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# MALTHUS AND THE IDEA OF PROGRESS

BY SAMUEL M. LEVIN

The subject of progress, described in Adam Smith's phrase "the natural progress of things towards improvement,"<sup>1</sup> though remote from the thinking of the ancients, was uppermost among European intellectuals and students in the second half of the XVIIIth century. To Malthus (1766-1834) the meaning of progress was an unresolved issue that posed many questions and that called for serious thought. It is well known that what led to the writing of his *Essay on Population*, the first edition of which appeared in 1798, was a mood of dissent from his father's views regarding the ideas of such a confirmed preacher of progress as William Godwin. This disquisition, which John Maynard Keynes called "a work of youthful genius" and one which "can claim a place amongst those which have had a great influence on the progress of thought,"<sup>2</sup> underscores the preponderant idea which swayed the author's mind at that time: that the checks of vice and misery which held population down to the level of the means of subsistence formed "the strongest obstacle . . . to any very great future improvement of society."

Malthus' interest in the improvement of society continued to be an impelling one, despite his concern with life's "melancholy hue."<sup>3</sup> In point of fact, it has been averred that the English thinker's motive for studying political economy "was chiefly the desire to advance the greatest happiness of the greatest number," and that "In his eyes the elevation of human life was much more important than the solution of a scientific problem."<sup>4</sup>

## *The Predilection of Malthus' Thought*

What is to be said regarding Malthus' view? Without offering a definition of progress, he indicates the predilection of his thought in such phrases as "the future improvement of society," "the progress of mankind towards happiness,"<sup>5</sup> "improvement and civilization,"<sup>6</sup> "the

<sup>1</sup> Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (New York, Introduction 1937), 326.

<sup>2</sup> J. M. Keynes, *Essays in Biography* (New York, 1933), 119-120.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Robert Malthus, *First Essay on Population* (1798), Reprinted for the Royal Economic Society (London 1926), Preface, III-IV. (Subsequent references indicated by Malthus, 1st. ed.)

<sup>4</sup> James Bonar, *Malthus and His Work* (New York, 1924), 57.

<sup>5</sup> Malthus, *An Essay on Population*, 7th ed. (London and New York), II, 5. (Indicated hereafter by Malthus, 7th ed.)

<sup>6</sup> Malthus, *Principles of Political Economy*, 2nd ed. (London, 1836), 351.

further progress of wealth," "the progress of a wild plant to a beautiful garden flower," etc. In most cases what he had in mind was a going forward, growth, change, or trend toward a better order of things, of life, or of society. He does not, however, restrict himself to this connotation. Thus under the supposition of an equalization of property, progress of population brings want and misery in its wake. The statement that no progress whatever has hitherto been made "towards the extinction of the passion between the sexes," indicates an identification of progress with an order of change that makes for human decay rather than strength or improvement. The phrase "to arrest the progress of the vicious," points to the kind of negative implication, brought to mind when one speaks of the progress of evil, of corruption, or of crime.

It is to be remembered, in this regard, that the early period of Malthus' life was signalized by the humanistic ideals of the Enlightenment, and by the advance of experimental science, inventions, and manufactures— all of which opened up the prospect of a forward movement. It was in the XVIIIth century, known for the idea "that by deliberate purpose and the rational use of knowledge, man can reconstruct society according to a more just and intelligible design," that the modern idea of progress was born.<sup>7</sup> But Malthus, who shied at the fanciful notions of Godwin and Condorcet, in respect to the future improvement of society, shifted his original, somewhat alarmist stand to a more optimistic one. His enunciation in the second edition of his work, published in 1803, of a new check to population—moral restraint<sup>8</sup>—narrowed the gap between himself and the ardent proponents of "the progress of man towards perfection." It not only meant a retreat from the gloom of the first Essay, but it induced him to plead for the acceptance of what took on the guise of a hoped for panacea, as "the strict line of duty."<sup>9</sup> He could now evince a more propitious attitude with respect to the realization of progress in the years ahead.

### *Progress and Irregular Movements*

In a letter to his friend, David Ricardo, dated January 26, 1817, Malthus wrote: ". . . I really think that the progress of society consists of irregular movements."<sup>10</sup> It was a pivotal idea. He had in mind the cyclical movements that characterize modern capitalistic econ-

<sup>7</sup> Carl Becker, *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences* (New York, 1934), XII, 498.

<sup>8</sup> Defined by Malthus as "the abstaining from marriage till we are in a condition to support a family, with a perfectly moral conduct during that period." 7th ed., II, 168.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *The Works and Correspondence of David Ricardo*, edited by Piero Sraffa (Cambridge, 1951), VII, 122.

omies or what he himself called "retrograde and progressive movements." Manifestations of the irregular were to be seen in the "disturbing" or "interrupting causes," (such as interfered with the balanced, orderly functioning of the economic system) highlighted by early XIXth-century economists, and the uncertainties, risks, and difficulties of daily existence. Believing that life involved privation and struggle, he asserted that even the desires for food, property, and marriage were healthier when they encountered some obstacles.

