences, as far as is consistent with absolute justice; (3) a reduction in the relative size of the highest and the lowest social strata, and an increase in the middle classes. One might say that these laws must bring about absolute equality. But they will not, any more than an asymptote, infinitely extended, would ever meet the curve which it constantly approaches. . . .

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