

POVERTY AND POPULATION

To the Editor, LAND VALUES

SIR,

The criticism of my article, coming as it does from the pen of Mr. R. Whyte, deserves careful reply, and I shall endeavour not to evade the straight questions he asks.

I have before me Malthus' *ESSAY ON POPULATION*, and, in my opinion, Henry George makes good his refutation of it. The issue is clear. Malthus attributes poverty to the pressure of population on subsistence; George attributes it to unjust man-made laws. Malthus declares (Book III., Chap. xiv.) that his argument "depends entirely upon the differently increasing ratios of population and food." Clearly, then, if it can be shown that the capacity of food production per head of the population increases with the growth of population, Malthus' argument and all that has been built on it falls to the ground. I do not know whether figures on the point are available, but surely it cannot be doubted, and I do not understand Mr. Whyte to question it, that the amount of subsistence at the command of civilised peoples is to-day relatively much greater than it was when population was but a fraction of what it now is. All evidence goes to show that the power to feed population has grown more quickly than population itself, and the only doubt I have seen expressed in this connection is as to whether this process can continue, man's power of discovery being, it is asserted, likely to slack down. On this point, each can only form his own opinion, for what it is worth, but at the present time no sign of the reduced pace is in evidence and the world has scarcely yet recovered from its astonishment at the German discovery for the extraction of nitrate (the chief of fertilisers) from the atmosphere in unlimited quantity and at low cost—a discovery specially bearing on this controversy when we remember the stress laid by Malthus on the difficulty which he alleged will in future times be experienced in maintaining the fertility of the earth.

Malthus gives his *THEORY OF POPULATION* the air of a self-evident proposition when he starts off with the obvious truth that more people cannot exist than there is food to keep alive; but throughout his work I can find no disproof of this relatively increasing productive power and if the power exists, the "self-evident truth" becomes meaningless in this connection.

I notice that Mr. Whyte does not challenge my point that if hunger is due to the niggardliness of nature, *all* of us ought to suffer from the famine just as a herd of cattle would. If poverty is really due to over-population *all* of us should in greater or less degree be poor. The fact that some of us, while doing no useful work, have more than we can consume, while others who work hard and usefully suffer from want ought to prove that these things have other cause than lack of power to produce subsistence, and that is why I cannot see how it is possible to be both Malthusian and Single Taxer, as Mr. Whyte claims to be, for if Malthus is right as to the cause of poverty, the Single Taxer is wrong. This is not to say that I would "ask mothers and potential mothers to procreate up to their fullest capacity," as Mr. Whyte asks me whether I would do. Apart from morality, so long as, through vicious and ignorant legislation, we force the greater part of our population to exist under housing and other conditions which make civilised existence almost impossible, such a request would indeed be folly, but to refuse to make this request is not at all an admission that these conditions are due to excessive procreation.

Dealing with the Malthusian doctrine that "population constantly tending to increase must, when unrestrained, constantly press against the limits of subsistence," Mr. Whyte challenges me to say whether I advocate the unbridled exercise of the sexual instinct. I do not, in the very least, any more than I advocate unbridled indulgence in food and drink. What I do contend is that whether

unbridled or not, poverty and misery will persist, given economic conditions as they are. But I refuse to believe that, given equality of economic opportunity, there need be any fear of this "unbridled exercise." Your space would not admit of this aspect of the matter being fully pursued, but it is worth considering the facts as to the lower animals when in a state of nature. Have we ever known any species which habitually increases in numbers to the limit of subsistence? Is it not a fact that nowhere on the earth are there so many elephants (to take but one example) as fail to find nourishment in abundance? Is it not a fact that no species of animal is in the habit of so increasing its numbers as to regularly expose itself to the ravages of hunger? To do so would involve the degeneration of any such species. Malthus lived before the days of Darwin, when the law of adaptation to environment was yet unknown, but it is now recognised that properties which prove to be useful and essential to the well-being of a species are called forth, perfected and fixed in the effort of that species to adapt itself to its surroundings. Since the property of never increasing in numbers to the limit of the food supply is absolutely necessary to the well-being, and even to the existence of any species, it must have been called forth, perfected and fixed as a permanent specific character so as to become part of their nature.

