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Henry George on Thomas Robert Malthus:

Abundance vs. Scarcity

By JIM HORNER*

ABSTRACT. The present era marks the 100th anniversary of the death of Henry George and the 200th anniversary of the publication of Thomas Robert Malthus's *Essay in the Principles of Population*. In observance of these historic dates, this paper examines George's critique of the work of Malthus and explores the *ideological functions* that both men served. George contended that Malthusian population theory served as a means of *social control* by supporting the landed class and strongly opposing ameliorative public policy. George, on the other hand, lashed out against the private ownership of land and advocated policies of *equality and social justice*.

I

Introduction

THE POPULATION DEBATE IS ESSENTIALLY a struggle between "reactionary" and "radical" social thought. No one has had more of an impact on the population debate than Thomas Robert Malthus. His reactionary work, *Essays in the Principles of Population*, created an economics of scarcity and austerity that served to promote inequality in defense of a landed aristocracy. Malthusian theory has survived two centuries and continues to be at the center of the population debate, the controversy over the limits to economic growth, and the argument concerning the nature and causes of poverty (Myrdal, 1962, 5–6).

Henry George, writing a century after the dismal economist, understood the ideological function that Malthusian economics served. He provided a most thorough critique of Malthus in *Progress and Poverty*. George's radical paradigm provided an economics of abundance and social justice. He in-

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sisted that poverty did not result from nature as Malthus contended, but rather from the social policies that protect the landed class at the expense of the poor.

To demonstrate once again that Malthus was mistaken in his predictions on population and the output of food would be a waste of time. He as much as admitted that he was wrong in the second edition of *Essays on the Principles of Population*. Instead, the purpose of this paper is to compare the economics, religion, and policy implications of Malthusian and Georgist population theory. The comparison will explore the invidious character of the Malthusian ideology and the compassionate character of Georgist ideology.¹

II

Malthus: A Defense of the Landed Class

DEMOGRAPHIC AND SOCIAL CONDITIONS were major concerns in the 50 years preceding the first edition of the *Essay on the Principles of Population* (1798). Fertility rates were relatively high and birth control was not widely practiced, as it was considered to be a sin. Why did similar treatises on population (written before 1798) fail to draw as much attention as the work of Malthus? The answer is to be found in the impact of the French Revolution (Myrdal, 1962, 5–6).

The Revolution erased all vestiges of feudalism in France. The landed class in England feared a dual threat—an armed one and an ideological one. The image of revolting masses in France overrunning the feudal armies was unnerving enough. But even more daunting, a revolutionary ideology had the potential to liberate the “peasants” from the sacred clutch of Church doctrine and the philosophy of a ruling elite. A countervailing ideology based on reason, nature, and religion could serve as a defense of the status quo. Malthus, a parson and an economist, provided such a doctrine.

Parson Malthus became a guardian of the “old rugged cross” and of the “landed aristocracy” and implored “the common man to nail himself to the former and to bow down to the latter” (Dugger, 1990, 154). He saw little hope that the human race could overcome its natural tendency toward vice and its ability to overcome the limits of nature.² Nature is parsimonious, and the poor have a proclivity toward the “vice of promiscuous intercourse” (Malthus, 1933b, 181–182).

Natural laws rule out equality, as some individuals are inevitably condemned to misery. Human institutions are not to blame for the plight of the poor. These “unhappy” souls have “drawn a blank” in the “great lottery of life,” and in no way does justice require that they receive an “equal share in the produce of the earth” (Malthus, 1933b, 20). Their salvation is to be found in the religion of chastity, spirit of abstinence, and obedience to the ruling class. Salvation springs neither from revolution nor from “the freest, the most perfect, and best executed government that the human mind could conceive” (Malthus, 1933b, 214).

Economist Malthus saw population growing at a geometric rate while the necessities of life grew at an arithmetic rate. Increases in wages would ultimately result in greater population so that a higher standard of living could not be maintained. Unless certain checks provided abatement of population growth, the imbalance between the number of people and food production gave little reason for long-run optimism. Positive (involuntary) checks, introduced in the first edition of the *Essay* (1798), consisted of war, pestilence, disease, and famine. The second edition (1803) introduced preventive (voluntary) checks, which included moral restraint, celibacy, late marriage, and abstinence. If the latter checks failed to prevail over the former, natural forces would “depress the whole body of the people in want and misery” (Malthus, 1933b, 29).

