

Population and Malthus

THE logic of events hunted the Malthusians out of their claims that population tends to increase in a geometrical ratio; 2 to 4, 8 to 16, 32 to 64 and so on; but that the food product increases only like 1, 2, $2\frac{1}{2}$, $3\frac{3}{4}$, 4 and so on, to an early stop.

Then they got up a modified theory of the blessings of "Things as they are" and called themselves "Neo Malthusians."

The Rev. Thomas Malthus was born in 1766, in the South of England. Daniel Malthus, his father, was a friend of Rousseau, and Thomas entered Jesus College, from which he graduated and took orders in the Church of England.

The first edition of the famous *Essay on Population* appeared anonymously in 1798. In this book, which provoked to the present day the fiercest controversy, he taught that population tends to outrun the means of subsistence, and is prevented from doing so only by wars, pestilence, famine, poverty and vice, or by prudential checks. Mankind may avoid the dangers of over-population and its miseries by continence and refraining from marriage until the individual is able to support a family. Poverty is the inevitable result of the pressure of population; the causes currently assigned for the existence of poverty, such as government tyranny, taxation, tariffs, land monopoly, etc., may be ignored.

It is not an attractive theory, nor consistent with the facts. It is difficult to reconcile it with religion, with natural law, or with an All-Wise Creator. We know that nature is not always kind—that it destroys whole populations by earthquakes, cyclones and tornadoes. We omit pestilence, famines and epidemics, since modern science and modern sanitary and distributive methods have largely overcome the severity of their visitations. But while natural law is not always kind, it is never inconsistent; Nature has a habit of adapting her means to her ends. Here, however, if we accept the theories of Malthus is no such adaptation.

It is significant that this book was begun with Godwin's utopian theories in mind. Godwin's book advocated the reconstruction of society on a basis of equality; it is now forgotten along with many other attempts at the mechanical rebuilding of society. But Godwin had his disciples, and everywhere at the time were discontent and social ferment, so *The Essay on Population* was welcomed as an answer to all theories of this kind. It was vastly comforting to the classes who were eager to maintain their own position. Do we desire a fairer distribution of the world's goods? We are stopped by a reference to the Law of Population as expounded in this famous *Essay*. Do we urge any plan by which we think poverty may be materially mitigated or abolished? We are told that population tends to press upon the means of subsistence,

and that therefore poverty must persist as a natural and inevitable accompaniment of even such progress as we may attain.

Arthur Young's scheme of half an acre for every laborer must also increase population and "produce a state like Ireland." Others who advocated greater equality, Condorcet, Paine, Robert Owen, were met with the objection that by increasing population they would only increase human misery.

The *Essay* was generally accepted. In rudimentary form the theory had been current long before Malthus wrote. Embodied in a pretentious work, which showed some scholarship and much research, it was eagerly welcomed. Buckle stamped it with the weight of his great authority. Mill, while taking exception to the formula that population increased geometrically while the food supply increased only arithmetically, accepted its main arguments. It very powerfully affected the conclusions of social thinkers, many of whom have only a slight acquaintance with the work, while it has insensibly helped much of the opposition to proposals for greater equality.

But it did not pass unchallenged. Godwin's refutation is well known; Cobbett attacked it fiercely, as did the American economist, Henry C. Carey; Karl Marx called it "a pompous and superficial plagiarism;" Henry George made, on the whole, the most elaborate and convincing reply.

Nevertheless, to many writers the work has seemed to furnish a superficially satisfactory solution of many problems. Thus the World War has been explained by Germany's over-population and her need for expansion. Other wars from the same causes are predicted by learned authorities.

It seems not to have occurred to them that the smaller nations do not appear to be affected in this way. Switzerland, Holland, Belgium, Denmark manage to solve their population problems without resort to expansion. They get along fairly well without acquiring new territory. If Malthus is right the pressure of population must also exist in these countries. But the impulse to expansion seems proportioned to the strength or weakness of standing armies, the possession of the power to seize the lands of weaker peoples. Nor is the emigration from these smaller countries as great relatively to population as it is from countries whose territory is vastly greater and whose population is, on the whole, less dense.

The work on Population which made the fame of Malthus proves to be so full of ill logic as to leave one wondering how it attained its eminence. That increase of population is the cause of poverty cannot be demonstrated until it is proven that there are not other and more potent causes. These Malthus quietly ignores.