A wider view of the Malthusian argument brings to light an involved pattern of thought—Malthus' economic ideas, premises regarding the characteristics and disciplinary needs of man, theological predilections, philosophy of mind, opinions on government and institutions, and his predispositions, impulses, and motivations. Of special importance are these two facts: 1. "the natural indolence of man," signifying that man basically is "inert, sluggish, and averse from labor, unless compelled by necessity";<sup>11</sup> 2. the indispensability of incentives or "stimulants to exertion," such as arise from the wants of the body and mind, passions, industry, and the variety of the forms and operations of nature, to overcome this indolence.<sup>12</sup> Thus natural indolence looms as a difficulty, but gives way, in varying periods of time, to the aforementioned stimuli. Indolence is a circumstance, moreover, whose rôle, in the spectrum of human experience, is immeasurably surpassed, by the culmination of the creative process in mind, spirit, and a human "capacity for superior enjoyment."<sup>13</sup>

Malthus turns to the complex of indolence, incentives, and exertion to provide a usable criterion of the desirability of a plan, policy, or situation. He is averse to "artificial and natural modes of checking population," because, among other things, by these modes, the indolence of the masses would be increased and because of their tendency to remove a stimulus to industry.<sup>14</sup> A state of society characterized by

<sup>11</sup> Malthus, 7th ed., II, 25; 1st ed., 363. Does the term natural indolence point to an inborn, heritable trait? The answer is uncertain, for Malthus characterizes the indolence of the American Indians of New Spain as mere habits, and that of the "country-labourers in Ireland," as possibly arising from "a natural tendency to idleness." See *Principles of Political Economy, op. cit.*, 340, 346.

<sup>12</sup> Malthus, 1st ed., 357; 7th ed., II, 25. It is worthy of note that John Kenneth Galbraith applies an analogous line of thought to what he calls the "conventional wisdom," defined as "ideas which are esteemed at any time for their acceptability." In much the same way as stimulants to exertion overcome human inertia, Galbraith tells us that "Ideas need to be tested by their ability, in combination with events, to overcome inertia and resistance. This inertia and resistance the conventional wisdom provides." See *The Affluent Society* (Boston, 1958), 9.

<sup>13</sup> Malthus, 1st ed., 352-354, 391.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. S. M. Levin, "Malthus' Conception of the Checks to Population," *Human Biology*, X, 2 (1938), 219, note 18.

inequality of conditions is, he holds, "the best calculated to develop the energies and faculties of man."<sup>15</sup> Motives to exertion constitute a distinguishing mark of the system of private property. In answer to Condorcet's grandiose ideas regarding progress, he writes: ". . . if the idle and negligent be placed upon the same footing . . . as the active and industrious, can we expect to see men exert that animated activity in bettering their condition, which now forms the master-spring of public prosperity?"<sup>16</sup>

### *Retrogressive Factors*

The gamut of Malthusian ideas, such as the tendency of population to outrun subsistence, risk, inequality, scarcity, disturbing causes, and natural indolence, also give us an intimation of the factors that precipitate difficulties in the path of life, and that portend a possible halting or reversal of progress. There is demonstrably no prospect of relief by recourse to "a system of equality" with its accompaniment of rapidly increasing numbers and (while the spirit of benevolence holds sway), a fading out of motives to better one's condition. Nor can one fall back on the efficacy of reason, for Malthus identifies the human "corporal propensities" (cravings, emotions, passions, and prejudices) with "disturbing forces." Consequently, man may act contrary to the dictates of reason.<sup>17</sup> It was this amenability to the irrational which powerfully impressed the iconoclastic American economist, John R. Commons, and led him to epitomize Malthus' thought, somewhat hyperbolically, in these words: "Man is not a rational being—he is a being of passion and stupidity, who does quite the opposite of what his reason tells him to do."<sup>18</sup>

Malthus not only apprehends the possibility of regression, but explains it in terms of aggravated poverty. Poverty is not unaffected

<sup>15</sup> Malthus, 7th ed., II, 25. This is in sharp disagreement with the views of William Godwin, set forth in his essay "Of Avarice and Profusion," (in *The Enquirer* of 1797), the content of which stimulated Malthus to the bringing out of his first edition of the *Essay on the Principle of Population*. Godwin writes: "The principles of virtue require, that the advantages existing in any community should be equally administered; or that the inequalities which inevitably arise, should be repressed, and kept down within as narrow limits as possible." Again: "Thus much is certain, that a state of cultivated equality is that state which, in speculation and theory, appears most consonant to the nature of man, and most conducive to the extensive diffusion of felicity."

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 3. Actually, notwithstanding his assumption of such frailties as inertia and sluggishness, Malthus highlights man's desire to better his condition—an innate factor, postulated by Adam Smith, that prods the individual to front the stern realities of existence in an effort to raise himself to a higher level of living.

<sup>17</sup> Malthus, 1st ed., 254–255.

