

The Lebensraum Gag

JOKESMITHS tell us there are only a half-dozen original witticisms, all the rest being felicitous variations. In political economy there are perhaps less than a half-dozen basic jokes, and they also come up from time to time in disguises appropriate for the occasion. Right now the old wheeze about over-population is going the rounds. A couple of new books, one in this country and another in England, exploit this theme, while magazine editors, to whom what is sensational is always sound, have recently given it space. Its revival at this time indicates that the audience—the public—is ripe for acceptance of the old yarn.

* * *

ONE hundred and fifty years ago Thomas Robert Malthus, an English divine, published a pamphlet in which he maintained that population tends to increase faster than the means of subsistence; he supported this thesis with a neat mathematical formula. England was then even poorer than it is today; so much so that the pilfering of anything edible became a popular means of existence which even the death penalty could not suppress. The do-gooders of that era came up with a charitable venture known as the Poor Law, but since this did not ameliorate the condition there was an urgency for more and better "relief." The consequential tax bill called forth some heart-rending howls from influential throats.

Dr. Malthus was one of the new intellectuals who sought explanation for economic phenomena in the immutable laws of nature. That was the way with the early explorers in economics; whether they were right or wrong in their findings, they nevertheless proceeded from the theory that economics is an amoral, non-political science, and its principles, like those of any other science, must be sought in the evidence of nature. They were not planners. So, Dr. Malthus gathered together whatever facts and logic he had at his disposal and propounded the doctrine that bears his name; to wit: nature is blindly careless about spawning more babies on the earth than she has provided food for; when the unbalance reaches threatening proportions she rights things through the instruments of war, pestilence and famine. From the human point of view this may be brutal, but nature is impervious to sentiment and there is nothing man can do about it—except, to some degree, by sexual continence.

The Malthusian theory caught on among the affluent like a new tune, and for good reason; it not only gave them telling argument against extending the operations of the Poor Law, which could only prolong the lives of those destined for extinguishment, but it also delivered them from any suspicion of responsibility for the prevalence of poverty. It was healing balm for any stray pangs of conscience. Dr. Malthus probably never anticipated that use of his doctrine, for he was an honest, even though mistaken,

thinker. Some of his other ideas in economics have withstood the test of time, but they never received the publicity accorded the population theory because they buttered nobody's parsnips.

In the latter part of the nineteenth century this theory lost some of its gruesome lustre, for the facts of experience relegated it to the dusty archives where only Ph.D. candidates rummage. Mass migration had relieved Europe of its "surplus," ingenuity had found the earth far more fruitful than had been suspected in the eighteenth century, international trade had made "poor" nations quite opulent. The general wage-level rose to undreamed of heights and Malthusianism became the forgotten joke of political economy.

Too Much With Too Little

THE resuscitation of Malthusianism, in new form, follows from the economic conditions of the past two decades; it might be called an outcropping of New Dealism. The depression of the 1930s, followed by a ruinous war, followed by an inflationary movement that points to another collapse of our economy and a war of frightening proportions—all this has sent our harried intelligentsia in search of some plausible explanation, and what could be more convenient than the old gag of over-population? It is significant, however, that while Dr. Malthus put his faith in the forces of nature, the neo-Malthusians are all for correcting the unbalance between population and subsistence by law and by enforcement agencies; showing how the prevailing pattern of thought can put any theory to its purpose.

The planners who find succor in Malthusianism are of two kinds: the conservationists and the eugenists. The latter are still far from the political stage and need not be disturbed in their discussion of hypothetical breeding - farm projects. The conservationists, however, have got to the point where they are demanding, and in some measure receiving, grants of power for the regulation of land-use. Malthusianism thus serves the new aristocracy as it once served the old.

It is impossible in a short article to show how unfounded in fact and reason is this whole concept of an unbalance between population and subsistence; nor is it necessary, for it can be shown that all Malthusians beg the question by conveniently by-passing two devastating facts. Until they explain these two facts away, if they can, the burden of proof

rests on them, and their offer to correct nature's errors by political means can be declined as bad 'medicine for non-existent disease.

