



CHAPTER II. OVER-POPULATION.

It is unnecessary for me to deal seriously with *Malthusian theories*, so popular with those who want an excuse for doing nothing in the way of reform. I could never make out a clearer refutation than that of Henry George, in "Progress and Poverty," nor could I ever understand how anyone could be found to contend that overpopulation was the principal cause of misery, while, at the same time contending that overproduction was at the root of the evil.

The theory of Malthus is, as we all know, that population has a natural tendency to overstep the boundary line drawn by the means of subsistence. The overpopulation we now complain of is an increase in the number of people without subsistence, because there is too great an abundance in every department of production, from the fundamental food supply up to houses, clothing and luxuries of every description. It is this overstocking of the market with all the necessities and superfluities of life, which prevents millions of willing workers from finding employment by which they could earn the wages enabling them to buy their share of the good things which are waiting in vain for purchasers. This strange, but well-known fact is of itself sufficient to silence most of the nonsense talked about *overpopulation*. The wealth of Great Britain increases at the rate of £200,000,000 a year, that is two percent.; while on the other hand population has grown only one per cent. How does this agree with the theories that population outgrows the means of subsistence? Schippel (*Das moderne Elend und die moderne Übervölkerung*, Leipzig, 1883), gives a list of 25 important branches of work in England, which occupied half a million less workers than they did 20 years before—2,562,000 instead of 3,030,000—in

spite of the increase of population, because improved tools and modes of production enabled the smaller number to produce a much greater amount of goods than before.

It is not only in industrial productions, however, that this law holds good, viz., of a smaller number of workers producing more goods than the larger number did before; even in agriculture we find the same result. In 1801 England and Wales, according to Schippel, had an agricultural population of 1,713,289 but in 1871, in spite of the largely increased population, this number had fallen to 1,657,138, while Caird gives the cultivated area as 20 per cent. larger than in 1821, with an increase of the quantity of wheat raised per acre. The best illustration of what "overpopulation" now-a-days really means is given by the case of Ireland, which Schippel presents in a very convincing way. I shall give it in his own words:

"In Ireland modern overpopulation has been developing for more than a generation in classic simplicity without any confusing accompanying circumstances. As is well-known the population of Ireland is not increasing, but has been rapidly decreasing for a long time since.

"It was 8.2 millions in 1842; 6.6 in '51; 5.8 in '61; 5.5 in '66; it is 5,175,000 now. But (Dudley) Baxter has been already enabled to show in 1867, that the total income in the tax lists was continually increasing; 1855, for instance, 16 per cent. The cultivated area had equally increased on the green Island from 1841-76; according to Mulhall from 13.5 to 15.3 million acres, or 13.3 per cent. The value of harvests rose from 23.8 to 36.5 millions, or more than half. The productive power of labour has had a remarkable increase; 1876, 60 per cent. more acres to each head of the population were cultivated and each acre produced 40 per cent. more. What was wanting to make the Irish people happier than it was before? It was just the increased productive power of labour that proved a curse to labourers and tenants! The more they brought forth, the less they were needed, and with the steady progress in cultivation they are wanted less and less from day to day and from year to year. In this way Ireland during the last decades always was overpopulated, in spite of the rapid decline of its population. It was overpopulated, when after 25 years it had lost not only the whole of the excess of

births over deaths, but 2·7 millions more; when through emigration and terrible famines it had been brought down to the level of 1801. It has been more overpopulated than ever within the last few years, though from 1871-80, according to the register, the general population had yearly decreased about 19,000. During 1880, 42,605 persons had been swept away from the ranks of Irishmen; in 1881, certainly more than 50,000. In spite of these terrible blood-lettings thousands find no subsistence to-day, further thousands are rendered superfluous every year through new advances in agriculture, and if ever technical science should develop so far that for the production of the same wealth only one man is needed, sitting in the middle and turning a crank to move the whole apparatus of national production, Irishmen will have to arrange to disappear to the last man from Ireland and perhaps from the globe, if our present system should then take hold of the whole world ever needing less work for the production of all wealth.

“Modern over-population does not originate from a drying of productive force, but on the contrary from its *overflowing*. It is caused by our consumption not increasing in proportion to the productivity of labour, by our not consuming more as we produce more. The nature of the demand governs employers in their employment of labour; in consequence of unchanged sales and increased productiveness of labour less workers are employed. Some of the unemployed are superfluous; if they found regular occupation before, they now find themselves all at once forming part of the surplus-population.”

I complete the words of Schippel, by adding a few lines I wrote in reply to an article in the April number, 1890, of the *Nineteenth Century* from the pen of the conservative politician T. W. Russell:

“An old hobby is ridden by Mr. T. W. Russell in the April number of the *Nineteenth Century*: The misery of Ireland 50 years ago came from over-population.

It was real over-population according to Mr. Russell, for “even if land had been rent free, the labourers for whom it was incapable of providing labour could not have profited.”