<sup>18</sup> John R. Commons, *Institutional Economics* (New York, 1934), 877.

by degree. When it has once passed certain limits, he warns, it almost ceases to operate as an incentive to effort. Hopeless indigence "destroys all vigorous exertion." And when distress is conjoined with a notion that the cause is to be found in the iniquity of government, it becomes a sinister threat: "the rock of defence, the castle, the guardian spirit of despotism."<sup>19</sup>

Commons has dwelt upon Malthus' rôle in developing the economic theory of scarcity, which makes man "work, think, and plan for future progress." He goes on to say that Ricardo "took over the scarcity theory of Malthus and substituted the niggardliness of nature for the XVIIIth-century beneficence of God and nature."<sup>20</sup> Ricardo, a commanding figure in the school of classical economists, thus put himself in a position to stress nature's resistance to labor power. All this is understandable in the light of the struggle for life in the midst of risks, scarcities, inequalities, and disturbances. It is not surprising, under the circumstances, that the mighty law of self-preservation is in the saddle, the law which under the threat of economic breakdown, "expels all the softer and more exalted emotions of the soul."<sup>21</sup> Does not this assume an outcropping of evil or perhaps the lurking of evil in the hinterland of human existence? The answer is—yes. Malthus looks upon evil not only as a part of human experience, but as something that seems to be necessary to induce exertion, exertion in turn being necessary for the creation of mind. He does, however, posit a distinction between partial or incidental evils that can be alleviated or removed by man himself, and the general laws of nature, identified with the wider purposes of creation and the laws of God.

Some of the determinative circumstances, underpinnings of the population problem, reflect such general laws, e.g. the tendency of the race of man to increase beyond the means of subsistence, the desire for food, and fecundity. Fecundity of the human species, we are told, implying in the main the power of women to bear children, "is strong and general," and "the evils arising from it are incidental to those necessary qualities of strength and generality."<sup>22</sup> This line of thought, stressed in the last two chapters of the first edition of the *Essay*, reveals an interconnection of population theory with theological principles. It actually becomes a discourse on "the theory of mind,"<sup>23</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Malthus, 7th ed., 143, 186–187.

<sup>20</sup> Commons, *op. cit.*, 247, 112.

<sup>21</sup> Malthus, 7th ed., II, 16.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 156–159. Malthus does not seem to be troubled by "the infringement of the general laws of nature by a divine revelation." (See 1st ed., 392.) He avers: "The striking necessity of general laws for the formation of intellect will not in any respect be contradicted by one or two exceptions." The very exceptions are calculated "to give rise to a new and powerful train of impressions, tending to purify, exalt, and improve the human mind" (*Ibid.*, 391, 392).

<sup>23</sup> Malthus, 1st ed., Preface, IV. "I should be inclined . . . to consider the world,



wherein the English savant, himself an ordained cleric, essays to expound an order of development or progress, by means of which "a constant succession of sentient beings, rising apparently from so many specks of matter,"<sup>24</sup> emerge as living entities endowed with mind.

It has been observed that "Malthus at first held the principle of population fatal to progress; but he later saw that it was an obstacle only to communistic equality and not to all progress."<sup>25</sup> Though his terminology may convey this idea, a closer look indicates that the situation precipitated by overpopulation was not hopeless. His assertion that the checks constitute the strongest obstacle "to any very great future improvement of society" should not be construed as denying all improvement. His main objection to the doctrine of perfectibility is its claim to unlimited progress; there is no negation of all progress. Nor does he shut out the possibility of progressive movements of the economy. The penalty for overpopulation falls on the lowest orders of society, not on the whole of it. And crowning all is the attainment of the principal goal: "the creation and formation of mind."

### *Stimulants to Exertion*

By what process does mind evolve out of matter? Malthus' answer is, by "the various impressions and excitements which man receives through life,"<sup>26</sup> a process marked by the continuity of varying wants, a succession of "stimulants to exertion," affecting body, mind, production, and population; an outpouring of activity, both physical and mental, and a context of general laws. But he proceeds to validate this affirmation, not by what Darwin subsequently designated as a process whereby man became "the modified descendant of some preexisting form,"<sup>27</sup> but by incidents in the life of the savage, stirred from his torpor by the cravings of hunger. Actually, he acknowledged the rôle of modifications in accounting for the "endless diversity of character that we see in the world,"<sup>28</sup> but what he had in mind was merely a modification of impressions. He unreservedly declared that if the stimulants arising from the wants of the body were removed

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and this life, as the mighty process of God for the creation and formation of mind . . ." (*Ibid.*, 353).

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 351-352.

<sup>25</sup> Norman E. Himes in Editor's Introduction to *Illustrations and Proofs of the Principle of Population by Francis Place* (Boston and New York, 1930), 31.

<sup>26</sup> Malthus, 1st ed., 353. At a later date he wrote: "The greatest of all difficulties in converting uncivilized and thinly peopled countries into civilized and populous ones, is to inspire them with the wants best calculated to excite their exertions in the production of wealth." (See Malthus, *Principles*, 1st ed., *op. cit.*, 470.)

<sup>27</sup> Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex* (New York, 1871), I, 9.

