

THE MALTHUSIAN DOCTRINE.

THE Malthusian doctrine, as originally stated, was to the effect that population tends to increase in geometrical ratio while subsistence only increases in numerical ratio, and therefore that, unless the people are being constantly or periodically thinned out by the sword, the pestilence or a catastrophe of some sort, there must always be chronic starvation among the poorest classes, do what we will, till man learns to restrict deliberately his own increase by "prudential restraint."

The penalty for this excessive but inevitable increase is not prospective but ever present. It is not that starvation *may* come or even *must* come, at some remote, indefinite period; but that it always has been, always is, and always must be at work among us until this "prudential restraint" becomes a recognised duty.

Not perhaps that many will die of literal starvation, but that multitudes will be dying of the diseases, accidents, and exhaustion due to insufficient nourishment before actual starvation can overtake them, and also that considerable numbers would die of actual starvation but for charitable relief.

Inventions and discoveries, cheapening production, are not lost sight of, but as population promptly and proportionately expands, no rise of wages results. The law remains as relentless as ever, only there are now a rather greater number within its grip.

The words, "geometrical" and "arithmetical" are not to be taken literally, but only as forcibly expressing the much

stronger tendency of population than of subsistence to increase. But even so we find here several disputable statements grouped together.

- (a) That the tendency of population is to increase so fast that the rate may pretty fairly be termed geometrical.
- (b) That the tendency of subsistence to increase is (not accidentally or temporarily, but as a law) at a rate so uniform and slow, that it may be termed arithmetical.
- (c) That the proper, in fact the only, remedy is "prudential restraint."

I. Take first the "geometrical" increase of population. The expression was no doubt suggested by the fact that there is a natural tendency in both sexes to pair; and that if every male and female grew up, paired and had children, the rate of increase would be literally geometrical, and, within measurable distance of time, the earth would not afford standing room, much less subsistence for them all.

But all this rests on an "if."

We find in practice that there are natural checks, quite independent of subsistence, that keep this increase within reasonable bounds.

1. More than half who are born die from the ordinary accidents and ailments of life before reaching a marriageable age.

2. Of those who reach that age, many, for various reasons that have nothing to do with want of subsistence, do not marry.

3. Again, of those who do marry—

A good many are absolutely barren;

Many more have only one child, or two;

Others have sickly children who die.

If every individual in existence found his mate, every pair would require to have two children merely to take their place

and so keep up the population. But as half (at least) die before reaching a marriageable age, therefore it would be necessary for every couple that did survive to pair and have four children to each pair merely to keep up the population.

When we strike off from these survivors all who cannot find mates, or won't seek mates, or who are barren, we shall find that, merely to keep up the population without any increase at all, it will be necessary that every couple marrying and having children should have about six. So that if we should look round at the average number of children that are born to a family, we should find that the rate of increase is not likely to be anything startling; and when we go farther and question statistics, we find that in countries like Australia, where there is work for all who choose to work and at what is recognised as "high wages," where subsistence is cheap, land fit for cultivation but uncultivated in abundance, and where there are no catastrophic checks, the actual rate of increase is only about 2 per cent. per annum, thus doubling about every 35 years. We may call this, then, the normal rate of increase of population. It is far from being a "geometrical" rate.

It is true that with extending knowledge, better sanitation and improved morals, many of the fore-mentioned ordinary checks on increase are being weakened in their effect; still they are pretty potent yet, and as they lose force another counteracting tendency comes into play.

It is found that as subsistence becomes more abundant and of better quality, and as life becomes more regular and artificial, fertility diminishes.

We find it so among the lower animals, and we find it so in man. Animals in poor condition breed more freely than those that are fat, and wild animals when domesticated have fewer offspring, and often cease altogether to breed.

The Western Irish or Highland woman, insufficiently nourished, and leading a half-wild, irregular life, commonly

has a large family, though this is no doubt partly due to early marriage; while among the upper classes, who are well fed and whose lives are regular and artificial, large families are by no means the general rule.