Population concerns notwithstanding, birth control was not an option in the Malthusian model. Parson Malthus opposed birth control (as well as prostitution and homosexuality) on moral and religious grounds as “improper arts to conceal the consequences of irregular connections” (Malthus, 1933a, 14). Economist Malthus, on the other hand, noted that birth control retards the social-conditioning process that is so important to preserving the status quo. Contraception could undermine the process of *em-bourgeoisement* of the poor. To use the words of Malthusian enthusiast Geoffrey Gilbert:

The ready availability of contraception could easily short-circuit that learning process. True, the poor might manage to avoid having large families. They might escape the evils of dependency on the dole. But they would not develop the middle-class habits of self-denial, self-discipline, and striving which were the keys to bourgeois achievement. On the contrary, they could easily lapse into a condition of comfortable inertia—able with minimal effort to subsist, and content to enjoy their simple, sensual pleasures without fear of consequences (Gilbert, 1993, 12).

Malthus deflected blame for poverty from policy and property rights to

heredity, nature, and the poor themselves. He shifted the focus from status and privilege to divine will. His work would not escape the scrutiny and the wrath of Henry George.

III

Henry George: An American Iconoclast

THE AMERICA OF HENRY GEORGE (1839–1897) was characterized by numerous contradictions. Slavery coexisted with a constitutional government during the first 25 years of his life. Although the Emancipation Proclamation ended chattel slavery, another form of slavery, caused by the private property in land, endured for the remainder of his life. Technological innovations drastically increased the output of goods and services while masses were hungry or unemployed. Economic growth enriched a few while many lived in abject poverty. Monopoly thrived in a country that supposedly believed in the “invisible hand” of Adam Smith.

The American version of the Industrial Revolution more closely resembled a system designed by Malthus than by Adam Smith. An antagonistic view toward the working class and the poor superseded the optimism of Smith’s harmony of interests. A focus on the “sexual immorality” of the masses overrode matters of conscience expressed in Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. A vengeful God had already determined who was fit to survive and who was not. All of these reactionary beliefs created the need in America for an ideology that would promote equality and social justice. Henry George, a journalist and an economist, provided such an ideology.

The journalist in George lashed out against land speculation, the misuse of power by railroad and communication monopolies, privilege and status, protectionism for vested interests, and government corruption. He spoke in favor of an eight-hour working day, equal pay for women, public libraries, and taxing “unearned income” (Hellman, 1987; George, Jr., 1900; Barker, 1955; Cord, 1965). The polemics of George the journalist grew into the evolutionary analysis of George the economist. Nowhere was this more evident than in his attack on Malthus in *Progress and Poverty*.

George refused to blame God or nature for inequality and injustice. Nature is not stingy; it “laughs at a miser.” The “Creator” was more intelligent and loving than to allot more humans to the planet than the Earth could support. Moreover, a larger population can *collectively* provide for human-

kind more effectively than can a smaller one. Poverty and injustice are not penalties imposed by God for sexual promiscuity, as Malthus claimed. George rejected any notion that links poverty to the “purest and sweetest affections” of the poor, and he suggested that such backward-looking ideas were offered with a “bitterness in which zeal was often more manifest than logic” (George, 1987, 96).

Morality requires more than a Malthusian concern with sexual behavior and consumption of distilled spirits. George believed morals and ethics to be more concerned with how humans organize economic activity and how they treat other humans. Malthus did little more than develop a theory of social control masked as a theory of population in which “selfishness” is protected from questions of “conscience” (George, 1987, 99). In the court of Henry George, the parson was guilty of providing the ideology for the continuation and protection of an immoral system:

What gave Malthus his popularity among the ruling classes—what caused his illogical book to be received as a new revelation, induced sovereigns to send him decorations, and the meanest rich man in England to propose to give him a living, was the fact that he furnished a plausible reason for the assumption that some have a better right to existence than others (George, 1987, 338).

Ethical concerns prompted George to explain the reasons for rising poverty in the midst of economic progress. The explanation did not spring from the revelation of divine will as envisioned by Malthus. Nor did it come from the concept of the survival of the fittest. Rather, the explanation is found in the arrangement of social institutions—the very type of arrangements that Malthus had passed off as the will of the Deity.