<sup>28</sup> Malthus, 1st ed., 381-382.

from the mass of mankind, "we have much more reason to think, that they would be sunk to the level of brutes, from a deficiency of excitements, than that they would be raised to the rank of philosophers by the possession of leisure."<sup>29</sup>

The tendency of "numbers" to increase faster than food is now interpreted as something that serves the need to rouse man to action and to further the designs of Providence by the full cultivation of the earth. Hence, even though this general law produces partial evil, there is an overbalance of good. These circumstances, moreover, derive from the fact that the Supreme Being acts in accordance with general laws which eventuate in the constancy of the laws of nature. Almost in the language of a critic of his own thesis, Malthus now takes the position that "Had population and food increased in the same ratio, it is probable that man might never have emerged from the savage state."<sup>30</sup> This kind of thought comes to a head in the view that the difficulties occasioned by the law of population excite "universal exertion, and contribute to that infinite variety of situations, and consequently of impressions, which seems . . . favorable to the growth of mind."<sup>31</sup> Thus they tend rather to promote than to impede the general purposes of Deity, and the very pressure on the means of subsistence becomes a species of super-preventive check, preventing the incidental evils from blocking the designs of the Creator.

Malthus concludes that these difficulties contribute to the generation of talent, that exertion for self-support or for family awakens faculty, and that experience with new and extraordinary situations helps to create mind. By and large, it is a configuration of thought that reappears in Bagehot's specification of "propensities to variation"<sup>32</sup> as one of society's prerequisites for the attainment of progress, and in the asseveration of W. I. Thomas, in the first decade of this century, that "it is quite certain that the degree of progress of people has a certain relation to the nature of the disturbances encountered, and that the most progressive have had a more vicissitudinous life."<sup>33</sup>

At a later stage, after mind has been braced to activity, the desire for knowledge forms a new class of excitements. Malthus regards the variety of the forms and operations of nature (symptomatic of change) and the range of the obscure and the unknown as awakeners of mind, since they furnish motives for intellectual endeavor. And

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 357-358. But the leisure "of a certain portion of society," is not something that must needs be overcome by motives to exertion. Instead, it is a benefit brought into being with the help of these motives. (See *Principles*, 1st ed., *op. cit.*, 463.)

<sup>30</sup> Malthus, 1st ed., 364.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 366-367.

<sup>32</sup> Walter Bagehot, *Physics and Politics* (London, 1896), 57.

<sup>33</sup> W. I. Thomas, *Source Book for Social Origins*, 5th ed., (Boston, 1909), 18.



who would not applaud his thought: "The finest minds seem to be formed rather by efforts at original thinking, by endeavors to form new combinations, and to discover new truths, than by passively receiving the impression of other men's ideas."<sup>34</sup> On the other hand, the statement that "we have every reason to think, that there is no more evil in the world, than what is absolutely necessary as one of the ingredients in the mighty process,"<sup>35</sup> is surprising when tested by the somber tone of his pronouncements on the checks of vice and misery. Nor does the idea that its quantitative variability is a motive to exertion bring things into balance.

It appears, then, that Malthus wove the threads of a theory of mind, colored by his theological preconceptions, into the fabric of his discourse on population. Whether anyone can explain the essence of mind is problematical, but there is a concurrence of judgment that man is endowed with a gift of intellectual power, and that its development in such instances as, say, Da Vinci, Shakespeare, Darwin, and Einstein, indicates a summit in human achievement and progress. As for the concept of evolution, the fact cannot be ignored that the Malthusian terminology is highly suggestive, for it is marked by such expressions as "the creative process of the world," "the world is a mighty process for the creation and formation of mind," and mind and body "both seem to be forming and unfolding themselves at the same time."<sup>36</sup> But Malthus' manner of handling the creation and formation of mind is remarkably different from the scrupulously methodical observation and comprehensive investigation of "the members of the whole animal series" which featured the work of Darwin, leading the latter to conclude that "man is the co-descendant, with other mammals, of a common progenitor," and to resort to the phrase "ape-like progenitors of man."<sup>37</sup> As to the subsequent stages of development, Darwin circumspectly declared: "The problem, however, of the first advance of savages toward civilization is at present [1871] much too difficult to be solved."<sup>38</sup> With Malthus, the constellation of thought in this field is mainly theistic. His motive is preeminently that of fixing in the mind and soul of man the conviction of a theodicy. He consequently veers from his original preoccupation with nature, natural law, and the power of increase implanted in the whole range of organic existence, to the empyrean realm, pointing to "the mighty incomparable power of the Creator," declaring that immortality in the case of certain differentiated beings is consonant with reason, and that "Life is, generally speaking, a blessing. . . ."<sup>39</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Malthus, 1st ed., 382-383.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 391.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 389, 247, 355.

<sup>37</sup> Darwin, *op. cit.*, I, 31-32; II, 369; I, 148, 155.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 161.

<sup>39</sup> Malthus, 1st ed., 379, 389, 391.

