

PARSON MALTHUS

WHO of us that have addressed Socialist meetings has not been interrupted by someone in the crowd declaring that the evils of which we complain are due to over-population, and that they can be cured only by restricting the number of births, and not by Socialism or Communism? These people call themselves Neo-Malthusians, and they take their name from the Rev. Malthus, who in 1798 wrote *An Essay on Population*. His disciples used the arguments set



out in that book to attack the early trade unionists and Socialists by means of the Wages Fund Theory and the Iron Law of Wages Theory.

Now, Malthus certainly made an important contribution to thought by indicating the importance of the population question; and we only put ourselves in a weak position if we deny this. Malthus' theory may for simplicity be divided into two parts:—

(1) He stated that population always *tends* to increase faster than the food supply. The number of mouths to be fed will increase faster than the wherewithal to feed them. This is due to the existence of the Law of Diminishing Returns on land. This law is that in the absence of new inventions an increased food supply can after a point only be obtained at an ever increasing cost in labour-power expended. This law is experienced by every worker on an allotment. After a certain point more potatoes can only be got from that piece of ground at the expense of a great increase

of time and trouble—so great as to make it possibly worth while to extend the size of the allotment, rather than to go on crowding the existing plot. Malthus showed that this tendency for population to grow faster than the food supply would involve poverty and a low standard of life, unless population was checked in either of two ways : (a) by positive checks—wars, famine, infantile mortality, etc. ; (b) by prudential checks—late marriages and conscious restraint. (Since Malthus' time the use of contraceptive methods has added another effective prudential check.) Malthus showed that if over-population is not checked by (b), (a) would inevitably come into operation.

(2) Since there was a "natural law" of population, viz., that a population of human beings tended to double itself every thirty years, poverty, disease, and wars were inevitable, said Malthus, unless by late marriages or sexual continence people voluntarily restricted increase. Hence all social reforms, Socialism, and trade union action were not only useless, but they would defeat their own ends. An increased standard of life among the masses would merely enable them to breed and rear more children ; and the population being increased, poverty would ensue again. Hence poverty, infantile mortality, and bad social conditions were not due to the social system, but to a law of nature.

Now (1), as a mere description of facts and a tendency, is a truism, but is none the less important. True, there may be inventions and discovery of new sources of food supply ; but inventions are uncertain, whereas increase of population is certain, and the food supply *per head* would be greater if the population were smaller.

(2), however, is completely fallacious for the following reasons :—

As Marx indicated in his reply to Malthus, there is no natural or absolute law of population. The ratio between population and food supply tends to be different at different stages of historical evolution. Both rate of increase of production, and rate of production are *relative to economic conditions*. For instance, in a predominantly peasant and petit-bourgeois society like France, the population is stationary. On the other hand, as Dr. Marshall points out, it was the bad conditions under which the proletariat of the early 19th century were forced to live that was chiefly responsible for the immense increase in the birth-rate in this country at that time. Moreover, prevalent codes of private and social morality exercise a powerful influence, and as Marxists we understand the relativity of morality to economic conditions. At the present time orthodox bourgeois religious morality is one of the greatest obstacles to the spread of birth-control. Imperialist ideology directly encourages a high birth-rate. The mother of sixteen children is complimented by jingo magistrates on rearing sons

for the Empire, and gets her photograph in the *Daily Mirror*. One of the chief arguments against concerted restriction of population is always the Imperialist one that it would weaken the nation's military position. Instances abound of the fact that Imperialism is a factor making for a large birth-rate, e.g., Imperialist propaganda for increase of population in France, legal restrictions on birth-control propaganda in U.S.A., and in Germany before the war; prohibition of public lectures by Mrs. Sanger in Japan. The law of population is not, therefore, a law of nature, a tendency fixed for all time. It is itself largely the effect of the economic system; a change in the economic system will change the ratio of population to food supply.

One of the most important things written on this subject recently has been the article by Prof. Brentano in the *Economic Journal*, September, 1910. The facts and figures given there abundantly prove the contention I have just made. He proves both that the birth-rate is higher among proletarians than among peasants, and that a rise in the standard of life tends to *decrease* the birth-rate, and probably to decrease it faster than the decrease of infant mortality (*i.e.*, the survival rate decreases also). He gives the following interesting facts:—

The birth-rate in the industrial departments Nord and Pas de Calais has fallen only very slightly during the 19th century; in the department Seine-Inferieure it has even risen; while in the more prosperous departments, Yonne, Cote d'Or, Garonne, Maine et Loire, Charente, etc., with their well-to-do peasant population, it has diminished by one-half. On the other hand, in Brittany as well as in the department of Corisca and Losere, where the peasant population is poor, the birth-rate is as high as in the industrial districts.... The more proletarian the department the higher the birth-rate.... (and fertility decreases with increasing prosperity.