George recognized the basic struggle between two opposing drives (Horner, 1993). The first drive prompted individuals to improve the quality of life and improve the human condition. The improvements could come from advances in science and technology as well as through the enrichment of “social intelligence.” A second drive counterbalances the first drive and maintains inequality through “powers of habit” and promotes moral degradation through “ostentation, luxury, and warfare.” Advances in science and technological innovations that improve the human condition are seized by “habits, customs, and laws, and methods, which have lost their original usefulness” (George, 1987, 514–519).

Individuals are not always aware of the powers of habit. The reasonable person can mistake the most absurd states of inequality as being part of

natural order. Education, religion, and government pass into the hands of “special classes,” which control thought in order to “magnify their function” and “increase their power” (George, 1992, 134–135; 1987, 516–517). George was especially disturbed with religious doctrine that perverts the teachings of Christ and distorts the will of God.

IV

In Which God Do We Trust?: The Lottery vs. the Lord

BOTH MALTHUS AND GEORGE CLAIMED to be men of God. Each believed in natural order and divine will. Nonetheless, their religious philosophies were antithetical to each other. It was as if they worshiped two different gods. The God of Malthus is miserly and vindictive. The poor are forced to choose between sex and food (Gaffney and Harrison, 1994, 31). The God of George is prolific and compassionate. Nature brims with abundance and a Christian society is replete with equality and justice.

The God of Malthus assigns to each individual the responsibilities of discipline and restraint when it comes to the “evils” of fornication. The exercise of virtue tends to increase both the happiness of the individual and the happiness of society. The lack of virtue engenders vice and misery. God awards definite punishment for those who do not follow the Malthusian code:

We can have no reason to impeach the justice of the Deity because his general laws make virtue necessary and punish our offences against it by the evils attendant upon vice, and the pains that accompany the various forms of premature death. *A really virtuous society as I have supposed* [emphasis added] would avoid these evils. It is the apparent object of the Creator to deter us from vice by the pains which accompany it, and to lead us to virtue by the happiness it produces. This object appears to our conceptions to be worthy of a benevolent Creator. The laws of nature respecting population tend to promote this object (Malthus, 1933b, 167).

The religion of Malthus has influenced social thought for two centuries. No less than Charles Darwin was seeking a theory of evolution that explained the process of natural selection when he stumbled upon the work of the dismal parson. He applied the Malthusian struggle between population and subsistence to the entire plant and animal kingdoms. Darwin, in turn, greatly influenced Herbert Spencer in England and William Graham Sumner in America. Both applied the biological theory of the “survival of the fittest” to society.

E. Ray Canterbery (1995, 124–128) notes that social Darwinism brought together the three traditions of the Protestant work ethic, the classical economics of Malthus, and Darwinian natural selection. Newton, God, and the science of biology were “all on the same side” bridging the gap between feudal ethics and twentieth-century economics. The rich became rich because they were more fit to survive in the capitalist world. Inequality is explained by the will of God and cannot be changed by the political process.

The evolutionary view of George turned Malthusian theory and social Darwinism upside down. Human laws, such as the law of population, are not natural laws. The only natural law is the will of God. And the will of God is equality and justice for all. The “Creator” in no way intended for some to be rich while others were engulfed in poverty. Such injustice “denies natural opportunities to labor,” “robs the producer of the fruits of his toil,” and “prevents us all from being rich” (George, 1981, 79). The salvation of society is found in the “gospel of brotherhood,” which is synonymous with the “gospel of Christ.” True Christians are committed to social progress and do not laze comfortably while poverty engulfs their fellow citizens. The amelioration of poverty becomes the business of all Christians (George, 1981, 9).

It is the institution of the private ownership of land, rather than God or natural selection, that determines who is the most fit to survive. Deprived of their natural right to land, humans are forced into “unnatural competition” in order to eke out a “mere animal existence” (George, 1981, 104). There is no “great lottery” in life in which unfortunates draw blank hands, as Malthus claimed. The social system is a Malthusian game that is rigged against the poor and in favor of the rich. George was no less confrontational with the social Darwinists:

Mr. Spencer is like one who might insist that each should swim for himself in crossing a river, ignoring the fact that some had been artificially provided with corks and others artificially loaded with lead. He is like the preachers who thundered to slaves, “Thou shalt not steal” but had no whisper against the theft involved in their enslavement (George, 1988, 66–67).