*The Cosmic Plan*

Though it may be argued that the discourse on the formation of mind is nothing more formidable than a concession to religious tradition, it has a perceptible relevance to the social philosopher's cogitations on the actuality of progress. The idea of progress is in the foreground, even though the follow-up of the evolutionary theme is neither systematic nor thorough. Avowedly concerned with the formation of mind out of matter, Malthus starts with a self already endowed with a functioning mind. It is noteworthy that he had nothing to say on that part of the order of change that accounts for the evolution of living cells into human entities, except perhaps to fall back on the unbounded character of God's creative power. The cosmic plan is apparently the overmastering purpose of spurring man, held down by the "sluggishness of original matter," into activity, and providing him with stimulants and "sources of improvement." But the attainment of mind leads to a more resplendent fulfillment—that of awakening "inert chaotic matter, into spirit" and sublimating "the dust of the earth into soul."<sup>40</sup> The concept of "natural indolence" is a salient one in Malthusian ideology. It offers a leverage for a critique of the idea of a limitless demand for goods as well as of Say's law.<sup>41</sup> In the build-up of thought on progress, it contributes to the elaboration of the rôle of "stimulants to exertion." Seemingly favored by Darwin,<sup>42</sup> natural indolence has failed to win recognition as a truism, even though suggesting a kinship to the economic principle of labor disutility. More than a generation ago, John Dewey expressed his dissent in these words: "In truth, man acts anyway, he can't help acting. In every fundamental sense it is false that a man requires a motive to make him do something. To a healthy man inaction is the greatest of woes."<sup>43</sup>

For the consummation of the developmental process, culminating in mind, Malthus postulates the formative influence of variety and inequality in nature, in the economic system, and in the social order.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 353.

<sup>41</sup> *Principles*, 1st ed., *op. cit.*, 468. Malthus resorts to the phrase "the counter-vailing luxury of indolence." *Ibid.*, 353–9.

<sup>42</sup> Darwin, *op. cit.*, II, 385–6.

<sup>43</sup> John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct* (New York, 1922), 118–19. On the other hand, the Malthusian type of thought is illustrated by Einstein's statement: "Man like every other animal is by nature indolent. If nothing spurs him on, then he will hardly think, and will behave from habit like an automaton." See Albert Einstein, *Out of My Later Years* (New York, 1950), 150. And the sociologist, Charles Horton Cooley, asserts: "The mass of mankind are sluggish and need some resentment as a stimulus." Cf. S. M. Levin, "Charles Horton Cooley and the Concept of Creativeness," *Journal of Social Philosophy*, VI, 3, (1941), 217, 220. Though Malthus does not specifically mention "resentment," his terminology, which includes "passions" and "excitements," would seem to make room for it.

By the same token, he is querulous of the impress of uniformity in the domain of human experience, warning that "Uniform, undiversified perfection could not possess the same awakening powers."<sup>44</sup>

Judging from the tenor of his exposition, Malthus is indubitably in quest of approvable paths to the goal of progress towards improvement, insofar as they relate to the growth of intellect, even at the cost of leaving his theory of population at loose ends. He invariably sees wrongheadedness casting its shadow on the schemes for perfectibility offered by Godwin and Condorcet, for they take on the guise of a mode of life calling for an abatement of risk, inequality, self-help, and responsibility. He disdains their savor of utopianism, averring that "The general tendency of an uniform course of prosperity is, rather to degrade, than exalt the character."<sup>45</sup> Even a revelation from heaven that would explain "the whole plan and scheme of the universe," is unwelcome, because it would in all probability tend to repress future exertion "and to damp the soaring wings of intellect."<sup>46</sup>

#### *Evolution and the Developmental Process*

The excursus into an arena which brought forth the vision of a developmental process, akin to the evolutionary, embracing elements drawn both from nature and theology, reappears in scattered and abbreviated form in the second and subsequent editions of the Essay. No doubt it offered some cushioning against the animadversions of writers who deemed the new population credo an onslaught against established religious principles. It may have soothed the conscience of one who was both social philosopher and ordained churchman. Actually, however, this part of his treatise failed to deflect the attention of students from the original and main emphasis. And when Darwin and Alfred Russel Wallace<sup>47</sup> were stirred by a reading of the Essay, so that they were separately inspired with the idea of natural selection, they had in mind the Malthusian predications on the power of increase of animated life, the want of room and nourishment, nature's variability, the struggle for survival, and the inexorable operation of the checks. This is the complex of ideas, rather than the theodicy, that Darwin repeatedly turns to in his *Descent of Man*, and that the citing of Malthus still brings to mind.

<sup>44</sup> Malthus, 1st ed., 378. John Stuart Mill, who hinged progress to "the human love of liberty or of improvement," and who like Malthus stressed the tie-up between progress, individuality, and diversity of character and culture, called attention to the disturbing fact that the very improvements civilized man boasts of in his quest for progress, e.g. education, political changes, means of communication, commerce and manufactures, etc., were promoting the trend to conformity. (See Mill, *On Liberty*, Ch. 3.)

<sup>45</sup> Malthus, 1st ed., 372-373.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 384.

<sup>47</sup> *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (Chicago, 1964), XXIII, 302.

