
CHAPTER 1

THE ESSENTIAL FALLACIES OF MALTHUSIAN TEACHING

§1. MALTHUS AND THE NEO-MALTHUSIANS

BIRTH CONTROL, in the sense of the prevention of pregnancy by chemical, mechanical, or other artificial means, is being widely advocated as a sure method of lessening poverty and of increasing the physical and mental health of the nation. It is, therefore, advisable to examine these claims and the grounds on which they are based. The following investigation will prove that the propaganda throughout Western Europe and America in favour of artificial birth control is based on a mere assumption, bolstered up by economic and statistical fallacies; that Malthusian teaching is contrary to reason and to fact; that Neo-Malthusian practices are disastrous alike to nations and to individuals; and that those practices are in themselves an offence against the Law of Nature, whereby the Divine Will is expressed in creation.

(a) Malthus

The Rev. Thomas Malthus, M.A., in 1798 published his Essay on the Principle of Population. His pamphlet was an answer to Condorcet and Godwin, who held that vice and poverty were the result of human institutions and could be remedied by an even distribution of property. Malthus, on the other hand, believed that population increased more rapidly than the means of subsistence, and consequently that vice and poverty were always due to overpopulation and not to any particular form of society or of government. He stated that owing to the relatively slow rate at which the food supply of countries was

increased, a high birth-rate¹ inevitably led to all the evils of poverty, war, and high death-rates. In an infamous passage he wrote that there was no vacant place for the superfluous child at Nature's mighty feast; that Nature told the child to be gone; and that she quickly executed her own order. This passage was modified in the second, and deleted from the third edition of the Essay. In later editions he maintained that vice and misery had checked population, that the progress of society might have diminished rather than increased the "evils resulting from the principle of population," and that by "moral restraint" overpopulation could be prevented. As Cannan has pointed out,² this last suggestion destroyed the force of the argument against Godwin, who could have replied that in order to make "moral restraint" universal a socialist State was necessary. In order to avoid the evils of overpopulation, Malthus advised people not to marry, or, if they did, to marry late in life and to limit the number of their children by the exercise of self-restraint. He reprobated all artificial and unnatural methods of birth control as immoral, and as removing the necessary stimulus to industry; but he failed to grasp the whole truth that an increase of population is necessary as a stimulus not only to industry, but also as essential to man's moral and intellectual progress.

(b) The Neo-Malthusians

The Malthusian League accept the theory of their revered teacher, but, curiously enough, they reject his advice "as being impracticable and productive of the greatest possible evils to health and morality."³ On the contrary, they advise universal early marriage, combined with artificial birth control. Although

¹ The birth-rate is the number of births per 1,000 of the whole population. In order to make a fair comparison between one community and another, the birth-rate is often calculated as the number of births per 1,000 married women between 15 and 45 years of age, as these constitute the great majority of child-bearing mothers. This is called the *corrected birth-rate*.

² *Economic Review*, January 1892.

³ So says the Secretary of the Malthusian League. Vide *The Declining Birth-rate*, 1916, p. 88.

their policy is thus in flat contradiction to the policy of Malthus, there are two things common to both. Each is based on the same fallacy, and the aim of both is wide of the mark. Indeed, the Neo-Malthusian, like Malthus, has “a mist of speculation over his facts, and a vapour of fact over his ideas.”⁴ Moreover, as will be shown here, the path of the Malthusian League, although at first glance an easy way out of many human difficulties, is in reality the broad road along which a man or a nation travels to destruction; and as guides the Neo-Malthusians are utterly unsafe, since they argue from (a) false premises to (b) false deductions. We shall deal with the former in this chapter.

§2. TEACHING BASED ON FALSE PREMISES

The theory of Malthus is based on three errors, namely (a) that the population increases in geometrical progression, a progression of 1, 2, 4, 8, 16, and so on upwards; (b) that the food supply increases in arithmetical progression, a progression of 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and so on upwards; and (c) that overpopulation is the cause of poverty and disease. If we show that *de facto* there is no overpopulation it obviously cannot be a cause of anything, nor be itself caused by the joint operation of the first two causes. However, each of the errors can be severally refuted.

