

Chapter 7

Malthus vs. Facts

DESPITE ITS ENDORSEMENT by respected authorities, I believe we will find Malthusian theory utterly without support when we apply the test of straightforward analysis. Facts marshaled in support do not prove it, and analogies do not uphold it. Further, there are facts that conclusively disprove it. There is no justification in experience or analogy for the assumption that there is any tendency for population to increase faster than the food supply.

The facts cited to support the Malthusian theory are taken from new countries where population is sparse, or among the poor classes in old countries where wealth is distributed unequally. In these cases, human life is occupied with the physical necessities of existence. Reproduction under such conditions is at a high rate, which, if it were to go unchecked, might eventually exceed subsistence. But it is not legitimate to infer that reproduction would continue at the same rate under conditions where population was sufficiently dense and wealth was distributed evenly. These conditions would lift the whole community above a mere struggle for existence. Nor can one assume that such a community is impossible because population growth would cause poverty. This is obviously circular reasoning, as it assumes the very point at issue. To prove that overpopulation causes poverty, one would need to show

that there are no other causes that could account for it. With the present state of government, this is clearly impossible.

This is abundantly shown in Malthus' *Essay on Population* itself. This famous book is spoken of more often than read. The contrast between the merits of the book itself and the effect it produced is one of the most remarkable in the history of literature. His other works, though written after he became famous, had no influence. They are treated with contempt, even by those who consider his theory a great discovery.

Malthus begins with the assumption that population increases in a geometrical ratio, while subsistence can increase in an arithmetical ratio at best. That is no more valid than to assert that, because a puppy doubled the length of its tail while adding so many pounds of weight, there is therefore a geometric progression of tail length and an arithmetical progression of weight. We can imagine Jonathan Swift, the great satirist, describing the logical inference from such an assumption. He might have the sages of a previously dogless island deducing from these two ratios the "very striking consequence" that by the time the dog grew to fifty pounds its tail would be over a mile long! This, of course, this would be extremely difficult to wag. Hence, they must recommend the "prudential check" of a bandage as the only alternative to the "positive check" of constant amputations.

After commencing with such an absurdity, the Rev. Malthus continues to show the most ridiculous incapacity for logical thought. The main body of the book is actually a refutation of the very theory it advances. His review of what he calls positive checks simply shows that

the effects he attributes to overpopulation actually arise from other causes. He cites cases from around the world where vice and misery restrain population by limiting marriages or shortening life span. Not in a single case, however, can this be traced to an actual increase in the number of mouths over the power of the accompanying hands to feed them. In every case, vice and misery spring either from ignorance and greed, or from bad government, unjust laws, or war.

Nor has what Malthus failed to show been shown by anyone since. We may search the globe and sift through history in vain for any instance of a considerable country in which poverty and want can be fairly attributed to the pressure of an increasing population. Whatever dangers may be possible in human increase, they have never yet appeared. While this time may come, it never yet has afflicted mankind.

Historically, population has declined as often as increased. It has ebbed and flowed, while its centers have changed. Regions once holding great populations are now deserted, and their cultivated fields turned to jungle.

New nations have arisen and others declined. Sparse regions have become populous and dense ones receded. But as far back as we can go, without merely guessing, there is nothing to show continuous increase. We are apt to lose sight of this fact as we count our increasing millions. As yet, the principle of population has not been strong enough to fully settle the world. Whether the aggregate population of the earth in 1879 is greater than at any previous time, we can only guess. Compared with its capacities to support human life, the earth as a whole is still sparsely populated.

Another broad, general fact is obvious. Malthus asserts that the natural tendency of population to outrun subsistence is a universal law. If so, it should be as obvious as any other natural law, and as universally recognized.

Why, then, do we find no injunction to limit population among the codes of the Jews, Egyptians, Hindus, or Chinese? Nor among any people who have had dense populations? On the contrary, the wisdom of the ages and the religions of the world have always instilled the very opposite idea: "Be fruitful and multiply."

If the tendency to reproduce is as strong as Malthus supposes, then how is it that family lines so often become extinct? This occurs even in families where want is unknown. In an aristocracy such as England, hereditary titles and possession offer every advantage. Yet the House of Lords is kept up over the centuries only by the creation of new titles.

To find the single example of a family that has survived any great lapse of time, we must go to immutable China. There, descendants of Confucius still enjoy peculiar privileges and consideration. Taking the presumption that population tends to double every twenty-five years, his lineage after 2,150 years should include 859,559,193,106,709,670,198,710,528 souls. Yet, instead of any such unimaginable number, his descendants number about 22,000 total. This is quite a discrepancy!

Further, an increase of descendants does not mean an increase of population. This would only happen if all the breeding were in the same family. Mr. and Mrs. Smith have a son and a daughter, who each marry someone else's child. Each has two children. Thus, Mr. and Mrs. Smith have four grandchildren. Yet each generation is no larger

than the other. While there are now four grandchildren, each child would have four grandparents.