Nearly two-thirds of the human race are grouped on about one-half of the area of the land of the whole earth, China, Japan and India. Yet in these countries

the inhabitants to the square mile are fewer than in those countries where the population is greater.

France with a population of 180 to the square mile enjoys a large measure of prosperity; Turkey with much less density of population is sunk in poverty. In 1846 Ireland had a population of 9,000,000. Today with a third less she should, according to the Malthusian argument, have a large measure of prosperity, but poverty persists in Ireland now as then. The fact is, these countries are at present grossly under-populated. For example: All China, including Manchuria, has over three and a third million square miles (to be exact, 3,341,500 square miles) and a little more than three hundred million persons, about a hundred to the square mile. That gives for the 342,639,000 persons about six acres per person, or say 30 acres to the family.

A learned professor in Yale to whom I submitted these figures figured it out, to his own great satisfaction, that omitting Manchuria, there would be only seventeen acres to the family. Well we won't spend time on that. A Chinese family can live in luxury on one acre; China is as long as the United States and has enough land for every inhabitant and for more than half the rest of mankind as well, besides her five thousand miles of seacoast which gives access to the boundless food supply of the ocean.

Malthus' theory was an obsession to him. He contended that the condition of the poor did not necessarily improve with the increase of wealth and that this was due to increase of population up to the limits of the food supply. If he could have got rid of his one explanation even for a time he might have seen that if the condition of the poor did not improve with increase of the general wealth, it was due to causes independent of his theory. But this would have exploded the theory. However, because of his obsession, the fact taught him nothing. No improvement in conditions was possible except through increased industry and greater prudence. Where land was held out of use (uncultivated) he said this was merely like possession of smaller territory by the country. Exactly!

He naively asserted his belief that long before the *practical limit* (ie; where subsistence could no longer supply an increased population) was reached, the rate of increase diminished gradually. To which it need only be said that if there is a natural law that arrests the growth of population before it reaches the practical limit of subsistence, to that degree—and it is a very important qualification—the Malthusian "Law" has lost its main prop. This is another of the many curious illustrations of how "facts" used to base the reasoning of our author nullify one another as he goes along. He reminds one of the fabled snake which placing its tail in its mouth swallows itself until even the head disappears!

This is his main weakness. It cannot be shown that population has ever yet pressed upon subsistence in a way to cause poverty, misery or vice. No country anywhere

has a population which it is unable at its full capabilities to support.

Malthus has been shown to be in error in his theory of "the wage fund," in his treatment of the Corn Laws, in his analysis of English Poor Law relief. His Political Economy, which appeared subsequent to the "Population," was ignored by the economists of the time and by those since, as of little or no value. How comes it that, alone among his treatment of economic problems, his theory of population has survived? The answer is that it furnished an easy and convenient explanation of social misery which earnest minded men and women were beginning to question, and which today is the subject of so much active inquiry.

At many points Malthus answers himself. He says, for example, "No estimates of future rates of increase (of Population) framed from existing rates are to be depended upon." He indicates that as people become crowded into unsanitary buildings the rate of increase of population mounts; but which is cause and which is effect he neglects to tell us. He states that the rate of increase in ancient times was greater than in modern days. This is pure guess work since we have little or no data on which to estimate ancient populations. In Chapter XIII he says that if there were no other checks on population every country would be subject to periodical plagues or famines. This is a sample of much of his reasoning. If things were not as they are, other things would happen!

He thought that improvements in economic conditions in France were due to diminished population, to increased industry of the laboring classes, and increased prudence in marriage. He did not divine that these improvements might have been due to the destruction of privilege, to the abolition of the tolls levied by royalty, and to a lessening of the power of the landowners and nobles following the Revolution.

To the objection that the power to produce food may be indefinitely increased, Malthus replies that this is no proof that it could keep pace with an *unlimited* increase of population. But it has kept pace with every increase of population of which we have record, and the distress arising from want of food—poverty, in short—can be sadly traced to causes which are sufficient without reference to this "law" of population.

Malthus wrote when the resources of the unexplored lands and waters in North and South America were hardly suspected. He did not foresee the tremendous agricultural development that loomed just ahead of him. Nor did he dream of something else that lay in the future, the extraordinary development of invention and commerce. That with all his familiarity with the food producing capacities of many countries, he under-estimated the food supply of which the whole earth was capable, seems clear. He wrote before the era of the enormously increased nineteenth century production had begun and when the world's

vaster capabilities had not been revealed. Every great invention like the railroad, the trolley, the steamship, the automobile, the airship, the wheel hoe, the reaper, the telegraph, the telephone, the concrete road, opens up to us a new source of supply like that of the discovery of a new country.

