

Overpopulation—Theory or Fact?

By GEORGE MARAVELAS

FIGURES on the density of human beings in various parts of the world are often misleading. India and China, for instance, are often thought of as most thickly populated countries. If we consult an atlas, however, we find that England, with some 50,000 inhabitants, has a density of 750 persons to the square mile while India, with 1,575,000 square miles, has only 214 people to the square mile. Or, taking an example in the United States, we find a density of population as high as any in the world, in the District of Columbia, where the ratio is 9,611.4 persons to 64 square miles.

Overpopulation does not seem to have attracted attention from sociologists until late in the eighteenth century—the period known as the industrial revolution—when country people in England began to drift to towns and cities to work in mills and factories.

During this period young Thomas Malthus, an English clergyman, was persuaded to write his essay on overpopulation. His father, though he did not agree entirely with the conclusions reached, was struck with the apparent logic of his son's views. There seemed to be sound reasoning in the theory that the geometrical increase of population would run far ahead of the arithmetical increase of subsistence. The "Essay on the Principle of Populations as it Affects the Future Improvement of Society" was published in 1798 and has had a profound influence in its field ever since.

Malthus correctly maintained that the poor laws prevalent in England in his day, as well as doles and charity, aggravated the conditions they were supposed to remedy. The essay aroused great controversy and its author was subjected to abuse from many quarters. He was compelled, in a revision, to admit that a check could be put to the increase of the poor by men and women of the working classes refusing to marry. In the revised version he put less emphasis on the geometric increase of populations; nevertheless, his theory took firm root in the scientific and social thought of the nineteenth century. As a problem in mathematics it was logical, but as a hypothesis, it ignored both common sense and history.

On the other hand, following the French Revolution, the land owning aristocrats not only in England but on the Continent, were apprehensive. These explanations by Malthus soothed the conscience of the rich and solidified the inertia of politicians. Many intelligent people were induced to believe that natural law inevitably doomed most people to grinding poverty. The theory of a limited economy became an accepted idea.

This type of reasoning was to be given further circulation by such social philosophers as J. S. Mill who pessimistically called attention to the "law of diminishing returns" as applied to agriculture.

Latest Research Shows Fallacy

The Malthusian theory continues to be popular with many scientists and sociologists, although it has been generally disproved by agronomists during the past ten years. Professor Artturi I. Virtanen, a Finnish chemist and Nobel prize winner, is of the opinion that if present agronomical knowledge were universally applied, the earth could feed 4,000,000,000 people. Surplus crops in the United States give evidence of the invalidity of the "not enough food" theory, and focus attention on the real reason—artificial controls.

An Italian scholar, Francesco Nitti, arrived at some thought provoking conclusions in his *Population and the Social System*, drawing attention to the fact that wealth and population are interrelated. "Malthus' law," he wrote, "explains nothing just as it comprehends nothing. Bound by rigid formulas which are belied by history and demography, it is incapable of explaining not only the mystery of poverty but the alternate reverses of human civilizations."

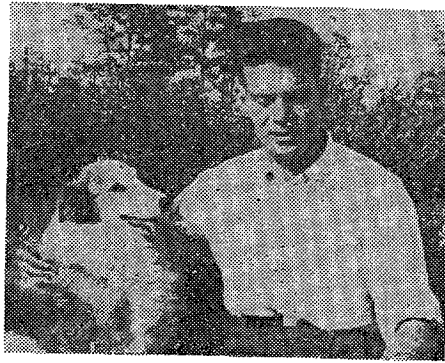
The "mystery of poverty" is nothing more than a problem of the production and distribution of wealth. Most people still wonder why economists cannot agree on the nature of wealth, or the curtailment of poverty. Nitti proposes that population and wealth be considered together. "We can assert that a country which, in the actual form of economic constitution, is capable of sustaining a certain number of individuals, could sustain a much greater number when the economic form is changed in the direction of a wider distribution of the wealth produced," he states. "Against this phenomenon of population some theorists have ventured to raise arguments, which do not well sustain even the slightest scrutiny."¹

Feminism a New Factor

Malthus still has his champions and their arguments are not always easy to dispute. In a country like India birth control may be a first step toward the solution of numerous social and religious problems. In some countries interest in the quality rather than the quantity of individuals leads to voluntary controls, not because of fear of overpopulation or lack of food, but simply because the improved status of women results in greater responsibility toward the oncoming generation.