The social Darwinists presented a distorted picture of evolution. Evolution does not separate losers from winners through natural selection. George saw the direction of evolution as moving toward a better society, one characterized by equality and justice. Injustice and inequality disrupt

and distort the progress of evolution. Social reforms that correct social wrongs allow evolution to take its course (George, 1987, 462–463). God has a plan for the Georgist world, but it does not resemble the plan of the English parson. George's plan calls for reform, not preservation of the status quo.

V

Policy Implications: Preservation of Inequality vs. Social Reform

MALTHUS NOTES THAT "POVERTY AND MISERY have always increased in proportion to the quantity of discriminate charity" (Malthus, 1933b, 221). Attempts to promote equality and alleviate poverty are counterproductive. Legislation such as the Poor Laws only worsen problems as the poor fail to practice proper restraint and discipline; consequently, they do not accept full responsibility for their station in life. A system of national education could, however, instill a "spirit of independence, a decent pride, and a taste for cleanliness and comfort" in the lower classes.

Parochial schools would teach "sobriety, industry, independence, and prudence" and other "superior" habits of the middle class. The poor can learn the "taste for the conveniences and comforts of life." The "training up" of the young, coupled with the proper "discharge of their religious duties," can weaken the impact of "inflammatory writings" and "ill-directed opposition toward the constituted authorities" (Malthus, 1933b, 214).

George, on the other hand, places the amelioration of poverty and the elimination of injustice at the heart of public policy. The duty of every Christian is to see after the poor, who "without fault of their own, cannot get healthful and wholesome conditions of life." To George, "at the bottom of every social problem is a social wrong" (George, 1981, 9, 79). The purpose of public policy is to correct those wrongs.

The public schools and universities that George envisioned have a different focus than those in the Malthusian view. The aim of education is to provide the intelligence by which the masses can discover and remove the causes of inequality. Rather than teaching emulation of a superior class, public education should liberate students from the ideology of "fashionable idlers" and "pocket nerves" of "pecuniary interests" (George, 1988, 66–67; 1987, 308; George, Jr., 1900, 276).

Both Malthus and George examined stabilization policy. Malthus devel-

oped a theory of gluts that was at odds with the rest of the classical school. The classical school believed that natural order, an “invisible hand,” and a “harmony of interests” would lead the economy toward full employment. Malthus countered, saying that natural order does not always result in an agreeable outcome. Full employment cannot necessarily be assumed, as unemployment could result from the inadequate purchasing power of the poor. Producers hire workers only if the value of their production is greater than wages. Hence, workers cannot buy all that is produced, and a surplus is generated.

The Malthusian remedy was not to redistribute income downward. Spending for the basic necessities of life would be deleterious for the economy, as the poor would not learn the proper obedience and discipline. After all, if the rich did not ride horses for pleasure, engaged in no “superfluous” consumption, and were as industrious as possible, there would be no appreciable effect on “lower classes of people” (Malthus, 1933b, 146). The landed aristocracy, from whom all “liberties and privileges” descend, can absorb the surplus of overproduction by increased expenditures on servants and lavish estates (Malthus, 1951, 380).

For George, the blame for instability and injustice lay in the institution of private property and an unjust system of taxation. Those who produce the least get the most and those who produce the most get the least. All humans have a natural right to the use of land (including natural resources) and an exclusive right to ownership of whatever they produce. Private property in land denies universal access to land and thus denies the right of some to earn an adequate living. The taxation of income that arises from production confiscates what rightly belongs to the worker (George, 1987, 338–339).

The key to understanding the Georgist critique of private property is in the dichotomy between socially created value and individually created value. The value of land is socially created. A growing population and economic growth increase the value of land with no contribution from the landowner. Individually created value results from the skills and efforts of labor and not from the title to and ownership of land. With private ownership of land, an increase in socially created wealth is not given back to the community but is instead acquired by individuals. An increase in wealth resulting from productive activity does not translate into higher wages, as much of the increase in wealth is captured in the form of rent and taxes.