Loria expresses the matter clearly in his chapter on population in *Contemporary Social Problems*:—

It is a remarkable fact that those departments of France in which the number of children to a family is smallest are precisely those in which small holdings of land are most general; while the birth-rate is much higher in the departments having a large wage-earning population.... When the workman is insufficiently paid he procreates madly.... Precisely because it is owing to economic factors peculiar to the wage-system, the excess of population is an essentially historical phenomenon.

The following are figures of the rate of increase of population during the last fifty years in Great Britain:—

	1871—5.	1901—5	1912.	1917.
Birth-rate	35.5 (per 1,000)	28.1	23.8	17.8
Death-rate	22.0 (per 1,000)	16.0	13.3	
Net increase	13.5 (per 1,000)	12.1	10.5	

These figures show that the rate of increase of population has

been on the decline, though slowly, during the last fifty years. The following figures also show that the higher the standard of life the lower tends to be the birth-rate :—

	Births per 1,000 married males aged under 55.		
Upper and Middle Class 119
Intermediate 132
Skilled Workers 153
Intermediate 158
Unskilled Workers.. 213

This is not to say that the population question is not an important one. It will certainly be a problem to be tackled in a Socialist community. But only in a Socialist community will it be a primary interest of society that there should be a rational restriction of population, so as to secure the maximum social welfare. Under capitalism the ruling classes are not *primarily* concerned with limiting the numbers of the working class, although they may be interested enough in practising birth-control themselves. A large labour supply is good for the capitalists; cannon-fodder is desired by the Imperialists. The economic emancipation of women in a Socialist community will also be an important factor in the restriction of prolific increase.

The Malthusian claim that excess of population is the cause of Imperialism and war, is supported by so great an authority on the population question as Mr. Keynes. But the facts do not seem to support this view very adequately. At any rate, the Marxian interpretation of Imperialism is a "working hypothesis" which explains the facts much more adequately. First, Imperialist policies are formulated and carried through by the ruling class. An increase of population among the workers does not harm the interests of the ruling class, except indirectly through social unrest caused by poverty. On the contrary, it benefits them by affording a cheap labour supply. Therefore it seems much more likely that the cause of Imperialism lies in some factor touching directly the interests of the capitalists, rather than in something affecting the interests, not of the capitalists, but of the workers. At the present time the Imperialism of France is producing propaganda in favour of increased population. In such a case the tendency to increased population is rather an *effect* than a *cause* of Imperialism.

Second, an important fact working against the Malthusian interpretation of Imperialism is that the percentage increase of world population was greatest during the pacifist, Cobdenite period of 1840—1870, and began to decline between 1860 and 1870, when modern Imperialism began. The rate of increase in the United

States had steadily declined since 1860, while the United States has become steadily more Imperialist.

	Percentage Increase of :—		
	World Popn.	Popn. in England.	Popn. in U.S.A.
1820	9.5	18	33.1
1840	12.2	15.6	23.7
1860	12.1	12	35.6
1870	8.7	13	26.6
1880	9.9	14.2	26.0
1890	3.4	11.5	24.9
1900	3.7	11.9	20.7
1910	4.7	11.0	21.0

These figures are not themselves sufficient to do more than throw a doubt on the Malthusian claim. But what is a stronger argument is that when modern Imperialism began round about 1870 the tendency to diminishing returns on land was not in operation, owing to the development and opening up of new fertile land in the Middle West of America. Not till *after* 1900, as Maynard Keynes himself admits, was “the Malthusian Devil, for half a century chained up and out of sight. . . . loosed again.” “After 1870 the pressure of population on food. . . . became for the first time in recorded history *definitely reversed*. . . . Up to about 1900 a unit of labour applied to industry yielded year by year a purchasing power over *an increasing quantity of food*” (*Economic Consequences of the Peace*, pp. 7 and 8). Therefore “the Malthusian Devil” cannot be an explanation of the sudden change round about 1870 from the pacifism of the Manchester School to the Imperialism of the Birmingham School.

Once again, therefore, we see that whereas bourgeois economists flounder among partial truths, among “absolute principles” and “laws of nature” tinged by metaphysical assumptions, Marxism alone provides a scientific working hypothesis to correlate the complex facts of social evolution. Marxism alone enables us to dispense with the old *a priori*, absolutist conceptions in social science by viewing history as a *process*, and realising the relativity of social events to this historical process.

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P.S.—The current number (No. 6) of *The Reconstruction Supplement* to the *Manchester Guardian Commercial* (1s.), is devoted to this question of Population and the Food Supply. The *a priori* approach to the problem, to which I have referred, is in places in evidence, when social policies are under discussion. But the articles

by Keynes on Malthus, by Dr. Brownlee on The Census, by Sir H. Rew on The World's Grain Supplies, by Prof. Sering on the Agrarian Revolution in Central Europe, and by Louis Levine on the Agrarian Problem in Russia contain much useful information.—M. H. D.