A few years after the war ended, some doubts existed as to the sufficiency of the food supply. They were dispelled when several successive bumper crops piled up mountains of food. With all due consideration to the prophets of doom, there seems to be no factual information that will back up the theory of a geometric increase in population over that of subsistence. Today the United States Government finds itself with such an abundance of food that it is compelled to maintain an artificial price structure on cer-

(Continued on Page Three)



George Maravelas

Overpopulation— Theory or Fact?

(Continued from Page One)

tain agricultural products through the medium of subsidies to farmers.

Although the Malthusian theory has caused incalculable confusion, a new economic approach was taken in the spring of 1950 by the chief of the ECA mission in Rome, James D. Zellerbach, who called attention to the tendency of government and industrial leaders to blame all their troubles on a large population. "Large populations can be a challenge as well as a problem," he said.

But a large population can only be useful if it is usefully employed in the production of wealth and if that wealth is transported to a ready market. A common complaint heard in Europe is that the United States is urging it to develop European industries, but when a manufacturer in Europe attempts to export merchandise to the United States he is confronted with a maze of red tape, government forms, and in most cases, a high tariff.

Why Not Cooperate?

It always takes two to make a bargain. If Europeans would take the initiative and develop mutual trade agreements (indeed phenomenal progress in this direction is already being made) there would be an increase in productive employment all over western Europe. A 30 per cent increase in employment in Italy would go a long way toward establishing that country on a prosperous basis and removing the threat of communism. Early in 1950 the Italian Government took positive action in trying to bring about a more equitable distribution of land among the peasants. The results are now well known. An estimated 1,000,000 acres formerly in landed estates in Calabria in southern Italy are expected to be "reclaimed."

Italy has always been considered by adherents of Malthus as a typical example of overpopulation and resultant poverty. The "hunger for land" has not been so apparent in the United States because of the increasingly large urban population engaged in specialized industrial work. Until about 1890 free land was still available. The abundance of land acted as an un-

employment cushion in times of industrial depressions. But as early as 1913 Frederick Jackson Turner could detect a drift towards socialism and state control of prices. This disappearance of the American frontier, Turner maintained, would block up an avenue for our surplus labor and discontented individuals to escape from the stiff competition of modern industry.

The population of the United States from 1800 to 1850 more than quadrupled, growing from 5,308,000 to over 23,000,000 men, women and children. From 1900 to 1950 it grew from 76,000,000 to a mere 151 or 153 million—a proportion of increase far below the first half of the last century, despite great waves of immigration from 1880 to 1920. It is no longer possible for the non-conforming individuals to pack up and seek new opportunities in new lands. As America grows older, her social problems will more and more approximate those of Europe, for the roots of our social and economic problems lie deep in the soil of the Old World.

The Ghost Is Laid

There appears to be far more danger of the earth becoming depopulated than overpopulated. This has happened in the past and there is no guarantee that it cannot happen again. So the gloomy influence of Malthus, which has enjoyed an altogether disproportionate popularity for a century and a half, may at long last be dismissed as academic, or too remote for practical consideration. The new or supplanting concept has made its somewhat timid appearance. The solving of our economic problem now depends on the degree and rapidity with which this little-tried concept of distinguishing land from wealth and from other property, can be put into practice.

¹ Quoted in *Population: A Study of Malthusianism* by W. S. Thompson. Studies in History of Economic Thought. Columbia University, 1915.