The significant rôle of Malthusian thought in respect to evolution has been generally recognized. Thus Karl Pearson called Malthus "the strewer of seed which reached its harvest in the ideas of Charles Darwin and Francis Galton."<sup>48</sup> John R. Commons has said: "He was the first scientific evolutionist. . . ."<sup>49</sup> More convincing and pertinent to our time is the sober judgment of Kenneth E. Boulding that in a sense Malthus "stands at the portal of the whole great movement of evolutionary thought."<sup>50</sup> That the eminent social philosopher furnished some of the building blocks of the XIXth-century theory of evolution is indeed witnessed at many points in his writings. He even suggestively notes how exertions and hardships in the lives of North American Indian women "prevent any but the most robust infants from growing to maturity," and that "Nature . . . seems always to seize upon the weakest part."<sup>51</sup> But there is no long-term genetic follow-up of the phenomenon of survival, in the light of a controlling principle of selection, inheritance, and evolutionary development. His discussion, however, shows him on the way to such mighty concepts as modern evolution and eugenics. In probing the meaning and implications of such terms as "unlimited progress," "organic perfectibility of man," "the capacity for improvement in plants and animals," and "improvement by attention to breed," his thought is centered on important aspects of these theories. Aroused particularly by Condorcet's hope that man would attain an indefinite extension of life, Malthus sets forth the distinction between unlimited progress and progress subject to limits, though undefined.<sup>52</sup> He denies the possibility of the former, taking a position, in this regard, far from the later idea that, in the realm of organic evolution, "the possible changes in form are infinite."<sup>53</sup>

In the light of the dogma of the constancy of the laws of nature, he argues that to subscribe to the idea of unlimited progress will mean the destruction of "the whole train of reasonings from effects to causes," and further that the human mind will no longer have any incitements to inquiry. It is true that he recognizes the possibility of a species of change in the laws of nature, but dismisses it on the

<sup>48</sup> Quoted in Malthus, 1st ed., Notes, XXI.

<sup>49</sup> Commons, *op. cit.*, 246.

<sup>50</sup> K. E. Boulding, Foreword to reprint of the First Essay (Ann Arbor, 1959).

<sup>51</sup> Malthus, 1st ed., 42; 7th ed., II, 181. <sup>52</sup> Malthus, 1st ed., 167; 7th ed., II, 7-9.

<sup>53</sup> A. J. Lotka, *Science and Society* VIII, 2 (Spring 1944), 167. The process, so far as Malthus was concerned, was subject to what J. B. Bury, in a later day, dubbed "the illusion of finality." In this respect science has moved forward, as clearly set forth by H. S. Jennings. "The universe," he wrote, "is not finished; it is still in the making, and what it will produce in the future we cannot predict." See H. S. Jennings, "Originality in the Development of Life," *Yale Review*, New Series, XXII (New Haven, 1932-1933), 570.

ground that "it is impossible to infer it from reasoning," meaning "without any previously observable symptoms or indications of a change."<sup>54</sup>

Commenting further on "the capacity for improvement in plants and animals," he admits that by an attention to breed, "a certain degree of improvement similar to that among animals might take place among men." That, indeed, is the basic idea of Galton's science of eugenics, though with Malthus the problem is the quantity of vice and misery, resulting from population pressure, and not the number of people endowed with good or bad hereditary traits. He concedes that size, strength, complexion, and perhaps even longevity, are transmissible. Here, too, however, he rebels against the notion of "an improvement really unlimited," and seeks to fortify his stand with the added opinion that a method of racial improvement which condemned all the bad specimens to celibacy made it unlikely that it should become general.

His animus against the creed of a limitless progress—in a positive sense, his preoccupation with the idea of a limit to the process of change—takes on the guise of an unshakable conviction, insofar as the affairs of this world are concerned. It manifests itself under two heads: 1. the non-existence, impossibility, or improbability of the change in question, 2. a change that serves as an indicator of a shift from a preexisting order of things to something different or new. It is the latter that leads to the underscoring of the ominous consequences of poverty passing certain limits and the untoward implications of an overaccumulation of capital. It is also in the light of these speculations that he propounds the principle of proportions: "that all the great results in political economy, respecting wealth, depend upon proportions."<sup>55</sup>

### *Other Influences*

In his speculations on improvement and progress, Malthus does not lose sight of man's responsibility as a moral being—his "improvement and moral amelioration." Moral considerations are placed among the primary and most important causes which influence the wealth of nations. His significant innovation in the second edition of the *Essay*, suggesting a desirable method of birth curtailment, is appropriately called moral restraint. Indeed, the fact that men are "moral agents" brings with it the duty of restraining their passions.<sup>56</sup> He had per-

<sup>54</sup> Malthus, 1st ed., 160.

<sup>55</sup> *Principles*, Second ed., *op. cit.*, 376.

<sup>56</sup> Malthus, 7th ed., II, 217. Malthus, however, observes "that we ought to consider chiefly the mass of mankind, and not individual instances," in respect to the



sueded himself that significant advances toward improvement could be made by a broad acceptance of this kind of self-discipline. Here was a path that led to an exit from want and misery. With moral restraint, wages would rise without an accompanying pressure on price, and abject poverty would be removed or confined to a very few. He even expected that under such circumstances war would soon cease to spread.

Characteristically, he ascribes a higher value to meekness, piety, and to kind and amiable affections than to talents or "acuteness of intellect." In consonance with his guiding thought, he holds the opinion that it seems highly probable that moral evil is necessary to the production of moral excellence.<sup>57</sup> But the goal of uniformity, i.e. of universal moral excellence, is unequivocally decried. Impressions, incitements, variety, and effort, stand out as ineluctable factors in the developmental process.

