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UNDERSTANDING THE RATIONALE BEHIND THE MALTHUSIAN
THEORY OF POPULATION

by

Gunnar Heinsohn and Otto Steiger

1. People who do not need heirs in order to secure their existence can remain childless, provided they have access to methods of birth control. The secret of modern economies, though - mercantilism, capitalism, and real existing socialism - lies precisely in the ability to provide the necessary labour power by means of procreation within the family, in spite of the fact that these economies are no longer organized on the basis of family unit. This ability proves to be the result of an enforced, 'police'-state production of human beings - always combined with the propagation of the belief in a 'natural desire for children' by the Christian Churches. Its success is attributable to the elimination of the knowledge of birth-control techniques following the mass liquidation of its practitioners, the systematic extermination of the "witches = midwives" in Europe from

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the mid-15th century to the end of the 17th century.¹⁾

Thomas Robert Malthus was one of the few population theorists who was aware that the 'natural desire to have children' can be manipulated by man's reason, i.e. that this desire in reality is not natural at all. When formulating his Principle of Population, Malthus, however, denounced the use of this reason and applied instead man's 'natural desire for children' for a particular calculation of population policy, which - as far as we know - has not been recognized sufficiently by interpreters of his population theory: in the following, this paper will demonstrate that Malthus' fear that men would not procreate sufficiently was at least as large as his well-known concern about 'surplus population'.

2. In 1798, Malthus was the first of the classical economists who consciously paid attention to the rapid growth of population in England after 1740 and more especially after the start of industrialization in 1781. In his analysis, Malthus decisively opposed mercantilistic policies, i.e. those aimed at increasing the population:²⁾

Politicians, observing that states which were powerful and prosperous were almost invariably populous, have mistaken an effect for a cause, and have concluded that their population was the cause of their prosperity instead of their prosperity being the cause of their population. 3)

This critic is based on a special explanation of the reproduction of human beings which can be regarded as the core of his population theory and which runs as follows:

Throughout the animal and vegetable kingdoms Nature has scattered the seeds of life abroad with the most profuse and liberal hand, but has been comparatively sparing in the room and the nourishment necessary to rear them. The germs of existence contained in the earth, if they could freely develop themselves, would fill millions of worlds in the course of a few thousand years. Necessity, that imperious, all-pervading law of nature, restrains them within the prescribed bounds. The race of plants and the race of animals shrink under this great restrictive law; and man cannot by any efforts of reason escape from it.

In plants and irrational animals, the view of the subject is simple. They are all impelled by a powerful instinct to the increase of their species, and this instinct is interrupted by no doubts about providing for their offspring. Wherever, therefore, there is liberty, the power of increase is exerted, and the superabundant effects are repressed afterwards by want of room and nourishment.

The effects of this check on man are more complicated. Impelled to the

increase of his species by an equally powerful instinct, reason interrupts his career, and asks him whether he may not bring beings into the world for whom he cannot provide the means of support. If he attend to this natural suggestion, the restriction too frequently produce vice. If he hear it not, the human race will be constantly endeavouring to increase beyond the means of subsistence. But as, by that law of our nature which makes food necessary to the life of man, population can never actually increase beyond the lowest nourishment capable of supporting it, a strong check on population, from the difficulty of acquiring food, must be constantly in operation. This difficulty must fall somewhere, and must necessarily be severely felt in some other of the various forms of misery, or the fear of misery, by a large portion of mankind. 4)

At this point it is interesting to note that Malthus made it absolutely clear that if reason exists at all in man's procreation, then 'surplus population', i.e. the "various forms of misery" when population is increasing up to the "lowest nourishment capable of supporting it", should not occur. At the same time, however, he denounced the use of this reason, because it "too frequently produces vice". As will be shown below, Malthus' reasoning in this point is only seemingly contradictory: It conceals, namely, a conscious calculation of population policy.

