

From the book:

The Foundations of Freedom: The Land and the People / 1912

HENRY GEORGE OVERWHELMS MALTHUS.

By F. McDougall

“Are God and nature then at strife
That nature lends such evil dreams?
So careful of the type she seems.
So careless of the single life.”—Tennyson.

The doctrine of Malthus— that population naturally tends to increase faster than subsistence—has received almost universal recognition, and has permeated all modern thinking. It may be admitted that the principle is true for the animal and vegetable kingdoms exclusive of man. To one whose education has saturated him with the theory of Malthus and its implications it is startling and refreshing to reexamine the doctrine with Henry George’s help, and to find how inapplicable it is to man.

Malthus would have us believe that Providence or Nature has been niggardly and cruel to man, and that misery and vice are the necessary results of material progress and of increase of population. A convenient doctrine for the comfortable classes who are well above the poverty line, are chiefly responsible for human enactments and maladjustments, and who are interested in the maintenance of existing privileges. The doctrine accords well with working-class prejudices, too, since to the submerged there certainly seem to be “too many people.”

Henry George shows that the opposite of what Malthus teaches is true, that as population increases, the production of wealth increases proportionately faster than population. His teaching is that want and misery are due to social maladjustments, which lead to bad distribution of wealth. The chief great fault or disease in society is the institution of private property in land, untempered by just taxation, so that communally created values are constantly permitted to accumulate in private hands, and

public revenue must be obtained by oppressive and restrictive taxation of industry.

Henry George deals with Malthus' arguments in detail. He first shows how arbitrary, and even absurd, is Malthus' formula, that population increases in geometrical ratio whilst subsistence increases only in arithmetical ratio; a play upon proportion which John Stuart Mill called "an unlucky attempt to give precision to things that do not admit of it."

In a general survey we are shewn that the earth is after all still thinly populated, and that no instance can be cited of a considerable country in which poverty and want can fairly be attributed to the pressure of an increasing population. Whatever be the possible dangers involved in the power of human increase they have never yet appeared.

(i) From what we know of the world's history decadence of population is perhaps as common as increase. Remember Asia Minor, Syria. Babylonia. Persia, parts of India and China. Think of the great populations long ago in North Africa and the Nile valley, and of the numerous traces of forgotten civilizations in nearly all parts of the American continent. Compare ancient with modern population in Greece. Turkey, the Mediterranean islands, and some other parts of Europe.

(ii) If there is a natural tendency for population to outrun subsistence how is it that we never get in historic creeds and codes any injunctions to practice the prudential restraints of Malthus? On the contrary the wisdom of the centuries, the religions of the world, have always inculcated multiplication as a civic and religious duty.

(iii) If the tendency to reproduce be so strong as Malthusianism supposes, how is it that families so often become extinct—families in which want is unknown? The English aristocracy or the class of literati of any country are constantly being replenished from other stocks. In this connection it must be remembered that even if a man and his wife ultimately have eight great-grandchildren, this is

not increase of population for each of the great-grandchildren has eight great grand-parents.

(iv) Henry George shows in detail that the cases commonly cited as instances of over population, particularly India, China, and Ireland, are not really cases where suffering is from over-population, but rather from social maladjustments and bad government. The starvation, the abject misery, the emigration are due to the rapacity of man, not to the niggardliness of Nature. We have in various degrees tyranny, warfare, ignorance, insecurity for life and goods, absentee landlordism, unjust taxation. Ireland supported eight million people in 1838 with not greater difficulty than two million people in 1727, although the arts of production had advanced but little and a greater toll was going in rackrents to absentee landowners. Even in time of famine this toll was represented by export of foodstuffs to England.

(v) It is true that the strength of the reproductive force in the animal and vegetable kingdoms is enormous. The Malthus doctrine does apply to brutes and plants. Each species tends to press, and when not limited by the number of its enemies, evidently does press against the limits of subsistence. But from these animals and plants it is that man draws his food. Therefore the greater strength of their reproductive force proves the power of subsistence to increase faster than population.

(vi) Moreover, man controls the brute creation; he can regulate the reproductive forces in the animals and plants around him by the processes of the agriculturist—by cultivation and domestication, by destroying and driving off birds and beasts of prey, and by selective breedings. Of all living things man is the only one that can give play to the reproductive forces, more powerful than his own, which supply him with food. “There is a difference between the animal and the man. Both the jay-hawk and the man eat chickens, but the more jay-hawks the fewer chickens, while the more men the more chickens.” Henry George argues from the indestructibility of matter and of energy that man’s operations cannot permanently reduce the productiveness of the soil of the planet.

(vii) Henry George reminds us that as man becomes prosperous, as his material conditions improve, he expresses himself in other ways than in reproductive effort, a higher life claims him. Give more food, open fuller conditions of life, and the vegetable or animal can but multiply. The man will develop. "The proportion of births is notoriously greater in new settlements, where the struggle with nature leaves little opportunity for intellectual life, and among the poverty-bound classes of older countries, who in the midst of wealth are deprived of all its advantages, and reduced to all but an animal existence, than it is among the classes to whom the increase of wealth has brought independence, leisure, comfort, and a fuller and more varied life. This fact, long ago recognized in the homely adage, 'a rich man for luck, and a poor man for children.' was noted by Adam Smith, who says it is not uncommon to find a poor, half-starved Highland woman has been the mother of twenty-three or twenty-four children."

(viii) Finally, Henry George goes to the root of the matter and shows that, in the communities that we have known of, where population was increasing, wealth production (and still more the power to produce wealth) was increasing still faster. The figures for Great Britain or for the United States prove this abundantly. And this is so in spite of the fact that, under our faulty social arrangements, as population increases more and more of the potential wealth producers are withdrawn from performing useful work or services to become a class of idle rich or idle poor or predatory vicious. Total wealth and wealth per capita is greatest where population is densest. As population and comparative wealth production increase, if any class obtains less, it is solely because of the greater inequality of distribution.

"Whether we compare different communities with each other, or the same community at different times, it is obvious that the progressive state, which is marked by increase of population, is also marked by an increased consumption and an increased accumulation of wealth, not merely in the aggregate, but per capita. And hence, increase of population, so far as it has yet anywhere gone, does not mean a reduction, but an increase, in the

average production of wealth. And the reason for this is obvious. For, even if the increase of population does reduce the power of the natural factor of wealth, by compelling resort to poorer soils, etc., it yet so vastly increases the power of the human factor as to more than compensate. Twenty men working together will, where nature is niggardly, produce more than twenty times the wealth that one man can produce where nature is most bountiful. The denser the population the more minute becomes the subdivision of labour, the greater the economies of production and distribution, and hence, the very reverse of the Malthusian doctrine is true; and, within the limits in which we have any reason to suppose increase would still go on, in any given state of civilization a greater number of people can produce a larger proportionate amount of wealth and more fully supply their wants, than can a smaller number.”