It is worthy of note that Malthus had a sensitive awareness of the rôle of institutions in affecting the lot of man and the course of progress. Though realizing that they are often "the obvious and obtrusive causes of much mischief to society," he did not think that they were to be classed with the "deeper-seated" causes of human affliction. He rejected Godwin's castigation of institutions, deeming the institutions of property and marriage as the two fundamental laws of society. The functioning of prudential and moral restraint even depended on the laws of property and succession. In point of fact, institutions might well be regarded as a species of preventive check, insofar as they proved a means of preventing worse evils. And just as ill-suited institutions could disorder life, so the desirable ones could lessen misfortune.

Always stressed, in respect to progress, is the individual's self-reliance and responsibility for his economic well-being. By and large, this concern for the individual takes cognizance of standard of living, sustained by liberty, security of property, and knowledge. Almost in the manner of contemporary writers, the earnest scholar and preceptor cites examples of higher real wages, resulting not in an increase in the number of marriages and births, but in a marked improvement in the quality of goods consumed and an enhancement of the people's comforts and conveniences. Extension of luxury, in this sense, is desirable. He even enlarges the idea to point out that "It is the diffusion of bearing of rewards and punishments, on human motivation. This exception does not appear in the 7th edition. (See 1st ed., 369.)

<sup>57</sup>Malthus, 1st ed., 375. But this is small comfort to the innocent victims of such evil. If moral evil means that our society suffers from the infraction of moral precepts, would not the Malthusian affirmation signify that the mass murder of civilians in the Second World War might perhaps be viewed as a proper means chosen by Deity to scale up our moral standards?



luxury . . . among the mass of the people, and not an excess of it in a few, that seems to be most advantageous. . . ." <sup>58</sup> Furthermore, a social order, regardful of the ideal of individuality, benefited by better habits of the laboring elements with regard to their numbers, and advanced by early instruction and the further utilization of improved methods of production, offered the prospect of "an increase in the relative proportions of the middle parts." It seemed possible, Malthus surmised, that this kind of change would constitute a basis for "our best grounded expectations of an increase in the happiness of the mass of human society." <sup>59</sup>

### *The Actual vs. the Theoretical*

Nevertheless, with this in the offing, one must not discount the rôle of those problems of life relating to population redundancy, scarcity, the economy, and the characteristics of man, which won for Malthus the reputation of having given the world a philosophy of pessimism. Even as late as the closing period of the 50's of this century, Galbraith used the term "Malthusian horror" <sup>60</sup> to describe the reaction of western Europe and America to the demographer's ideology—perhaps not unwarranted as a response to the checks, to man's irrational proclivities, to the rôle of economic scarcities and irregularities, and to the debasing influence on human destiny of despotism, oppression, and ignorance. These circumstances do not lose their commanding importance, in spite of the solacing thought that "Evil exists in the world, not to create despair, but activity."

The path to progress is not straight, nor is it free of obstacles and frustrations. Inequalities of an economic or social character may become so aggravated as to impede it. Thus, Malthus remarks with regard to the conspicuous property inequality of his day, that ". . . it must certainly be considered as an evil," and that "every institution that promotes it, is essentially bad and impolitic." <sup>61</sup> "Practically it has always been found," he warns, "that the excessive wealth of the few is in no respect equivalent, with regard to effectual demand, to the more moderate wealth of the many." <sup>62</sup> Nor does he countenance an order of existence that disregards the supreme importance of

<sup>58</sup> Malthus, 7th ed., II, 253.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 254, 214.

<sup>60</sup> John Kenneth Galbraith, *op. cit.*, 34.

<sup>61</sup> Malthus, 1st ed., note 287; 344–345. Regarding private property, he writes: ". . . the laws of private property, which are the grand stimulants to production, do themselves so limit it, as always to make the actual produce of the earth fall very considerably short of the power of production." Again: ". . . under a system of private property, cultivation is sometimes checked in a degree, and at a period, not required by the interest of society." Cf. Malthus, *A Summary View of the Principle of Population* (London, 1830), in Introduction to Malthus, ed. D. V. Glass (London, 1953), 147–49.

<sup>62</sup> *Principles*, 2nd ed., *op. cit.*, 375.

“equal laws,” for it is these laws, featured by the participation of the laboring classes in the business of legislation, that eventuate in the improvement of government and in the growth of habits of prudence.

It is unlikely that in our day this interpretation of change and improvement will be greeted with widespread approval. Historic, scientific, economic, and technological trends have moved away from Malthus' preconceptions. Not only has communism taken root in a large part of the world, but socialistic economies have been making headway in various countries. “The newer current of things”<sup>63</sup> is definitely toward a widening of the domain of equality. And begetting uncertainties, in respect to the future, are the multiplying complexities, unloosed by the stress of a rapidly spreading, turbulent, mass life; the speed and impact on world society of technological change, the immense aggregation of scientific knowledge, and the availability for political maneuvering or aggrandizement of modern weapons, charged with appalling destructiveness. Hence the baffling difficulty of knowing where to draw the line between right and wrong, especially in a period notable for modernized concepts of individualism, civil and political rights, and discrimination. Moreover, certain wide-ranging claims to a comprehensive equality on the part of the economically weak or forgotten elements, claims that have recently gained ground in various countries, are breaking down the tradition-bound practices and defenses cherished by the privileged classes of bygone days.