(a) In the first place, it is true that a population *might* increase in geometrical progression, and that a woman *might* bear thirty children in her lifetime; but it is wrong to assume that because a thing *might* happen, it therefore does happen. The population, as a matter of fact, does not increase in geometrical progression, because Nature⁵ places her own checks on the birth-rate, and no woman bears all the children she might theoretically bear, apart altogether from artificial birth control.

⁴ Bagehot, *Economic Studies*, p. 193.

⁵ To assign a personality to “Nature” is, of course, a mere *façon de parler*; the believer holds that the “course of Nature” is an expression of the Mind and Will of the Creator.

(b) Secondly, the food supply does not of necessity increase in arithmetical progression, because food is produced by human hands, and is therefore increased in proportion to the increase of workers, unless the food supply of a country or of the world has reached its limit. The food supply of the world *might* reach a limit beyond which it could not be increased; but as yet this event has not happened, and there is no indication whatsoever that it is likely to happen.

Human life is immediately sustained by food, clothing, shelter, and fuel. Food and clothing are principally derived from fish, fowl, sheep, cattle, and grain, all of which *tend*, more so than man, to increase in *geometrical* ratio, although actually their increase in this progression is checked by man or by Nature. As regards shelter there can be no increase at all, either arithmetical or geometrical, apart from the work of human hands. Again, the stock of fuel in or on the earth cannot increase of itself, and is gradually becoming exhausted. On the other hand, within living memory, new sources of fuel, such as petroleum, have been made available, and old varieties of fuel have been used to better advantage, as witness the internal-combustion engine driven by smoke from sawdust. Moreover, in the ocean tides is a vast energy that one day may take the place of fuel.

(c) Thirdly, before anyone can reasonably maintain that overpopulation is the cause of poverty and disease, it is necessary to prove that overpopulation actually exists or is likely to occur in the future. By overpopulation we mean the condition of a country in which there are so many inhabitants that the production of necessaries of livelihood is insufficient for the support of all, with the result that many people are overworked or ill-fed. Under these circumstances the population can be said to *press on the soil*: and unless their methods of production could be improved, or resources secured from outside, the only possible remedy against the principle of diminishing returns would be a reduction of population; otherwise, the death-rate from want and starvation would gradually rise until it equalled the birth-rate in order to maintain an unhappy equilibrium.

§3. THE ROOT FALLACY

According to Malthusian doctrine overpopulation is the cause of poverty, disease, and war: and consequently, unless the growth of population is artificially restrained, all attempts to remedy social evils are futile. Malthusians claim that “if only the devastating torrent of children could be arrested for a few years, it would bring untold relief.” They hold that overpopulation is the root of all social evil, and the truth or falsehood of that proposition is therefore the basis of all their teaching. Now, when Malthusians are asked to prove that this their basic proposition is true, they adopt one of two methods, not of proof, but of evasion. Their first method of evading the question is by asserting that the truth of their proposition is self-evident and needs no proof. To that we reply that the falsity of the proposition can and will be proved. Their second device is to put up a barrage of facts which merely show that all countries, and indeed the earth itself, would have been overpopulated long ago if the increase of population had not been limited by certain factors, ranging from celibacy and late marriages to famines, diseases, wars, and infanticide. The truth of these facts is indisputable, but it is nevertheless a manifest breach of logic to argue from the fact of poverty, disease, and war having checked an increase of population, that therefore poverty, disease, and war are due to an increase of population. It would be as reasonable to argue that, because an unlimited increase of insects is prevented by birds and by climatic changes, therefore an increase of insects accounts for the existence of birds, and for variations of climate. Nor is it of any use for Malthusians to say that overpopulation *might* be the cause of poverty. They cannot prove that it *is* the cause of poverty, and, as will be shown in the following chapter, more obvious and probable causes are staring them in the face. For our present purpose it will suffice if we are able to prove that overpopulation has not occurred in the past and is unlikely to occur in the future.

§4. WHAT OVERPOPULATION MEANS

In the first place, the meaning of the word “overpopulation” should be clearly understood. The word does not mean a very large number of inhabitants in a country. If that were its meaning the Malthusian fallacy could be disproved by merely pointing out that poverty exists both in thinly populated and in thickly populated countries. Now, in reality, overpopulation would occur whenever the production of the necessities of life in a country was insufficient for the support of all the inhabitants. For example, a barren rock in the ocean would be overpopulated, even if it contained only one inhabitant. It follows that the term “overpopulation” should be applied only to an economic situation in which the population presses on the soil. The point may be illustrated by a simple example.

