

Henry George and Malthusianism

By Glenn E. Hoover

For a number of years I have been one of the few professional economists who have publicly advocated the social appropriation of the economic rent of land. I mention this only that the reader may know that what I say in criticism of *The Freeman* or of Henry George is said by one who is a friend of both. I seek only to correct what seem to me to be some of the tactical errors in our movement. It is so difficult to gain adherents to our program that we ought not to alienate possible friends by taking a position on collateral issues which are questionable or positively erroneous. Nor should we ever give the impression that we believed Henry George was infallible.

For instance, the editorial in the July issue of *The Freeman*, entitled "Sailing the Malthusian Sea," attacks the alleged error in the Malthusian analysis. That analysis can best be summarized in the words of Mr. Malthus himself as found at the end of Chapter 2, of the 6th edition of his "Essay On Population." He there said:

- "1. Population is necessarily limited by the means of subsistence.
- "2. Population invariably increases where the means of subsistence increase, unless prevented by some very powerful and obvious checks.
- "3. These checks, and the checks which repress the superior power of population, and keep its effects on a level with the means of subsistence, are all resolvable into moral restraint, vice and misery."

I believe the only comment needed to make that statement clear to the modern reader is that Malthus believed that practices now known as "birth control" were forms of "vice."

The *Freeman* editorial, following Henry George, proceeded to combat the Malthusian "error." Said the editor: "That error is that there are more people in the world than the

earth can support." I shall be charitable enough to assume that was a slip of the typewriter. Neither Malthus, nor any man of common sense, ever said that there were more people in the world than it could support for that would be a contradiction in terms. Such an excess could exist only for the length of time it would take for them to starve and the balance would then be restored. Malthus, in the first principle given above, specifically denied that the population would ever exceed subsistence, by saying that population was "necessarily limited" by it.

It must have been another slip that prompted the writer to say: "Or, as that befuddled English cleric, Mr. Malthus, put it, population increases faster than the means of subsistence." Mr. Malthus did not say this, but rather said that man, like every known form of animal and vegetable life, had a capacity for, and a tendency to, increase beyond the limits of its subsistence.

It should be noted at the outset that this purports to be the statement of a biological fact, and economists, as such, Henry George included, have no special qualifications to determine its truth or falsity. With respect to the biological capacity to increase, I think it is now abundantly proved that groups of men have increased at a rate that permitted them to double their numbers every twenty-five years, and that too under circumstances not the most favorable. We had best admit the existence of a capacity for increase that has been historically demonstrated.

With respect to the "tendency" to increase, that too is a biological fact which cannot be disproved, as George attempted, by showing that population in the past had been held in

check by the various means which Malthus recognized. By "tendency" to increase is meant the "drive," the "biological urge," or, as Malthus put it, "the passion between the sexes," which, unchecked, leads to reproduction. George, I think conceded that this tendency, unchecked, might under some circumstances result in a population growth so rapid, that it would be limited only by the means of subsistence. After analyzing the evidence introduced by Malthus, George said:

"The facts cited to show this simply show that where, owing to the sparseness of population, as in new countries, or where, owing to the unequal distribution of wealth, as among the poorer classes in old countries, human life is occupied with the physical necessities of existence, the tendency to reproduce is at a rate which would, were it to go unchecked, some time exceed subsistence." (Progress and Poverty, Book II, Chap. 2)

But George apparently believed with Herbert Spencer, that with an improvement in the standard of living and the exercise of our intellect, the "passion between the sexes" would subside and in part give way to what George called "the passion of passions, the hope of hopes—the desire that he, even he, may somehow aid in making life better and brighter, in destroying want and sin, sorrow and shame." (Progress and Poverty, Book II, Chap. 3)

George's views with respect to the persistence of the sexual drive in *homo sapiens*, are, I think, an excursion into the field of biology which adds little to his reputation. It is a kind of writing that will amuse biologists and medical doctors, but it is not the stuff on which solid economic theories are built, and his theories are not at all necessary to the program he advocated.

It should have been clear to George that the Law of Diminishing Returns (which George showed was applicable to all land and was not



limited to agriculture), was but an explanation of the way in which increasing numbers would, after reaching a certain point, press on the means of subsistence by continually lowering the value product of the marginal worker. While in general George accepted The Law of Diminishing Returns and the Ricardian Law of Rent which is inextricably bound up with it, at other times he thought that the only increase of population which might be prejudicial to our interests was an increase "beyond the possibility of finding elbow room." (Progress and Poverty, Book II, Chap. 3) But for that lim-

itation he thought "that the earth could maintain a thousand billions of people as easily as a thousand millions" and that this was true because "matter is eternal and force must forever continue to act." For those who can follow that logic I have, for the moment, only a feeling of pity. For anyone who convinces me of its logical soundness, I shall have an unlimited admiration.

In conclusion I should like to question the practice of ridiculing economists and college professors in general. The editorial in question refers to the economic error which has persisted, "aided and abetted by the

pundits who purvey knowledge," and this is but an instance of frequent lapses of this kind. There is always a temptation to tickle the populace with cracks of this sort, but they should be resisted by the advocates of any reform which appeals to reason. We should leave such tactics to the Huey Longs, the Ham & Egg-ers, and all those groups which represent a Retreat From Reason, and are really anti-intellectual in character. The Freeman, in any event should refrain, when many of its best articles are written by a clear headed, public-spirited professor of economics, Dr. Harry Gunnison Brown.