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LAND, FOOD AND OVERPOPULATION

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Two schools of thought about world hunger are, in my opinion, really dangerous to the future of humanity, because they falsify the social reality of the problem. One theory attempts to prove that famine is a natural and incurable phenomenon; the other offers as our only salvation a forced reduction in the world's birth rate

The contention that famine results from a kind of natural law has no basis in scientific knowledge. Analysis of certain fundamental statistics will show how artificial that notion is: The oceans cover 71 per cent of the surface of the earth, and the remaining 29 per cent is the solid part of our planet. This land covers an area of about 56 million square miles, of which 30 per cent is forested, grassy plains are 20 per cent, 18 per cent is mountains and 32 per cent desert, either torrid or polar. According to Robert Salter and Homer Shantz, specialists of the United States Department of Agriculture, only 25 million square miles—half of the land surface of the planet—can be agriculturally exploited by present methods of soil utilization. Desert and mountainous regions are not considered arable, although lately there have been notable triumphs of agricultural technique in such areas. Yet this conservative calculation gives mankind some 16 billion acres to cultivate, or 8 acres per individual of our present world population. Authorities on agriculture and nutrition, studying the correlation of area cultivated and food supply in the light of modern knowledge of nutrition, have estimated that about 2 acres per person will supply the indispensable elements of a rational diet. Cultivation according to that ratio would use one-fourth of the world's arable land. As yet, the area cultivated has not reached 2 billion acres, an eighth of the earth's natural possibilities. Clearly, hunger and famine do not result from any natural law.

Half the world's land has been left out of this reckoning. Mountains and desert are not computed as useful, although hundreds of thousands of acres of tropical desert have recently been made fertile by modern irrigation, and the Russians, with their surprising agricultural processes, are adding a wide strip

* *Geography of Hunger*, by Josué de Castro. Publishers, Gollancz, London—18s.

of polar desert to the productive area of their country. According to Mikhailov, the Kola peninsular, lying at 67° 44' north latitude, 3° above the arctic circle, today provides wheat, barley, turnips, carrots, peas, radishes, squash and cucumbers for its 150,000 inhabitants. Still farther north, on the most northerly lands of the European land mass, only 850 miles from the North Pole on the Taymyr peninsular, plants selected according to the "vernalization" methods of the agronomist Lysenko are being cultivated, and are adjusting their growth and ripening to the short polar summer. Plantations of potatoes, corn and raspberries not only produce at such latitudes, they produce well; a variety of potato grown north of the arctic circle yields 200 quintals per hectare (17,844 pounds per acre), while in the centre of the Eurasian continent the average yield is only half as much. Veritable oases are appearing in the polar desert

Another theory of hunger accuses nature of provoking this calamity by an indirect mechanism: endowing man with excessive powers of reproduction and thus inviting overpopulation of the earth. The so-called neo-Malthusians subscribe to this idea. They would like to revive the doctrines brought forth by the English economist, Thomas Robert Malthus, at the end of the eighteenth century. The first industrial experiments gave the impression that machines could replace men completely, and some people came to feel that the production of human machines must be reduced to keep them from competing with iron ones. In England, which was the cradle of industrialism, Malthus's theories were widely accepted. Then, too, as Alfred Sauvy claims, the fear of nascent socialism was responsible for the creation as well as the acceptance of Malthusian theory. Malthus found the increase of world population a great danger to its economic equilibrium, and in defence of this thesis he fathered the hypothesis that population increases in geometrical progression and the food supply in arithmetical progression. Thus as people reproduce, food production becomes irretrievably insufficient for their necessities.

Malthus's theory lacked a scientific basis. His first error was to consider the growth of population as an independent variable, isolated from other social phenomena, whereas in fact such increase is strictly dependent on political and economic factors. His notion of a natural law governing the growth of population was challenged by Marx, who pointed out that what really occur are historical tendencies or cycles which change from one period to another in accordance with changing social organizations. Further, history itself has completely disproved the predictions of Malthus. For a time after the publication of his theories the growth of world population seemed to confirm his predictions, but before the end of the last century the increase had lost its impetus. Fertility began to decline in various countries, and side by side with the spectre of overpopulation appeared that of underpopulation.

