

THE LANDLESS ARE HUNGRY

At a time when so much political and philosophical thought seems to be based on a half-belief in the doctrine of Malthus and when even the President of the British Association can question the desirability of prophylactic medicine, it is refreshing to discover a book so sanely written as Josué de Castro's *Geography of Hunger**. That hydra-headed monster, the Malthus theory, has been destroyed on many previous occasions only to arise again and one can but hope that Mr. de Castro's patient and factual survey will now have brought about its final demise and that never again will this theory be advanced to support a false argument or justify a sadistic policy.

The main argument of the book is that "overpopulation does not cause starvation, but starvation is the cause of overpopulation"; that "hunger is a universal phenomenon not the result of any natural necessity" and "results from grave errors and defects in social organisation." This proposition is amply supported by a wealth of detail and particularly by the figures which show how a high birth rate results from dietary deficiencies. The answer is therefore not to call vainly for birth control or accept famine as a natural and necessary calamity, but to readjust social organisation so as to remove hunger—which the author defines as a dietary deficiency, not absolute starvation. It is clear that the world is not overpopulated but rather the reverse since only one-eighth of the earth's natural resources is at present cultivated and only by an increase in population can its potentialities be adequately developed.

Having demolished Malthus and demonstrated that soil erosion is not a serious factor (the author refers to it as a "subterfuge" to cover up the "deleterious factors" responsible for the "decadence of the world") the author appears to attribute hunger to landlordism and colonial exploitation. He does not state the former directly since he is avowedly avoiding politics, but from the number of references it might be thought that such is his view. To quote a few examples from the many in the book he says, concerning landlordism, that in China "3 per cent of the 'farmers' hold a monopoly of 45 per cent of the cultivated land," in India "48 per cent of the cultivated lands belong to the large scale landlord . . . who are businessmen rather than farmers . . . and appear only at harvest time to collect their 40—60 per cent of the crop," in Africa "the plantation system is based on great land holdings, or latifundia organised for large-scale cash crops," in Spain "the arable land was monopolised by a handful of great landlords." His attack on colonialism is more direct and he maintains that while the colonial powers have carried out extensive developments it has invariably been with a view to providing cheap raw materials for their own industrial machine and always to the disadvantage of the particular colony concerned.

Although mention is made of Marx, whose teachings the author appears to support, it would seem that he was unaware of the writings of Henry George. So much of the work is complementary to George's teachings that phrases and paragraphs of *Progress*

and *Poverty* are constantly called to mind while reading the book—Henry George's demolition of Malthus, for instance, in Book II of *Progress and Poverty* contains much that is apposite to the author's argument.

It is, therefore, somewhat disappointing to find no reference whatsoever to the land question in the author's solution which seems to be more an expansion of colonialism rather than a radical departure from it. He calls for a "broader and more intensive study of nutrition throughout the world" and for a plan "to raise the productive levels of marginal peoples and groups and through economic progress to integrate them into the world economic community." Yet at the same time he is opposed to the production of single crops at the most economic point—the division of labour—since he considers this the worst aspect of colonialism. Thus the production of sugar in Cuba and oil in Venezuela should not be based on "profit margins through the play of competition for industrial products," but must be related to "the cost of basic necessities . . ." "Productivity is not the key to the problem, but it must be approached in terms of humanistic economics."

Having overlooked the land question despite the clear references to it in the first part of the book, the author has led himself into a series of contradictions. Perhaps having observed the failure of the various agrarian reforms to which he refers he regards the solution of landlordism as too difficult except on a world scale and does not realise that there is an alternative to the physical sub-division and distribution of large estates into uneconomic sizes. Observing that the colonial producers of raw materials receive but a pittance he proposes a more diversified production even though he knows that tropical countries are unsuitable for many forms of production. At the same time he suggests an "International Commodity Clearing House" and planning on a world scale which is surely colonialism run wild and which would inevitably result in restrictions, quotas and controls aimed at maintaining price levels to the advantage of producers, not consumers.

It is evident that the cause of wide-spread hunger is the same as that which causes poverty to go hand-in-hand with progress, the great enigma of our age which not to answer is to be destroyed. The answer is to collect land values for the people by means of land value taxation, not to engage in expensive and wasteful organisations for the redistribution of land to the landless, since by taking the full annual value of the land (all land, not just agricultural land) and freeing the products of human effort from taxation the land is returned to the people more effectively and more permanently than ever it would be by re-distribution. Colonial exploitation is but one aspect of the land question and the most serious fault of the colonial powers is that they perpetuated and buttressed the system of private expropriations of the rent of land rather than collect it for public use.

Failure to appreciate this has marred an otherwise valuable book, but we can nevertheless admire the author for his optimism in the face of the picture he presents, agree with much of his argument and hope with him that his book will have a wide and cauterising effect. We cannot conclude better than

* *Geography of Hunger* by Josué de Castro. Publishers, Gollancz, London—18s. An extract from this book appeared in our July, 1952, issue.

in the words of the author himself: "The road to survival, therefore, does not lie in the neo-Malthusian prescription to eliminate surplus peoples, nor in birth control, but in the effort to make everyone on the face of the earth productive." It only remains to add that this can best be done by making the face of the earth freely available for all to work and the products of their work freely available to all to buy.

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