With scant consideration for the Malthusian law we have permitted the great bulk of our population to devote itself to other production than those of basic food necessities. A population of 566 to the square mile in Rhode Island and 500 in Massachusetts devotes itself entirely to production of commodities which do not directly sustain life. From the Dakotas and western Kansas we feed not only these relatively thickly settled communities, but also congested centers like New York and London.

Malthus stresses the misery and poverty of a prodigious number of the Chinese. The poverty of the lower classes is attributed to the only cause that Malthus knows. The ruthless exactions of the taskmasters, the fact that eighty thousand people live in the water huts on the river that runs past Canton in order to escape the payment of high land rents, the fact that one may travel for miles through unoccupied and fertile territory, must not be allowed to enter into the calculation. Happily we have epidemics and infanticide in China, and with these Malthus is forced to be content. He learns from "Meares' Voyages" that there are violent hurricanes followed by epidemics, and these are promptly listed as the divine and necessary checks to population!

He makes the pressure of population upon subsistence account for the poverty of every country in turn. This poverty is mitigated by famines, pestilence, earthquakes, etc. Thus the book is swollen out of all proportions to the enforcement of his main thesis. If there were more countries there would be more of this six hundred page book. No single chapter throws any light on preceding ones. The ditto mark would serve after two or three examples, since the reasoning is identical. What seems not to have occurred to Malthus is the frightful inefficiency of his epidemics and famines. One would imagine that the "beneficent" operations of these visitations—for famines with Malthus were natural visitations, and not the result of the faulty workings of economic machinery and legal barriers to distribution—would leave a large measure of wealth and comfort to the major part of the population at least somewhere. But they do not seem to work that way. Even here Nature has blundered woefully. No wonder Proudhon said that "Malthus had reduced political economy to an absurdity."

One may admit increases in population. Also, that if there were no checks to population it *might* outrun the means of subsistence. But these checks are natural checks; increase of population stops long before the limits of subsistence are reached. We have seen that Malthus

admitted this, naively enough, without reference to famines or epidemics.

Life becomes less prolific in proportion to duration, organization and means of maintenance. The higher the organization, the less its fecundity. We see this in the lower animal world. Man is part of the animal world; the laws that govern it, govern us. As man moves to higher levels, he differs from his fellows almost as much as he differs from the brutes. He becomes a new creature in a more highly specialized environment. We have but to compare the birth-rate in various stratas of society to see how intimately it is related to conditions, temperate living, to mental development and to increased prudence. There is today in many countries an enormous variation between country and city districts in the birth rate. Upper Silesia, peopled by a comparatively ignorant rural population, shows a birth-rate of thirty per thousand as compared with an average rate for the whole of Germany of twenty-one.

Malthus brushed aside the dream of economic equality which all generous minds cherish as possible of ultimate realization. "Men cannot live in the midst of plenty," he says. "All cannot share alike in the bounties of nature." He seemed to think that to "share alike in the bounties of nature" was only possible under some communistic system which must contain the seeds of its own certain dissolution. For he says, "Were there no established administration of property every man would be obliged to guard with force his little store." Which may be true enough, though he seems not to have conceived that men might "share alike in the bounties of nature" under "an established administration of property."

After all, progress is in the direction of a more equitable participation in the enjoyment of the bounties of nature. We must harken back to a remoter barbarism for a denial of this truth from any authoritative source. So determined, however, was Malthus in the notion that any teachings of the principle of equal rights was inherently vicious, and dangerous in the influence it might exert on society, that even Paine's Rights of Man was curiously abhorrent to him. "Nothing," he says, "would so effectually counteract the mischief of Mr. Paine's Rights of Man as a general knowledge of the real rights of man. What these rights are it is not my business at present to explain."

He never made it his business to explain. How could he? Perhaps it would have shaken his own belief. How can men have rights in a world where the race is penned in by a wall of subsistence against which they must ineffectually beat their spiritual wings in a vain endeavor to escape its confines?

—JOSEPH DANA MILLER.

"THEY fought in Flanders for their native land."
Which—if they have the price—they may demand.

—HORATIO.