In the first place, they assume an even distribution of all the earth yields. Yet, the evidence is overwhelming that such is not the case. It is not a question of the justice or the injustice of the unbalanced distribution; it is a question of fact. Since under the prevailing conditions some come by an abundance, even a surfeit, it cannot be said positively that the lack others experience is due only to the niggardliness of nature. Simple addition throws doubt on the doctrine.

India is always offered as an example of poverty due to the press of population against the possible food supply. But the fabulous wealth of the maharajahs is extracted from the earth of India, nowhere else, while the maintenance of the British Raj was necessarily derived from the same source. Hence, we must reject this exhibit-A as proof of the correctness of the Malthusian doctrine. So too with China and old Ireland, two classic examples offered by its proponents. In estimating the productivity of the land integrity demands that we include that which goes to the native affluent and the foreign exploiter, as well as the little enjoyed by the indigent.

Nor should we overlook the waste, that which in no wise contributes to the well-being of people, resulting from Statism everywhere. Is hunger the lot of Europeans

today because the land cannot provide? During the war more was destroyed than consumed, and all of this wealth came out of the soil, forests, mines and oil wells; can there be any other source? The war over, the wastage in preparation for another war continues. One third of all that Americans produce from the land is taken in taxation, and it can be demonstrated that most of this third is sheer waste, in no way adding to the abundance men live by. The conservationist accepts this wastage as a regrettable but necessary condition of the social order, but fails to include it as a contributing cause of "surplus" population.

So long as the proponents of conservation by-pass the fact of political waste and the distributive process which everywhere results in opulence as well as poverty, their case is weak.

The Padlocked Warehouse

THE second fact which the Malthusian dodges is that large sections of the earth are withheld from use under our land-tenure system. If the warehouse is padlocked its contents can only be guessed at. Estimates of the extent to which speculation locks up the source of all wealth necessarily vary, one investigator declaring that it amounts to as much as two-thirds of the arable land of the world. The difficulty of arriving at any exact figure is accentuated by the fact that land held speculatively may be partially in use, thus hiding its true economic potentiality.

However, the city-dweller who has eyes to see needs no statistical study to reveal to him the impact of land speculation on the economy. According to the report of the tax department of the City of New York, twenty percent of its total area is "unimproved," and the department's definition of "improved" land is any site which bears a taxable structure; thus a tennis court on a fabulously valuable Park Avenue corner makes that "improved" land, as does a gas-

taxable structure; thus a tennis court on a fabulously valuable Park Avenue corner makes that "improved" land, as does a gasoline station on Broadway. Yet, adjacent skyscrapers prove that these sites are not being put to their fullest use. All up and down the main thoroughfares of our large cities, "taxpayers"—structures just large enough to bring enough rent to meet the taxes—attest to the inadequate use of land, while slums and blighted areas add their testimony to the fact of land speculation. Taking into consideration the disproportion between the value of the sites and the value of the structures on them, one student estimates that seventy-five percent of the land of New York is economically vacant.

What has city land to do with the problem of subsistence? Simply this: within a radius of twenty-five miles of the center of any American city, even New York, there is enough unused arable land that could feed its population. Any Broadwayite, or Giant fan, knows that Brooklyn should be a farm; and so it probably would be, if labor and capital could get to the better sites in Manhattan and build them up to the needs of the community. What is true of New York is true of every city in the country; one investigator pointed out that within the city limits of Rochester, N. Y., there were in 1930, when the study was made, sufficient vacant lots to provide housing for the 76,677 city workers who were pushed out to suburbs by prohibitive land prices; that is, they were occupying land that should properly have been put to truck gardening.

Is there any purely agricultural land that is not working for the sustenance of man? Neither the census department nor the Malthusians have any interest in the matter, and so no statistics are available. But, if you take an automobile ride from Boston to

San Francisco you will see an unused continent, more than enough land to feed all of Europe's "displaced persons," and if you seek the why of it you will find a price that no producer could pay and still have a living left for his pains. The presumption is reasonable that this condition obtains throughout the world.