Let us assume that a fertile island of 100 acres is divided into 10 farms, each of 10 acres, and each capable of supporting a family of ten. Under these conditions the island could support a population of 1,000 people without being overpopulated. If, however, the numbers in each family increased to 20 the population would *press on the soil*, and the island, with 2,000 inhabitants, would be an example of overpopulation, and of poverty due to overpopulation.

On the other hand, let us assume that there are only 1,000 people on the island, but that one family of ten individuals has managed to gain possession of eight farms, in addition to their own, and that the other nine families are forced to live on one farm. Obviously, 900 people would be attempting to live under conditions of dire poverty, and the island, with its population of 1,000, would now offer an excellent example, not of overpopulation, but of human selfishness.

My contentions are that poverty is neither solely nor indeed generally related to economic pressure on the soil; that there are many causes of poverty apart altogether from overpopulation; and that in reality overpopulation does not exist in those countries where Malthusians claim to find proofs of social misery due to a high birth-rate.

If overpopulation in the economic sense occurred in a closed country, whose inhabitants were either unable or unwilling to

send out colonies, it is obvious that general poverty and misery would result. This *might* happen in small islands, but it is of greater interest to know what does happen.

§5. NO EVIDENCE OF OVERPOPULATION

In a closed country, producing all its own necessities of life and incapable of expansion, a high birthrate would eventually increase the struggle for existence and would lead to overpopulation, always provided that, firstly, the high birth-rate is accompanied by a low death-rate, and secondly, that the high birth-rate is maintained. For example, although a birth-rate was high, a population would not increase in numbers if the death-rate was equally high. Therefore, a high birth-rate does not of necessity imply that population will be increased or that overpopulation will occur. Again, if the birth-rate fell as the population increased, the danger of overpopulation would be avoided without the aid of a high death-rate. For a moment, however, let us assume that the Malthusian premise is correct, that a high birth-rate has led to overpopulation, and that the struggle for existence has therefore increased. Then obviously the death-rate would rise; the effect of the high birth-rate would be neutralised; and beyond a certain point neither the population nor the struggle for existence could be further increased. On these grounds Neo-Malthusians argue that birth-control is necessary precisely to obviate that cruel device whereby Nature strives to restore the balance upset by a reckless increase of births; and that the only alternative to frequent and premature deaths is regulation of the source of life. As a corollary to this proposition they claim that, if the death-rate be reduced, a country is bound to become overpopulated unless the births are artificially controlled. Fortunately it is possible to test the truth of this corollary, because certain definite observations on this very point have been recorded. These observations do not support the argument of birth controllers.

(a) In the Suez Canal Zone

In the Suez Canal Zone there was a high death-rate chiefly owing to fever. According to Malthus it would have been a great mistake to lower this death-rate, because, if social conditions were improved, the population would rapidly increase and exceed the resources of the country. Now, in fact, the social conditions were improved, the death-rate was lowered, and the subsequent events, utterly refuting the above contention, are thus noted by Dr. Halford Ross, who was medical officer in that region:

During the years 1901 to 1910, health measures in this zone produced a very considerable fall in the death-rate, from 30.2 per thousand to 19.6 per thousand; the infant mortality was also reduced very greatly, and it was expected that, after a lapse of time, the reduction of the death-rate would result in a rise of the birth-rate, and a corresponding increase of the population. *But such was not the case.* When the death-rate fell, the birth-rate fell too, and the number of the population remained the same as before, even after nearly a decade had passed, and notwithstanding the fact that the whole district had become much healthier, and one town, Port Said, was converted from an unhealthy, fever-stricken place into a seaside health resort.⁶

Moreover, Dr. Halford Ross has told me that artificial birth control was not practised in this region and played no part in maintaining a stationary population. The majority of the people were strict Mohammedans, amongst whom the practice of birth control is forbidden by the Koran.

(b) In “Closed Countries” like Japan

But a much more striking example of the population in a closed country remaining stationary without the practice of birth control, thus refuting the contention of our birth controllers, is to be found in their own periodical, *The Malthusian*.⁷ It would

⁶ *Problems of Population*, p. 382.