Supposing this process were to go on and on. The line of descent might spread out to thousands, even millions. But in each generation, there would be no more individuals than in any previous generation. The web of generations is like lattice-work or the diagonal threads in cloth. Commencing at any point at the top, the eye follows lines that diverge widely at the bottom; but beginning at any point at the bottom, the lines diverge in the same way to the top. How many children a woman may have is variable. But that she had two parents is certain! And that these also had two parents each is also certain. Follow this geometrical progression through a few generations and see if it does not lead to quite as "striking consequences", as Mr. Malthus' peopling of the solar systems.

But let us now advance to specific cases. I assert that examples commonly cited as instances of overpopulation will not bear up under investigation. India, China, and Ireland furnish the strongest of these. In each, great numbers have died of starvation, while entire classes were reduced to abject misery or compelled to emigrate. But is this really due to overpopulation?

Comparing total population with total area, India and China are far from being the most densely populated countries of the world. The population densities [in 1873] of India and China were 132 and 119 per square mile, respectively. Compare this to England (442), Belgium (441), Italy (234), and Japan (233). The total population of the world was estimated to be just under 1.4 billion, for an average of 26.64 per square mile.

Both India and China have large areas not fully used,

or even unused. There is no doubt that they could support a much greater population—and in greater comfort. Labor is crude and inefficient. Meanwhile, great natural resources go untapped. This does not arise from any innate deficiency in their people. They devised the rudiments of many modern inventions while our ancestors were still wandering savages. The problem arises from the form which social organization has taken in both countries. This has shackled productive power and robbed industry of its reward.

In India, from time immemorial, working classes have been ground down by extortion and oppression into a condition of hopeless, and helpless, degradation. For ages, peasants considered themselves happy if they could keep enough to support life and save seed for the next crop. All the wealth that could be wrung from the people was in the possession of princes, who were little better than thieves. Some they gave to their favorites; the rest they wasted in useless luxury. Religion, reduced to an elaborate and terrible superstition, tyrannized their minds as physical force did their bodies.

Capital could not be accumulated safely nor used to assist production to any significant extent. Under these conditions, only arts that ministered to ostentation and luxury could advance. Elephants of the rajah blazed with gold of exquisite workmanship; umbrellas symbolizing his regal power glittered with gems. But the plow of the ryot (peasant) was only a sharpened stick. Tools were of the poorest and rudest description. Commerce could only be carried on by stealth.

It is clear that this tyranny and insecurity produced the want and starvation of India. Population did not pro-

duce want, and want tyranny. As a chaplain with the East India Company in 1796 noted:

“When we reflect upon the great fertility of Hindostan, it is amazing to consider the frequency of famine. It is evidently not owing to any sterility of soil or climate; the evil must be traced to some political cause, and it requires but little penetration to discover it in the avarice and extortion of the various governments. The great spur to industry, that of security, is taken away. Hence no man raises more grain than is barely sufficient for himself, and the first unfavorable season produces a famine.”

The good Reverend then goes on to describe the misery of the peasant in gloomy detail. The continuous violence produced a state under which “neither commerce nor the arts could prosper, nor agriculture assume the appearance of a system.” This merciless rapacity would have produced want and famine even if the population were but one to a square mile and the land a Garden of Eden.

British rule replaced this with a power even worse. “They had been accustomed to live under tyranny, but never tyranny like this,” the British historian Macaulay* explained. “It resembled the government of evil genii, rather than the government of human tyrants.”

An enormous sum was drained away to England every year in various guises. The effect of English law was to put a potent instrument of plunder in the hands of native money lenders. Its rigid rules were mysterious proceedings to the natives. According to Florence Nightingale,

* Lord Thomas Macaulay (1800-1859), English historian, in his essay on Lord Clive (1725-1774), the British general who led the conquest of India.

the famous humanitarian, terrible famines were caused by taxation, which took the very means of cultivation from farmers. They were reduced to actual slavery as "the consequences of our own [British] laws." Even in famine-stricken districts, food was exported to pay taxes.

In India now, as in times past, only the most superficial view can attribute starvation and want to the pressure of population on the ability of land to produce subsistence. Vast areas are still uncultivated, vast mineral resources untouched. If the farmers could keep some capital, industry could revive and take on more productive forms, which would undoubtedly support a much greater population. The limit of the soil to furnish subsistence certainly has not been reached.

It is clear that the true cause of poverty in India has been, and continues to be, the greed of man—not the deficiency of nature.

What is true of India is true of China. As densely populated as China is in many parts, the extreme poverty of the lower classes is not caused by overpopulation. Rather, it is caused by factors similar to those at work in India.

Insecurity prevails, production faces great disadvantages, and trade is restricted. Government is a series of extortions. Capital is safe only when someone has been paid off. Goods are transported mainly on men's shoulders. The Chinese junk must be constructed so it is unusable on the seas. And piracy is such a regular trade that robbers often march in regiments.

Under these conditions, poverty would prevail and any crop failure would result in famine, no matter how sparse the population. China is obviously capable of supporting a much greater population. All travelers testify to the great

extent of uncultivated land, while immense mineral deposits exist untouched.