The Malthusian exposition of progress is not without its flaws. A principal cause of confusion is the philosopher's persistent effort to hit two targets at one time, the scientific—indicated by his emphasis on the general laws of nature, and the theistic—by his numerous references to the commanding rôle of Deity in a field relating to life, growth, organic change, and the development of mind. In the spirit of Genesis, he proclaims “that God is the creator of mind as well as of body.”<sup>64</sup> This deep-rooted ambivalence involves his perception in a web of faith-inspired dogma which weakens the force and persuasiveness of his argument.

### *Man's Capacity for Improvement*

Still Malthus shows himself to be a staunch believer in man's capacity for improvement. Without it, in truth, the grand denouement of the growth of intellect could not have occurred. The theory of mind is not only a good deal of a counterpoise to the misery and tribulation, consequent on the efficacy of the law of population, but is indicative of a direction of change that offsets in part, at least, the

<sup>63</sup> Charles Horton Cooley, *Social Organization* (New York, 1909), 167.

<sup>64</sup> Malthus, 1st ed., 355.

regressive factors, for there can be no humanization of existence without mind. He notes the more hopeful prospects in terms of reason, education, civil and political liberty, and even the pragmatic test of judging by consequences.<sup>65</sup> His confidence in society's ability to benefit itself by recourse to reason is surely more far-reaching than what Commons noticed. Unmistakably clear is Malthus' view that indispensable for progress is the individual's own effort to better his condition; to exert himself to avoid, mitigate, or remove evil;<sup>66</sup> to build self-reliance, improve understanding, and endeavor to win a firm economic footing for himself and his dependents.

The Malthusian system, in its totality, offers appreciable latitude for progress, conditioned by such circumstances as human wants, inequality, variety, economic instabilities, and competitive striving for a better life. Its concept of progress underscores the crucial rôle of the difficulties occasioned by the law of population.<sup>67</sup> It contemplates a society free of communistic conformity, it welcomes the benefits of education and desirable institutions, sets store by improved methods of production, and accords with the free spirit of a liberal society. It takes into consideration a numerous array of factors that prescribe the conditions of economic improvement: e.g. wages, employment, physical discovery, invention, and machinery; security of property, foreign trade, investment, division of landed property, extension of the market, and increased stimulation of consumption. Notwithstanding the distresses generated by the tendency to overpopulation, Malthus indicates that the future does not preclude a "gradual and progressive improvement in human society."<sup>68</sup> There is, to be sure, the need for constant effort "to avoid evil, and to pursue good,"<sup>69</sup> the goal of moral purpose, as enjoined by the Psalmist. His credo is well summarized in his pronouncement, contained in a pamphlet published in 1814 on the Corn Laws: "Wealth, population, and power, are after all only valuable, as they tend to improve, increase,

<sup>65</sup> Reason, Malthus asserts, is "that faculty which enables us to calculate consequences" (1st ed., 215-216). Under the head of moral restraint, the mode of birth prevention which he thought suitable for "reasonable beings," he writes: ". . . as natural impulses are abstractly considered good, and only to be distinguished by their consequences, a strict attention to these consequences and the regulation of our conduct conformably to them, must be considered as our principal duty," (7th ed., 157; also 154).

<sup>66</sup> These are terms used by Malthus. What he has in mind, however, is in general the partial or incidental evil. For a critique of this position, see S. M. Levin, *Human Biology, op. cit.*, 223-4.

<sup>67</sup> That society at present sets store by stimulants or incentives, though not necessarily to overcome a natural indolence, is shown by their prevalence in every important field of human activities: e.g. advertising, industrial incentive plans, the profit system, high salaries and bonuses to corporation executives, the patent system, degrees, awards, and honors, by colleges, universities, and governments, etc.

<sup>68</sup> Malthus, 7th ed., II, p. 261.

<sup>69</sup> Malthus, 1st ed., 394; Psalm 34: 15.

and secure the mass of virtue and happiness.”<sup>70</sup>

But the renowned thinker who insisted that his ultimate object was to diminish vice and misery evinced his interest in progress by still another approach, an approach prompted by his preoccupation with the elevation of human life, and motivated by the idea of applying foresight and intelligence to mold opinion and guide change for the attainment of desired goals. Invariably the principle of population loomed up as the needful test for the formulation of a fresh point of view or the trying of a new tack. Armed with this knowledge and impelled by this purpose, Malthus came to grips with a complex of stubborn social and economic problems—human redundancy, poverty, education, war, oversupply of capital, productive and unproductive consumers, effective demand, etc. Resolutely, he sought to bring about new ways of thinking about them and unconventional methods of solving them. The effort was not fruitless. Some forward movement was registered—steps that helped to clear the way and offer the promise of a measure of amelioration of the lot of the masses of people of our world.

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<sup>70</sup> Malthus, *Observations on the Effects of the Corn Laws* (1814).