In the same way is it not certain that, were the laws of nature allowed free play, the quality of never reaching near the limit of subsistence would be called forth and automatically fixed in the human kind just as any other useful quality would become fixed, and would we then have any reason to fear the unbridled indulgence in the sexual instinct of what Mr. Whyte asks me whether I approve? Dr. Theodore Hertzka more fully develops this in his book *FREELAND*.

Mr. Whyte claims that George misrepresented Malthusians when he charged them with attempting to eradicate "a natural social instinct." Here it does seem George is in error, for Malthus wished to control the instinct, not to eradicate it. But when Mr. Whyte proceeds to represent Malthusians as holding that misery and profligacy can be eradicated by regulating fecundity according to social needs, I ask him, as a Single Taxer, does he seriously assert that, whatever the population, these things will not always persist so long as we maintain institutions which shut men out from the earth and deprive them of their earnings? Does he mean, that if, let us suppose, through the ravages of war, the population of these islands is largely reduced while present institutions remain as they are, misery and profligacy will in any way be reduced? The position of Malthus himself, in this connection, is curious. When dealing with the effect on the lower classes of withholding land from use, he writes:—"With regard to uncultivated land, it is evident that its effect on the poor is neither to injure nor to benefit them. The sudden cultivation of it will indeed tend to improve their condition for a time, and the neglect of lands before cultivated will certainly make their situation worse for a certain period; but when no changes of this kind are going forward the effect of uncultivated land on the lower classes operates merely like the possession of a smaller territory." From which it follows that whether land laws be good or bad, the effect on the poor is nil! All is reduced to nothingness! By the "law of population" nothing we do can make any difference, for if land is made more accessible, population will so increase as to bring the benefit to naught: if it is locked up, population will decline and put matters right again!

Mr. Whyte charges George with taking a statement of J. S. Mill and proceeding to criticise it after mutilating the statement. Mill's statement is that a greater number of people cannot in *any given state of civilisation* be collectively so well nourished as a smaller, and Mr. Whyte points out that when submitting the statement to examination, George omits the words in italics.

Mr. Whyte seems to admit that George has no difficulty in

showing that the relative power of producing wealth increases with population. But, exclaims Mr. Whyte, has not civilisation been advancing with population, and if so has not George failed to meet Mill's statement? Well, I am not defending George's omission of the words, but whether omitted or not can make no difference in the conclusion we are forced to. Omitting them, as he does, George shows that subsistence increases faster than population. Mr. Whyte does not deny it. On the other hand, taking Mill's statement as it stands, and granting with Mr. Whyte that advancing population means advancing civilisation—advance in the arts and knowledge—the case is also proved, for this is precisely George's contention. Undoubtedly it is true, as opponents of Malthus continually assert, advance in population brings with it that advance in Science, art and knowledge which we call civilisation, thus ensuring that subsistence shall more than keep pace with population. Despite the clerical omission, the case against Mill is made good.

As evidenced by the following quotations, selected from many, Malthus embraced, apparently without question, the then popular WAGE FUND THEORY. He contends, for example (Book IV., Chap. x.) that a certain proposal in connection with Foundling Hospitals is proof that "the funds destined for the maintenance of labour cannot properly support a greater population."

And when discussing the cause of poverty in France and Ireland, he declares that "A population is brought into existence which is not demanded by the quantity of capital and employment in the country."

Again: "The funds for the maintenance of labour must increase with greater rapidity in order to find work and food for the additional numbers that would then grow up to manhood."

In the same way he accounts for periods of scarce and plentiful employment. According to him, population normally increases till the supply of labour is greater than capital can support. This brings poverty and disease, which act as "positive checks" on further increase till the number of labourers is brought down to what capital can employ. Wages then begin to rise again and population to increase, only once more to exceed what capital can employ, and again to bring poverty and disease. Is it unreasonable to think that the adoption of this view on labour and employment prepared the way for his own fatalistic THEORY OF POPULATION? Directly you believe that capital employs labour the rest follows with ease.