Neither in India nor China, therefore, can poverty and starvation be charged to the pressure of population against subsistence. Millions are not kept on the verge of starvation (and occasionally pushed beyond it) by dense population—but rather by causes that prevent the natural development of social organization and keep labor from getting its full return.

Let me be clearly understood. I do not mean only that India or China could maintain a greater population with a more highly developed civilization. Malthusian doctrine does not deny that increased production would permit a greater population to find subsistence.

But the essence of that theory is that whatever the capacity for production, the natural tendency of population is to press beyond it. This produces that degree of vice and misery necessary to prevent further increase. So as productive power increases, population will correspondingly increase. And in a little time, this will produce the same results as before.

I assert that nowhere is there an example that will support this theory. Nowhere can poverty properly be attributed to population pressing against the power to procure subsistence using the then-existing degree of human knowledge. In every case, the vice and misery generally attributed to overpopulation can be traced to warfare, tyranny, and oppression. These are the true causes that deny security, which is essential to production, and prevent knowledge from being properly utilized.

Later we will discover why population increase does not produce want. For now, we are only concerned with

the fact that it has not yet done so anywhere.

This fact is obvious with regard to India and China. It also will be obvious wherever we track the true causes of results that, on superficial view, are often assumed to come from overpopulation.

Ireland, of all European countries, furnishes the great stock example of alleged overpopulation. It is constantly referred to as a demonstration of the Malthusian theory worked out under the eyes of the civilized world. Proponents cite the extreme poverty of the peasantry, the low wages, the Irish famine, and Irish emigration. I doubt if we could find a more striking example of how a pre-accepted theory has the power to blind people to the facts.

The truth is obvious. Ireland has never had a population it could not have maintained in ample comfort, given the natural state of the country and the current state of technological development. It is true, a large proportion has barely existed, clothed in rags, with only potatoes for food. When the potato blight came, they died by the thousands.

Did so many live in misery because of the inability of the soil to support them? Is this why they starved on the failure of a single crop?

On the contrary, it was the same remorseless greed that robbed the Indian ryot of the fruits of his labor and left him to starve where nature offered plenty. No merciless banditti plundered the land extorting taxes, as in Asia. But the laborer was stripped just as effectively by a merciless horde of landlords. The soil had been divided among them as their absolute possession, regardless of the rights of those who lived upon it. Most farmers dared not make improvements, even if the exorbitant rents left anything

over. For to do so would only have led to a further increase in rent. So labor was inefficient and wasteful. It was applied aimlessly, whereas had there been any security for its fruits, it would have been applied continually.

Even under these conditions, it is a matter of fact that Ireland did support eight million plus. For when her population was at its highest, Ireland was still a food exporting country. Even during the famine, grain, meat, butter, and cheese destined for export were carted past trenches piled with the dead. So far as the people of Ireland were concerned, this food might as well have been burned or never even produced. It went not as an exchange, but as a tribute. The rent of absentee landlords was wrung from the producers by those who in no way contributed to production.

What if this food had been left to those who raised it? What if they were able to keep and use the capital produced by their labor? What if security had stimulated industry and more economical production? There would have been enough to support the largest population Ireland ever had, and in bounteous comfort. The potato blight might have come and gone without depriving even a single human being of a full meal.

It was not the imprudence of Irish peasants, as English economists coldly say, that made the potato the staple of their food. Irish emigrants do not live upon the potato when they can get other things. Certainly in the United States, the prudence of the Irish character to save something for a rainy day is remarkable. The Irish peasants lived on potatoes because rack rents stripped them of everything else. The truth is that the poverty and misery of Ireland have never been fairly attributable to overpopulation.

Writing this chapter, I have been looking over the literature of Irish misery. It is difficult to speak in civil terms about the complacency with which Irish want and suffering is attributed to overpopulation. I know of nothing to make the blood boil more than the grasping, grinding tyranny to which the Irish people have been subjected. It is this, not any inability of the land to support its population, that caused Irish poverty and famine.

No matter how sparse the population or what the natural resources, poverty and starvation are inevitable consequences when the producers of wealth are forced to work under conditions that deprive them of hope, self-respect, energy, and thrift. They are inevitable when absentee landlords drain away, without return, at least a fourth of the harvest. In addition, a starving industry must support resident landlords, with their horses and hounds, agents and jobbers, middlemen and bailiffs, as well as an army of policemen and soldiers to hunt down any opposition to the iniquitous system. Is it not blasphemy to blame this misery on natural law rather than on human greed?

What is true in these three cases will be found true in all cases—if we examine the facts. As far as our knowledge goes, we may safely say there has never been a case in which the pressure of population against subsistence has caused poverty—or even a decrease in the production of food per person.

Overpopulation is no more the cause of the famines of India, China, and Ireland than it is of the famines of sparsely populated Brazil. And the limitations of Nature are no more to blame for poverty than they are for the millions slain by Genghis Khan.