

MUST WE CHOOSE BETWEEN GEORGE AND MALTHUS?

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In Progress and Poverty, Book I, Chapter 2, George recommends the perusal of Malthus' Essay on the Principle of Population, if only to show the reader the "contrast between the merits of the book itself and the effect it has produced." Many years after my first reading of Progress and Poverty I have taken the advice and some reflections on the exercise may interest other readers.

As is pointed out by Professor Michael Fogarty in his preface to the Everyman edition of the Essay, much that is regularly attributed to Malthus is the direct opposite of what he actually said. George is not always fair to Malthus. Let us begin by pointing out some of the defects of his treatment of Malthus.

George is very scornful of Malthus' claim that population, if unchecked, tends to increase in a geometrical ratio, but his own argument for the contrary is no more impressive. Consider this, from Book II, Chapter 2:

"Increase of descendants does not show increase of population. It could do this only if the breeding was in and in. Smith and his wife have a son and daughter who marry respectively some one else's daughter and son, and each have two children. Smith and his wife would thus have four grandchildren; but there would be in the one generation no greater number than the other - each child would have four grandparents... How many children a man may have is problematical. But that he had two parents is certain. Follow this geometrical progression through a few generations and see if it does not lead to quite as 'striking consequences' as Mr. Malthus' peopling of the solar systems."

This is just not good enough. Can it seriously be suggested that, where people marry young and take no steps to limit the size of their families, the normal number of children per family is only two? Or even that slightly larger number necessary to compensate for those children who die before reaching marriageable age or who do not marry when they grow up?

Malthus did at least try, with the limited statistical information available to him, to calculate from rates of births, marriages and deaths, the actual number of years that would be required in each country for the population to double itself and he also tried to relate this to the social conditions in the countries concerned.

What is interesting is that, according to Professor Fogarty, statistics now show that Malthus was much too pessimistic about the possible rate of increase of the food supply. Remembering that the discouragements to food production which George reviewed have now been completely removed, this goes some way to support George's view that "in any given state of civilization a greater number of people can collectively be provided for than a smaller." Perhaps the conclusion we should draw, however, is that the decision whether population tends to outrun subsistence should be settled by factual information rather than by seeing debating points.

Population and Providence

George also suggests that if the natural tendency of population were to outrun subsistence, it might have been expected that classical creeds and codes of the Jews, Egyptians, Hindus, Chinese, etc. would have inculcated the prudential restraints of Malthus whereas they did just the reverse. But Malthus dealt with this. He pointed out that in former times the losses of population through war and pestilence were much greater than in modern times, so that encouragement of population was often necessary to the survival of a people.

Certainly George was on shaky ground in suggesting that if Malthus' ideas did not coincide with "the wisdom of the centuries, the religions of the world," they were unlikely to be true. One obvious reason why religions, like secular governments with imperialistic ambitions, should promote the growth of population is that such a policy would tend to a relative increase in the number of their followers and so make it easier for them to impose themselves more widely.

The main burden of George's criticism of Malthus is, however, that in his review of the checks to population, "in every case the vice and misery are shown to spring either from unsocial ignorance and rapacity or from bad government, unjust laws or destructive warfare." And George suggests that this "is really a refutation of the theory which the book advances." But consider Malthus' discussion of the checks to population among the Romans:

"Among the Romans themselves, engaged as they were in incessant wars from the beginning of their republic to the end of it, many of which were dreadfully destructive, the positive check to population from this cause alone must have been enormously great... When the equality of property, which had formerly prevailed in the Roman territory, had been destroyed by degrees, and the land had fallen into the hands of a few great proprietors, the citizens who were by this change successively deprived of the means of supporting themselves, would naturally have no resource to prevent them from starving but that of selling their labour to the rich, as in modern states; but from this resource they were completely cut off by the prodigious number of slaves which, increasing by constant influx with the increasing luxury of Rome, filled up every employment both in agriculture and in manufactures. Under such circumstances, so far from being astonished that the number of free citizens should decrease, the wonder seems to be that any should exist besides the proprietors."

The author of such a passage must surely have seen that human institutions could deprive men of the opportunity to provide themselves with subsistence. Did he look at the fact and not really take it in? Or did he take such changes as the monopolization of land by a few great proprietors as the working out of the inscrutable will of Providence and so not to be questioned?

"A Fuller and More Varied Life"

There is certainly a great deal to criticize in Malthus' Essay, yet at the end of his lengthy criticism, George in effect grants Malthus' main premise when he says that man is "an animal plus something else" and that "the proportion of births is notoriously greater in new settlements, where the struggle with nature leaves little opportunity for intellectual life, and among the poverty-bound classes of older countries, who in the midst of wealth are deprived of all its advantages, and reduced to all but an animal existence, than it is among the classes to whom the increase of wealth has brought independence, leisure, comfort and a fuller and more varied life."

George makes no attempt to say how the "fuller and more varied life" reduces the number of children born, and he could not claim that, when the intellect develops, the sex drive dries up. What it amounts to is that "the classes to whom... wealth has brought... a fuller and more varied life" apply the prudential check so that their fuller and more varied life is not ruined by mere animal proliferation.

To sum up, I think we can say that George and Malthus both understood that, where human life is nearest to the animal, human beings come nearest to the animal in their reproductive habits; where they show the most typical human characters of reason and intelligence, the pressure of population is relieved and there is nothing to worry about. So we do not have to choose between them.