Yours, &c., W. R. LESTER.

To the Editor, LAND VALUES

SIR,

May I have a small space in which to deprecate the introduction of a side issue in too great fulness into the campaign against the land monopoly.

The practical object of Malthus in writing THE PRINCIPLE OF POPULATION should not be forgotten. That object was to show the fallacy which underlay that sort of charity which encourages foundling hospitals and other methods obviating or removing the natural incentive to moral restraint; he did not I think propose anything positive with regard to restricting the increase of population. He maintained that under given circumstances, which, though he did not specify it, included the private appropriation of land, population would press too hard on subsistence if artificially encouraged.

Henry George dealt with Malthus and so far the controversy is relevant in the pages of LAND VALUES, but he did not deal with the Malthusians, and a discussion of the value of inculcating moral restraint is irrelevant.

This is a question which has become obsolete in the minds of single tax men. The abolition of the land monopoly is a better alternative.

Like Mr. Whyte I was in agreement with Malthus before

I became a single taxer and am so still. I cannot even now understand why Henry George attacked his great essay. Malthus was not wrong, but his teaching is to us obsolete.

Yours, &c., W. DRURY.

THE SELLING VALUE OF LAND

To the Editor, LAND VALUES

SIR,

The September number of LAND VALUES contains an interesting discussion about the effect of the Single Tax upon the selling price of land. Mr. McLennan's solution is open to question on some points and is lacking in clearness. He agrees that the Single Tax would cause the selling value to disappear, then he argues that "nevertheless land would always have a good-will value, based on the right to occupy, and on what could be got by its use." But obviously such sources of value are already represented in the selling value, which he admits would disappear. I do not see that any "problem" worth the name would arise under the full Single Tax. At least the following suggested solution seems simple enough. Assume a plot of land worth £1,000 if it had been sold without liability of any taxation. If the Single Tax were applied to such a plot in New Zealand it would mean the owner had now to pay £50 Single Tax; then the selling value as he says would disappear. Assume now the owner wishes to sell the plot by auction. Auction sales always begin at a price below the real value, and this might take the form of a bid to take the land off the owner's hands if he (the owner) would give £200 with it, the bidding goes on by decreasing this amount until, say, the auctioneer gets a bid to accept the land with £50 only, if the seller is urgent to rid himself of the liability to pay Single Tax he might then declare the land was "in the market" and would be sold if no better bid were received; after the usual wine and biscuits a keen buyer is found to accept it with a bonus of only £20, and at this figure it is knocked down. Such might be the rule when values had declined. When the values had risen no "difficulty" would arise; the land would be sold as in our present sense at, say, £100. This simple solution would only be required when an unimproved plot was for sale. "Land" containing any improvements, as buildings, &c., would usually have a selling value in our present sense of that phrase.

Mr. McLennan seems inadvertently to have slipped into an error in saying the Government Valuation in New Zealand allows for the effect of rates and taxes, so that the official valuation would be higher than the selling price; this is certainly not so unless the New Zealand Year Books are all wrong. "Objections to value can only be on the ground that the valuation does not represent the true selling value, as that is the guide imposed by the Act." (1901. p. 624.)

"The unimproved value and the value of the improvements, these two values combined must represent the fair selling value (known as capital value) of the whole." (1913. p. 850.)

As a matter of fact the official valuations are *below* the selling values (but if Mr. McLennan were correct they would be *above* the selling values); Government revaluations are often made for loans (loans from the State). "Since the system came into force, these revaluations for loan purposes have, in almost every case, exceeded the values entered on the roll" (1910, p. 624). Also Mr. Fowlds' Parliamentary Return showed that six months' property sales from March to September, 1910, totalled £4,009,365, while the official valuation for the same properties was only £3,102,818, or in other words, the selling price was 29 per cent. above the official valuation.

I am, &c.,

18, Lister Lane, Bradford.

J. K. MUSGRAVE.