Nor is speculation the only cause of unused land. Obviously, farming in those parts of China which are likely to be overrun by guerrillas would not be profitable, and a Hindu would be foolhardy to set up an establishment near the Pakistan border. How much of the globe's surface is immobilized by the imminence of organized or unorganized warfare should be a subject of inquiry before the Malthusian can say Q.E.D. Also, how much food could society get out of estates devoted to pleasure or ostentation?

Thus, the neo-Malthusian, who rests his case on a ratio between estimated population increase and the possible yield of the earth, which he claims to know down to a turnip or a lump of coal, is of necessity guessing. He is compelled to compute the fish supply of the world by the number of trout a fisherman can catch in a brook with a rod, rather than by the haul of the crew working with nets in the ocean. Since the expectancy of appreciation is more lively where land is more productive, it is exactly this kind that is most subject to speculative withholding; hence an estimate of the earth's productivity based on the yield of land in use must be weighted by the yield of marginal land. Furthermore, what new productive techniques would be called into play by the opening up of the richer opportunities? One does not put farming machinery to work on barren soil; on the other hand, were the richer sources of supply unlocked, the amount of capital and ingenuity that would be applied to them would be limited only by the possible yield, and one cannot tell what this might be until the thing happens. Who would think of a fishing net

if the ocean were inaccessible?

The population-subsistence ratio of the neo-Malthusians must be, therefore, as untrustworthy as the one worked out by Dr. Malthus. His prognostications were proven false because his equation was based on faulty premises; for the same reason his present day followers are not to be depended upon.

Legalized Erosion

THERE is, however, no controverting the conservationist when he points to the erosion of the soil, to the wanton depletion of the reproductive elements in it. Here he is on solid ground, as far as he goes. But, his suggested cure for the condition, political coercion in the use of land, can be put aside until we ascertain the basic cause of it. Why does man so abuse the only machine from which he can make a living that it breaks down? Is it weakness of intellect, short-sighted avarice or sheer necessity that drives him to destroy his earth?

Weakness of intellect is, of course, at the bottom of all error. When we consider how much of the earth's products are destroyed in war, or the preparation for war, one loses one's regard for man's vaunted gift of reason. The proper idea of conservation is that the earth should be used only for the purpose of satisfying the desires of man, not for his impoverishment or destruction. When the things taken out of the earth are blown up in smoke, or dumped into the ocean, the earth is being wasted. Also, it is wastefulness to take gold out of one hole and sink it into another, where it can do man no good, when steel and lumber and labor are poured into political monuments, when projects are pursued for the one purpose of bolstering the State. Whatever man does economically is conservation; everything he does politically is waste. It is indeed a wonder that after centuries of such wastefulness the earth can still provide us with some sort of living.

Putting aside the political erosion of the earth, we come to the robbing of it by avarice and necessity, and we find that the political reduction of land to property abets avarice and causes necessity. So long as the law gives a man a title deed in fee simple there is no way of preventing him from getting all he can out of his domain, leaving the hindmost to the devil. His is the timber on it, his is the energy congealed in its surface and his are the minerals below. He is entirely within his legal rights if he turns the whole thing into a penny. If what he leaves is a shambles, we must look for cause to the law which enabled him to do so. It is ridiculous to scold him for being human.

The law which empowers a man to rob the land also empowers him to keep it out of use. If he keeps it out of use he forces labor and capital to work on whatever land is available, which, under the circumstances, is usually land of less productivity. Since the beginning of our country the land-hungry animal has been progressively pushed to poorer and poorer land simply because the more productive locations were pre-empted and priced. It is the working of these naturally poor sources that is a prime cause of erosion.