The central doctrine of Malthus "was thus completely contradicted by historical evolution," says the well-known demographer, Imre Ferenczi. Dr. W. R. Aykroyd, director of the Division on Nutrition of the F.A.O., wrote in 1937 that, "Now in western civilization the spectre raised by Malthus has been laid." Yet his theory, long buried in the ruins of his frightening

predictions, has lately been dug up and used to project new and still more terrifying forecasts, culminating in the prophecy of the end of the world depopulated by famine

Our blind flight into the unknown tends to frighten prudent spirits, and fear leads them now, as it did when Malthus lived, to attribute social unrest to the sheer number of human beings. When the neo-Malthusians say that mankind is starving and condemned to perish in universal famine because of its inadequately controlled birth rate, they are simply blaming the hungry for the fact that there is hunger. It seems to them that famished populations, raising the demographic pressure of the world by their delirium of reproduction, are criminals.

These criminals are guilty of the crime of hunger, for in the final analysis the neo-Malthusian theory is one of the born starveling, who starves because he is born to starve, just as the criminal, in the old Lombrosian theory, kills and robs because he is born to do so. Like born criminals, the starving deserve an exemplary punishment, and so they are condemned to extermination, either by individual starvation or by controlling reproduction until the born-to-starve disappear from the face of the earth. They are guilty of the masochistic crime of inventing hunger and suffering it.

Here is the death sentence that William Vogt, standard-bearer of the neo-Malthusians, serenely pronounced upon those great hunger-makers, the Chinese: ". . . there is little hope that the world will escape the horror of extensive famines in China during the next few years. But from the world point of view, these may be not only desirable, but indispensable."

The neo-Malthusians have invented nothing; their theories rest on the same precarious base that supported Malthus. To give a colour of reality to their prophecies, they based their predictions on the average annual coefficient of population increase during the last two centuries, and calculated that in three hundred years the world would have 21 billion inhabitants. This calculation has as little value as those of Malthus, which have already been disproved by history. The social changes of the next three hundred years may as likely bring a decrease as an increase in the present population. Since we have no information about society in the coming centuries, long-range predictions of population changes are pure speculations and consequently of no practical value.

Another alarmist idea with no basis in fact is that food production cannot be increased because we have reached the practical limits of soil utilization as well as of human saturation. The facts are, first, that of the 50 per cent of the globe's soil which can be cultivated, only 10 per cent is being used; and second, that production per acre in most of the world could be greatly increased by rational agricultural practices. The special F.A.O. committee which edited the report of the World Food Survey concluded that wheat production in India could be raised 30 per cent in ten years: 20 per cent by using fertilizers, 5 per cent by introducing new varieties and 5 per cent through protection from insects and diseases. They go on to say that after this period additional measures could swell the increase to 50 per cent. The same thing could be done in many parts of the world. Raymond

Christensen estimates that half the increase in agricultural production in the United States during the Second World War was due to the introduction of new techniques.

I do not entirely agree with Marx's statement that production can be increased indefinitely, but I do believe that we are still a very great distance from its maximum limits. And consequently I am not alarmed by the ghost of Malthus, or, as I always have an impulse to put it, by the Malthusian scarecrow. Nothing reminds me more of this theory than the grotesque figures of scarecrows, those frightening but harmless effigies that farmers set up to scare away the birds. To the neo-Malthusians, the peoples of the world are a calamity worse than a flock of hungry birds or a thick cloud of locusts threatening to devour all the harvest of their neat little orchard which, as we have seen, occupies only 10 per cent of the surface of the earth. Against this threat to the nutritional security and general living standard of the richer populations, the neo-Malthusians hoist in the four corners of the world the scarecrows of their excess-population theories—scarecrows that are both symbols and phantoms. A poet has called them "sculptures of the fear of our people and our epoch."

Dr. Josué de Castro, author of "Geography and Hunger," from which the foregoing extract is taken, is Chairman of the Executive of the Food and Agriculture Organisation, and Professor at the Institute of Nutrition, University of Brazil. Continent by continent, and country by country, Dr. de Castro's book is an appalling record of malnutrition, disease, famine and death. For instance, 50 per cent of Chinese mortality is caused directly or indirectly by chronic malnutrition. In New Guinea, eight of every ten children die before reaching puberty—because they are born already wasted by the starvation of their parents. In Cuba a family of five has to live on a daily energy total sufficient for only one person. In most parts of the world the story is basically the same. People may die of a different deficiency disease: that is all.

Dr. de Castro writes: "The fundamental truth can no longer be concealed from mankind. The world has at its disposal enough resources to provide an adequate diet for everybody, everywhere. And if many of the Guests on this earth have not yet been called to the table, it is because all known civilisations, including our own, have been organised on a basis of extreme economic inequality."

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