It appears, moreover, that as brain power is cultivated and as life becomes more artificial reproductive power diminishes, so that, with a rising standard of comfort, a more regulated life and higher intellectual tastes, a sort of Law of Diminishing Return comes in, and the increase of population slackens from causes having little or nothing to do with "prudential restraint."

All this, however, it may be said, is mere theory. Well it is a theory that has a great many facts at the back of it; not quite sufficient perhaps for demonstration, but quite enough to arrest attention and demand further enquiry. We do not wish to press it for more than it is worth.

II. "Subsistence increases only in numerical ratio." This is altogether an incorrect and misleading statement. Man's existence on the earth may be divided into three stages.

1. The primitive or hunter state, in which he does not *produce* subsistence (in any creative sense) at all, but only slays the animals that are already in existence, as the lions and tigers do, or gathers the natural fruits of the earth, as the birds and monkeys do. In this stage, there being no real production, subsistence does not increase at all—in *any* ratio.

2. What may be called the intermediate stage, in which man does not merely kill the lower animals, but domesticates them (or some of them), burning off the coarse herbage or otherwise improving and increasing the pasture and defending them from wild beasts; and not only gathers the fruits of the earth, but cultivates the soil and grows them, and so does really begin to produce—*i.e.*, create and increase subsistence. But in doing this he performs only such productive acts as are obvious and simple, using the rudest tools, and goes on from generation to

generation without any perceptible improvement in his methods. The Egyptian of to-day, for instance, cultivates his land in the same way and with almost exactly the same implements as he did in the days of the Pharaohs. Here there is a sort of rate of increase, and you may call it "numerical" if you like. It proceeds entirely by extension of area, not by improvement of method.

3. But there comes a time, when man begins to invent and to improve; when he begins systematically to observe and to reflect, to conceive new ideas and carry them out, investigating the laws of nature, and perfecting his instruments and his social and industrial organisation. From the moment that he once fairly enters this progressive stage his power of producing subsistence increases rapidly; indeed, so long as there is land enough, the rate of increase of production (whether of subsistence or other things) may much more fairly be described as "geometrical" than his rate of increase in population. Anyway it is a continually accelerating increase. And it might be made vastly greater than it is but for the obstruction of privileged monopoly. Take Australia where the rate of population increase is 2%, and where but a mere fraction of the land is cultivated, and that fraction in the rudest and roughest manner. If the workers were allowed to use the land as fast as it was wanted, and if the method of culture were improved, it could easily maintain for a long time a population whose increase was really geometrical (which as we have seen it never is). As it is, it exports great quantities of food; and that it does not produce very much more, is due not to any inability of nature to produce much more, but mainly to the fact that under existing conditions of society, produce is raised not to supply human wants, but to yield a profit to the landholder; and as the rich man does not require more subsistence than the poor man, and the poor man can't buy all that he requires, the "effective demand" and consequently the price is

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so low as to check further production. Nature (or human labour, whichever way you choose to put it) could at once augment the supply indefinitely if required.

When in any even moderately civilised and progressive country there are people starving, it is never the food that is lacking, but the money to buy it.

The whole doctrine in question rests on the assumption that as population increases there is an increasing difficulty in procuring subsistence.

This assumption we dispute, and we propose to show that it is based on a false inference from the Law of Diminishing Return and a false explanation of the Resort to Inferior Lands.

DIMINISHING RETURN V. DIMINISHING AREA.

But first, Diminishing Return is one thing, Diminishing Area is another, and we must not mix the two together.

Every one sees that if population is to go on increasing, no matter at what rate, a time must come when the world itself would not afford standing-room, much less subsistence. But we need not concern ourselves about that. So long as any country, provided with all the resources of civilisation and peopled by an energetic race, has an appreciable quantity of land of any sort into which a spade can be put, but which yet is uncultivated, it is concerned with the Law of Diminishing Return only, and not with the Law of Diminishing Area. Over and over again it has been shown that if you do but secure to the occupier undisturbed possession and the fruit of his labour, he will not only bring a full and sufficient subsistence from the most barren soil, but convert it into a fruitful garden and cover it with improvements. A time may