Are you so sure of this, Mr. Russell? Let us investigate a few figures. The area of Ireland is 20,826,209 acres, of which,

according to J. R. McCulloch's description and statistics of the British empire of 1847, 13,000,880 were cultivated at that time. Let us leave aside the fact that a great portion of the remaining 7,800,000 acres could have been cultivated, if landlordism, with its habit of increasing rent as soon as the tenant had improved the land without paying for the improvement, had not been in the way. In spite of this obstacle, two million more acres have been put into cultivation since then, and millions more could be added. Let us leave this aside, though it is of great importance; let us simply divide the 13 millions among a population of 1,600,000 families of five persons each, and we obtain eight acres for each family, that is, twice as much as is needed to feed them, so that Ireland could maintain at least double the population of 1840, without counting the food which might be imported for industrial products. As, according to Arthur Young, this land is superior to that of England in point of fertility, and, as three acres are sufficient to furnish all the food a family needs, we could easily add eight millions more, if we include the land capable of cultivation, but not counted in the above estimate. The rental, acre for acre, amounted to 13s. 5½d. This amounted to £5 8s. for each family, and as, according to Mr. Russell, the average earnings of a labourer amounted to from 2s. to 2s. 6d. a week, the part taken by the drone was as much as the workers got, and from this source alone the income of the latter could have been doubled. The indirect effect would have been much greater, if that greatest of all hindrances to the free development of the country, idle landlords confiscating improvements and thereby preventing them, had been taken off. Look at the exports of that same poor and starving Ireland at the same period, exports mostly made to pay for the rent of the land due to absentee landlords. The exports of 1845, according to McCulloch, amounted to 3,251,000 quarters of grain and meal. A quarter of eight bushels forms the estimated consumption of an adult during a year, and we thus see that the grain exported, by itself would have been sufficient to feed half the population. Idle landlords took it away: the people starved, and politicians like Mr. Russell call it "Over-population." Why, on the same plan one single family might be considered as over-population if somebody took away from them the foodstuffs they produced to feed on. The exportations of Ireland in other articles besides grain and flour, amounted to about seven million pounds. The total produce of Ireland in grains, potatoes, garden produce, and flax amounted to £28,200,000. This did not include meat, bacon, butter, eggs, etc., and industrial products; but it would, even as it is, have yielded three times as much to each family as they earned, according to Mr. Russell, if we take into account the wages he mentions. Page 682, he gives the average income of a family at that time to be under £50, which would be about eight times as

much as the average wages paid to labourers, and therefore, would by itself indicate that it was not over-population and a deficiency of goods which caused the need of the people, but a wrong distribution ; for £50 a year for each family would be enough to feed and clothe them, would be a good deal more than what French and German populations possessed at that period, or what 90 per cent. of them possess even now.

If the annual drink bill, according to Mr. Russell, exceeds the annual rent paid for land to-day, it certainly must have done so in 1840, if, as the same writer states, people drink a good deal less now than they did then. He says that men drank to forget their misery. As the land system caused this misery, we here have another item which has to be taken into account when we investigate the real cause of the state of things described by Mr. Russell. The absence of landlordism would have turned into food a great part of the wealth which flowed into this channel. Where, after all this, can we find a justification of that unpardonable levity which sees in over-population the source of Ireland's misery, when the real cause lies so evidently before the eyes of all who do not intentionally blind themselves to the truth ?"

If anybody, who does not shut his eyes willingly, who does not make use of the overpopulation craze to lull his conscience to prove to himself satisfactorily, that there is not the least use in doing anything for his fellow men, as any improvement in their lot would only tend to make them increase so much faster, and thus tend to bring back the old misery ; if, I say, any man who looks things honestly in the face continues to talk of overpopulation as the cause of existing misery, there is no alternative, but doubting the soundness of his mind. No man who has the full possession of his senses can continue to talk in the same breath of *overpopulation* and *overproduction*, after having for one single moment thought over the real meaning of both words. Both cannot exist at the same time. We might have overpopulation with starvation, or a sparse population with a plethora, but they must of necessity be incompatible together. As however it is the existing conditions that we have to grapple with, and not hypothetical cases, it can be considered that we have banished the spectre of "overpopulation" from the field of discussion in regard to the social problem of the day. The question whether in the distant future this spectre might not take bodily form and become a terrible reality, is another matter ;

but certainly it is no question of our day. It should have just as little to do with present efforts for reform as the fear, that the cooling of our earth might at some future period make it uninhabitable and therefore restrain us from working for the progress of humanity. Judging however by past increase and considering the immense area of the earth's surface not yet brought into cultivation, as well as the continual progress we are making in agriculture, such a period could not be reached under the most unfavourable circumstances for probably thousands of years. I do not incline to the belief that it ever will be reached at all, for those philosophers, who busy themselves with such prophesies always base them upon precedents and analogies from the vegetable and animal kingdom, forgetting that man is something more than an animal and that the laws governing the other creatures do not invariably apply to him as well. Man is the only creature on the earth capable of increasing his food supply beyond the limits of natural growth by means of artificial stimulation. How far we have advanced in the attainment of this end has been admirably shown by Prince Krapotkin in an article of the June number 1888 of the *Nineteenth Century*, entitled "The Reign of Plenty," which gives an example of small culture according to which, as much asparagus had been raised on half an acre, by artificial cultivation, as would grow on 60 acres in the ordinary way, besides numerous other examples of a similar kind. Furthermore, we are the only animals capable of controlling our increase rationally. Our reason develops with well-being, and as a consequence we find individuals and nations showing a decrease in the number of their families in proportion to their well-being. (France and the New-England states may be cited.)

For these reasons there probably never will be a time when man will multiply to such an extent that the law of the survival of the fittest will apply to him as it does to the lower creation. And so fall those ramparts which the rich have been erecting around their consciences from the scientific material furnished by Malthus and Darwin. No more can the lack of desire to reform social evils shield itself behind the plea of uselessness because a corresponding increase of population brings with it the old misery ; nor can selfish-

ness find an excuse in babbling about the battle of life with its inexorable necessities.

We have done now with the master, who tries to prove to us the existence of invisible beans and in the same breath the uselessness of the crop, even if we clearly saw it. Let us see next what our socialist gardener has to say for himself.