The remedy is the “single tax” on land. Taxing unearned increments of income (rent) encourages the development of land. The rent of land is unearned. Taxing land encourages the development of land. A tax on land cannot be shifted, as long as the tax is independent of how the land is used and is less than the rent of the land. Land would not be held out for purposes of speculation, as landholders would be induced to develop the land to pay the taxes. In order to pay taxes on land, landowners have to produce, which requires the services of labor. Improvements on the land (any productive labor) would not be taxed. As a result, investment is stimulated, production increases, and employment rises.

While George advocated addressing the needs of the poor, he did not desire to hurt the rich. He wished to take nothing from anyone who had earned it. The dividend from the single tax is to be redistributed to *all* citizens, rich or poor. The dividend could be used to provide public baths, museums, theaters, schools, universities, and technical schools. George also advocated universal access to medical care and to the most modern technology.

VI

Conclusion

A STARK CONTRAST EMERGES FROM THE COMPARISON between Thomas Robert Malthus and Henry George. Malthus was an apologist for a corrupt system. Outside the economics profession, the ideas of Malthus have dominated the population debate for 200 years. Remnants of his oppressive ideology are uncovered in the emotions of superiority and status, which result in internal violence (racism, sexism, inequality) and in external violence (imperialism, war, exploitation). Inside the economics profession, the Malthusian notion of scarcity remains at the center of economic analysis.

George was the antagonist of a corrupt system. As Warren Samuels (1983, 64) notes, the orthodox economics profession considered George to be “unsafe.” The ideology of equality and the policy of a single tax posed “a clear and present danger” to members of the landed class and to their apologists in the “intellectual establishments” (Gaffney and Harrison, 1994, 29). Mainstream economists excluded George from their exclusive circle during his lifetime and have continued to do so in the present day.

The contrast between George and Malthus also reveals a choice between

social reform and *social control*. Malthus used the specter of overpopulation as a tool of social control. His aim was to protect the landed aristocracy from the poor. Natural order divided people into a superior class and an inferior class. Divine will required the obedience of the latter to the former.

The single tax is the capstone of George's social reform method. The implementation of the single tax reconciles the usual trade-offs between efficiency and equity, between ecology and growth, and between security and incentive. The revenues from the single tax can provide all citizens not only with the basic necessities of life, but also with the most modern technology of the time. Equal access leads to equal opportunity; and equal opportunity leads to the end of poverty in the midst of economic progress.

The choice between the two paradigms is also a choice between *emulation* and *association*. Malthus showed lifelong support for policies that denied the poor the ability to participate fully in the system. The poor can be assimilated into the mainstream of society only to the extent that they learn the superior ways of the elite class. Through emulation of the rich, the poor can learn to appreciate the culture and taste of those with status and rank and eschew revolutionary and radical notions that challenge the status quo.

George, on the other hand, believed in the power of association as the first step in social development. Progress occurs where all people can engage freely in economic activity. Integration of people without regard to class distinctions is the essence of association while warfare, rank, status, and inequality are its enemies. Peaceful association allows for cooperation and liberates mental effort from the wasteful expenditure involved in conflict. Consequently, inequality is "lessened, checked, and finally reversed" (George, 1987, 508).

Finally, the contrast between Malthusian and Georgist policy proposals accentuates the difference between the *economics of scarcity* and an *economics of abundance*. Malthusian policy denies the possibility of equality because of nature's scarcity and, as such, analyzes how to limit the number of people coming to the dinner table. Georgist policy demands a condition of equality as a natural outgrowth of abundance and thus decides on an ethical division of an ample amount of bread for guests coming to the dinner table. In other words, the question to be decided is whether to "let them eat cake" or to "multiply the fish," turn "water into wine," and distribute "manna from heaven."

Endnotes

1. A frequent contrast and comparison is made between the work of Malthus and David Ricardo. Samuel Hollander (1997; 1990b; 1994) demonstrates that the differences between Malthus and Ricardo are not as wide as commonly believed. Thus, a more meaningful comparison is between the writings of George and Malthus.

2. For an alternative interpretation and kinder treatment of Malthus, see Hollander (1990a; 1997). Hollander contends that Malthus was more optimistic than what is commonly thought. He believes that Malthus foresaw the possibility of simultaneous population growth and higher real wages as long as there was no artificial depression of domestic agriculture or an artificial encouragement of population.

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