⁷ *The Malthusian*, July 15, 1921.

appear that in Japan from 1723 to 1846 the population remained almost stationary, only increasing from 26,065,422 to 26,907,625. In 1867 the Shogunate was abolished, the Emperor was restored, and Japan began to be a civilised power. Now from 1872 the population increased by 10,649,990 in twenty-seven years, and “during the period between 1897 and 1907 the population received an increment of 11.6 percent, whereas the food-producing area increased by only 4.4 percent. ... According to Professor Morimoro, the cost of living is now so high in Japan that 98 percent of the people do not get enough to eat.” From these facts certain obvious deductions may be made. So long as Japan was a closed country her population remained stationary. When she became a civilised industrial power the mass of her people became poorer, the birth-rate rose, and the population increased, this last result being the real problem today in the Far East. In face of these facts it is sheer comedy to learn that our Malthusians are sending a woman to preach birth control amongst the Japanese! Do they really believe that for over a hundred years Japan, unlike most semi-barbaric countries, practised birth control, and that when she became civilised she refused, unlike most civilised countries, to continue this practice? There is surely a limit to human credulity.

The truth appears to be that in closed countries the population remains more or less stationary, that Nature herself checks the birth-rate without the aid of artificial birth control, and that birth-rates and death-rates are independently related to the means of subsistence.

§6. A NATURAL LAW CHECKING FERTILITY

During the past century the population of Europe increased by about 160,000,000, but it is utterly unreasonable to assume that this rate of increase will be maintained during the present century. It would be as sensible to argue that because a child is four feet high at the age of ten he will be eight feet high at the age of twenty. Moreover, there is evidence that, apart altogether from vice, the fertility of a nation is reduced at every step in

civilisation. The cause of this reduction in fertility is unknown. It is probably a reaction to many complex influences, and possibly associated with the vast growth of great cities. This decline in the fertility of a community is a natural protection against the possibility of overpopulation; but, on the other hand, there is a point beyond which any further decline in fertility will bring a community within sight of depopulation and of extinction.

§7. OVERPOPULATION IN THE FUTURE

It is a fallacy to say that overpopulation is the cause of poverty and disease, and that for the simple reason that overpopulation has not yet occurred. For the growth of a nation we assume that the birth-rate should exceed the death-rate by from 10 to 20 per thousand, and it is obvious that in a *closed* country the evil of overpopulation might appear in a comparatively short time. The natural remedies in the past have been emigration and colonisation. According to the birth controllers these remedies are only temporary, because sooner or later all colonies and eventually the earth itself will be overpopulated. At the British Association Meeting in 1890 the population of the earth was said to be 1,500 millions, and it was calculated that only 6,000 millions could live on the earth. This means that if the birth-rate throughout the world exceeded the death-rate by only 8 per thousand, the earth would be overpopulated within 200 years. It is probable that in these calculations the capacity of the earth to sustain human life has been underestimated; that the earth could support not four times but sixteen times its present population; and that the latter figure could be still further increased by the progress of inventions. But, apart altogether from the accuracy of these figures, the danger of overpopulation is nothing more or less than a myth. Indeed, the end of the world, a philosophic and scientific certitude, is a more imminent event than its overpopulation.

§8. HOW NATIONS HAVE PERISHED

Before speculating on what might happen in the future, it is well to recollect what has happened in the past. The earth has been inhabited for thousands of years, and modern research has revealed the remains of many ancient civilisations that have perished. For example, there were the great nations of Cambodia and of Guatemala. In Crete, about 2000 B.C., there existed a civilisation where women were dressed as are this evening the women of London and Paris. That civilisation perished, and even its language cannot now be deciphered. Why did these civilisations perish? Surely this momentous question should take precedence over barren discussions as to whether there will be sufficient food on the land or in the sea for the inhabitants of the world in 200 years' time. How came it about that these ancient nations did not double their numbers every fifty years and fill up the earth long ago?

The answer is that they were overcome and annihilated by the incidence of one or other of two dangers that threaten every civilisation, including our own. These dangers are certain physical and moral catastrophes, against which there is only one form of natural insurance, namely, a birth-rate that adequately exceeds the death-rate. They help to illustrate further the fallacy of the overpopulation scare.