Anyone familiar with the Dakotas knows that the major part of these areas consists of a thin top-soil, beneath which is a bottomless sea of clay. For centuries nature had laboriously put together this meager coating of soil, but the most it could be expected to yield regularly was "buffalo" grass. An occasional crop of corn or wheat might be coaxed out of this skinny top, but only at the risk of destroying it. This every farmer outside the rich river-bed areas has long known; but he also knew of the prohibitive price put on the deep-soil areas, and he had no choice but to plow the grassland. He hoped that he could get a living out of it, even though some of the skimpy crop had to service a mortgage and pay taxes. He robbed it of the little energy nature had put into it. Then came the hot sun to pulverize the remains and the strong wind to blow the powder off. The clay remained.

The same land-laws which compel the use of marginal land long before there is any need for it, causing depletion to the point of uselessness, work in other subtle ways toward the same end. Under these laws tenure becomes uncertain, and this uncertainty impels the user of land to get all he can out of it while he can, with no regard for its future utility. There is, to begin with, the matter of market value which, under our laws, land must acquire. It is this value which makes possible the mortgage which makes foreclosure likely; when, as a result of poor crops or profligacy, the threat of foreclosure comes upon the land-worker, any consideration of the future usefulness of the land is academic; his immediate emergency compels him to work the land to the limit. He robs it so that he may retain tenure. Then, again, our tax system levies on the improvements put upon the land, and if its output does not meet these demands (after his living), he stands to lose both his labor products and his tenure; to save both, he must extract from the soil enough to satisfy the prior lien of the tax-collector, as well as the next prior lien of the mortgagee. Finally, when land becomes valuable it becomes rentable, resulting in the system of tenancy. The tenant's interest in the land terminates with his lease, and during his time he must get all the traffic will bear, first, to meet the terms of tenure, secondly, to live; he cannot have any concern in the future.

Were our land laws so framed that use of a location would be the only assurance of tenure, its usefulness would be jealously guarded. No one would abuse the land which, so long as he used it profitably, would remain in his possession. But, while our laws benefit the speculator, the usefulness of land will be a secondary consideration.

Those Who Cry "Wolf"

NOT only because it fails to consider politically-made erosion does the case of conservationism fall down. Its record is both dirty and full of inaccuracy. The fact is that conservation has always been pleaded by monopolies, and since monopoly lives to get a higher price by limiting supply, its cry of a shortage of natural resources is decidedly suspect. This does not mean that the sincere conservationist is a tool of monopoly, but it puts upon him the necessity of attacking the politico-economic problem of monopoly. Until he does so, the suspicion of ulterior motives is on him.

The inaccuracies of conservationists in the past throw doubt on their present figures. Fifty years ago they told us that we were consuming our coal supply at a rate that would in short order completely deplete it. Along came oil. Now it's oil that has the conservationist on edge. If only half of what the scientists tell us about the possibilities of atomic power are realized, the coming generations will forget all about coal and oil, and then no doubt the conservationists will prove a dearth of fissionable material. So it goes. Dr. Malthus surely did not know about the nutritive value of spinach or chinquapins, and he would have declared utterly fantastic the idea of getting fifty bushels of wheat out of an acre. How can we put faith in prophets who have been so regularly wrong?

As for the birth-rate, which our conservationist-Malthusians view with alarm, nature tells them in unmistakable terms to go mind their own business. According to Dr. Malthus, war is nature's way of eliminating "surplus" population; and yet, the records show that the number of babies born

during the past decade exceeds its horrible obituary list. It seems to be a biological law that when a species finds existence hazardous, as among the fellaheen of the Near East or the coolies of the Far East, nature rushes in with new battalions. On the other hand, she is parsimonious with the offspring she allows to the affluent. War and poverty breed large families, peace and plenty reduce their size. Hence, to limit the growth of population the only thing we can do is to remove man-made laws which seminate fellaheen and coolies. The real job of conservationism is in the field of political economy, not in eugenics or even agronomy.

Putting aside all other considerations, the proposal of our neo-Malthusians to apply political measures to the malady they suspect makes them dangerous doctors. When has political power ever and in any sphere promoted the welfare of man? Even if the conservationists are right, even if the birth-rate—not the atomic bomb—threatens to destroy the human race, it were better so; dying from starvation as free men has advantages over being hounded to death by commissars. *Nature is not the enemy of man; man is.*