The following is a general outline of these dangers, and in a later chapter I shall quote an example of how they have operated in the past.

§9. PHYSICAL CATASTROPHES

Deaths from famine, floods, earthquakes, and volcanic eruptions are confined to comparatively small areas, and the two physical catastrophes that may seriously threaten a civilisation may be reduced to endemic disease and war.

(a) Disease

Disease, in the form of malaria, contributed to the fall of ancient Greece and Rome. In the fourteenth century 25,000,000 people, one-quarter of the population of Europe, were exterminated by plague, the "Black Death," and in the sixteenth century smallpox depopulated Spanish America. Although these particular diseases have lost much of their power owing to the progress of medical science, we have no right to assume that disease in general has been conquered by our civilisation, or that a new pestilence may not appear. On the contrary, in 1805, a new disease, spotted fever, appeared in Geneva, and within half a century had become endemic throughout Europe and America. Of this fever during the Great War the late Sir William Osler wrote: "In cerebro-spinal fever we may be witnessing the struggle of a new disease to win a place among the great epidemics of the world." There was a mystery about this disease, because, although unknown in the Arctic Circle, it appeared in temperate climates during the coldest months of the year. As I was able to prove in 1915,⁸ it is a disease of civilisation. I found that the causal organism was killed in thirty minutes by a temperature of 62° F. It was thus obvious that infection could never be carried by cold air. But in overcrowded rooms where windows are closed, and the temperature of warm, impure, saturated air was raised by the natural heat of the body to 80° F. or over, the life of the microorganism, expelled from the mouths of infected people during the act of coughing, was prolonged. Infection is thus carried from one person to another by warm currents of moving air, and at the same time resistance against the disease is lowered. Cold air kills the organism, but cold weather favours the disease. In that paradox the ætiology of cerebrospinal fever became as clear as the means of prevention. The story of spotted fever reveals the forces of nature fighting against the disease at every turn, and implacably opposed to its existence, while man alone, of his own will and folly, harbours infection and creates the only conditions under which the malady can appear. For example, during two consecutive winters

⁸ *Lancet*, 1915, vol. ii, p. 862.

cerebro-spinal fever had appeared in barracks capable of housing 2,000 men. A simple and effective method of ventilation was then introduced. From that day to this not a single case of cerebro-spinal fever has occurred in these barracks, although there have been outbreaks of this disease in the town in which the barracks are situated.

There are many other diseases peculiar to civilisation, and concerning the wherefore and the why an apposite⁹ passage occurs in the works of Sir William Gull.

Causes affecting health and shortening life may be inappreciable in the individual, but sufficiently obvious when their effect is multiplied a thousandfold. If the conditions of society render us liable to many diseases, they in return enable us to establish the general laws of life and health, a knowledge of which soon becomes a distributive blessing. The cure of individual diseases, whilst we leave open the dark fountains from which they spring, is to labour like Sisyphus, and have our work continually returning upon our hands. And, again, there are diseases over which, directly, we have little or no control, as if Providence had set them as signs to direct us to wider fields of inquiry and exertion. Even partial success is often denied, lest we should rest satisfied with it, and forget the *truer and better means* of prevention.¹⁰

Medical and sanitary science have made great progress in the conquest of enteric fever, diphtheria, scarlet fever, measles, and whooping cough. The mortality from bronchitis and from pulmonary tuberculosis has also been reduced, but nevertheless tuberculosis still claims more victims in the prime of life than any other malady. It is a disease of civilisation and is intimately associated with economic conditions. The history of tuberculosis has yet to be written. On the other hand, deaths from certain other diseases are actually increasing, as witness the following figures from the Reports of the Registrar-General for England and Wales:

⁹ apposite - apt in the circumstances or in relation to something.

¹⁰ *The New Sydenham Society*, vol. clvi, section viii, p. 12.

Disease	Number of Deaths in 1898	Number of Deaths in 1919
Diseases of the heart and circulatory system	50,492	69,637
Cancer	25,196	41,144
Pneumonia	35,462	38,949
Influenza	10,405	44,801

In view of these figures it is folly to suppose that the final conquest of disease is imminent.

(b) War

War, foreign or civil, is another sword hanging over civilisations, whereby the fruits of a long period of growth may be destroyed in a few years. After the Thirty Years War the recovery of Germany occupied a century and a half. During the fourteen years of the Taiping rebellion in China whole provinces were devastated and millions upon millions of people were killed or died. In spite of the Great War during the past decade, there are some who would delude themselves and others into the vain belief that, without a radical change in international relations and a determined effort to neutralise its causes, there will be no more war; but unless the nations learn through Christianity that justice is higher than self-interest the following brilliant passage by Devas is as true today as when it was written in 1901:

True that the spread of humanitarianism and cosmopolitanism made many people think, towards the end of the nineteenth century, that bloodshed was at an end. But their hopes were dreams: the visible growth of national rivalry and gigantic armaments can only issue in desperate struggles; while not a few among the nations are troubled with the growth of internal dissensions and accumulations of social hatred that point to bloody catastrophes in the future; and the tremendous means of destruction that modern science puts in our hands offer frightful possibilities of slaughter, murderous anarchical outrages, and rivers of blood shed in pitiless repression.¹¹

¹¹ Charles S. Devas, *Political Economy*, 1901, p. 191.

Malthusians may inveigh against wars waged to achieve the expansion of a nation, but so long as international rivalry disregards the moral law their words will neither stop war nor prevent a Malthusian country from falling an easy prey to a stronger people. On the contrary, a low birth-rate, by reducing the potential force available for defence, is actually an incentive to a declaration of war from an envious neighbour, because it means that he will not hesitate so long when attempting to count the cost beforehand. In 1850 the population of France and Germany numbered practically the same, 35,500,000; in 1913 that of France was 39,600,000, that of Germany 67,000,000.¹² The bearing of these facts on the Great War is obvious. In 1919 the new Germany, including Silesia, had a population of just over 60,000,000; whereas, in 1921, France, including Alsace-Lorraine, had a population of 39,200,000. Thus, despite her victory in the war, the population of France is less today than it was seven years ago.

§10. MORAL CATASTROPHES

In view of past history only an ostrich with its head in the sand can profess to believe that there will be no calamities in the future to reduce the population of the earth. And apart from cataclysms of disease or of war, empires have perished by moral catastrophe. A disbelief in God results in selfishness, and in various moral catastrophes. In the terse phrase of Mr. Bernard Shaw, "Voluptuaries prosper and perish."¹³ For example, during the second century B.C. the disease of rationalism¹⁴ spread over Greece, and a rapid depopulation of the country began.

The facts were recorded by Polybius,¹⁵ who expressly states that at the time of which he is writing serious pestilences did not

¹² *Revue Pratique d'Apologétique*, September 15, 1914.

¹³ *Man and Superman*, p. 195.

¹⁴ By rationalism we mean a denial of God and of responsibility for conduct to a Higher Being.

¹⁵ Quoted by W. H. S. Jones, *Malaria and Greek History*, 1909, p. 95.

occur, and that depopulation was caused by the selfishness of the Greeks, who, being addicted to pleasure, either did not marry at all or refused to rear more than one or two children, lest it should be impossible to bring them up in extravagant luxury. This ancient historian also noted that the death of a son in war or by pestilence is a serious matter when there are only one or two sons in a family. Greece fell to the conquering Romans, and they also in course of time were infected with this evil canker. There came a day when over the battlements of Constantinople the blood-red Crescent was unfurled. Later on all Christendom was threatened, and the King of France appealed to the Pope for men and arms to resist the challenge to Europe of the Mohammedan world. The Empire of the Turk spread over the whole of South-Eastern Europe. But once more the evil poison spread, this time into the homes in many parts of Islam, and today the once triumphant foes of Christianity are decaying nations whose dominions are the appanage of Europe. In face of these facts it is sheer madness to assume that all the Great Powers now existing will maintain their population and prove immune from decay. Indeed, the very propaganda against which this Essay is directed is in itself positive proof that the seeds of decay have already been sown within the British Empire. Yet, in an age in which thought and reason are suppressed by systematised confusion and spiritless perplexity, the very simplicity of a truth will operate against its general acceptance.

From the theological point of view, the myth of overpopulation is definitely of anti-Christian growth, because it assumes that, owing to the operation of natural instincts implanted in mankind by the Creator, the only alternative offered to the race is a choice between misery and vice, an alternative utterly incompatible with Divine goodness in the government of the world.