It goes, therefore, without saying that Malthus' "principle of population" embodied in his above cited explanation of human procreation is only valid in the case of "perfect freedom",⁵⁾ i.e. a case of complete lack of reason where men's "powerful instinct" is not interrupted by "doubts about providing for their offspring". In this case, Malthus assumed population would increase in a geometrical ratio, whilst, on the other hand, food supplies would, in favourable circumstances, only increase in an arithmetical ratio.⁶⁾ The result would be that the minimum means of subsistence would be constantly exceeded and that the size of population would be constrained by this point. Malthus was not mainly concerned with painting a gloomy picture of an absolute surplus population, as he only to well realized:

that the period when the number of men surpasses their means of easy subsistence has long since arrived, and that this necessary oscillation, this constantly subsisting cause of periodical misery, has existed in most countries ever since we have had any histories of mankind, and continues to exist at the present moment. 7)

3. In his analysis of this misery of mankind, Malthus was interested in the

ratio of the size of population to the subsistence minimum in order to determine the wealth of a nation:

Corn countries are more populous than pasture countries, and rice countries more populous than corn countries. But their happiness does not depend either upon their being thinly or fully inhabited, upon their poverty or their riches, their youth or their age, but on the proportion which the population and the food bear to each other. 8)

In this statement, Malthus was assuming a wage which lies above the subsistence minimum (= supply of food) and thus favouring marriage, necessarily resulting in procreation. According to Malthus, thus, the number of workers is increased and their average wage drops; however, it still remains above the minimum and stabilizes their traditional reproduction behaviour. The number of workers is thus further increased, and the wage falls below the minimum. In the case that state support of the poor now comes into being, public welfare has to suffer, although it is precisely this what should be maintained. The support of the poor, Malthus argued, raises the income of the unemployed or unpaid to the minimum and once again makes the old rate of reproduction possible: the poor - taking state guarantee of a minimum wage into consideration - increase as demonstrated. State funds providing for the minimum wage are quickly used up resulting in general misery and finally large-scale death.

In order to shut off this source of poverty, this production of unemployed through an excessive increase in the working population, the state, Malthus proposed, should dispense with its guarantee and let the individual worker personally be responsible for the risk of his wage falling below the living wage. This would influence him to change his attitude to procreation. Workers would thus contribute to a reduction in the supply of labour and hence an increase in wages above the minimum so that public welfare is once more safeguarded :

The object of those who really wish to better the condition of the lower classes of society must be to raise the relative proportion between the price of labour and the price of provisions, so as to enable the labourer to command a larger share of the necessaries and comforts of life. We have hitherto principally attempted to attain this end by encouraging the married poor, and consequently increasing the number of labourers, and overstocking the market with a commodity which we still say that we wish to be dear. It would seem to have required no great spirit of divination to foretell the certain failure of such a plan of proceeding. 9)

Malthus did not, however, want to combat the undamped system of unemployment only by means of the cutting off of the traditional support of the poor - one of the mercantilistic measures to eliminate the results of the 'police' - state production of human beings (cf. above, esp. footnote 3). This cutting off should rather be based on an elucidation, appropriate (at least partially) to the conditions of capitalism. The aim of this enlightenment being to explain for the wage labourer the relationship between level of wages and possible family size :

He may perhaps wish that he had not married, because he now feels the inconveniences of it; but it never enters into his head that he can have done anything wrong. He has always been told that to raise up subjects for his king and country is a very meritorious act. He has done this and yet is suffering for it; and it cannot but strike him as most extremely unjust and cruel in his king and country to allow him thus to suffer in return for giving them what they are continually declaring that they particularly want.

Till these erroneous ideas have been corrected, and the language of nature and reason has been generally heard on the subject of population, instead of the language of error and prejudice, it cannot be said that any fair experiment has been made with the understanding of the common people; and we cannot justly accuse them of improvidence and want of industry, till they act as they do now, after it has been brought home to their comprehensions, that they are themselves the cause of their own poverty; that the means of redress are in their own hands, and in the hands of no other persons whatever; that the society in which they live and the government which presides over it, are without any direct power in this respect; and that however ardently they may desire to relieve them, and whatever attempts they may make to do so, they are really and truly unable to execute what they benevolently wish, but unjustly promise that when the wages will not maintain a family, it is an incontrovertible sign that their king and country do not want more subjects, or at least that they cannot support them; that, if they marry in this case, so far from fulfilling a duty to society, they are throwing a useless burden on it, at the same time that they are plunging themselves into distress. 10)

4. Up to now, it has become clear that Malthus' reasoning like that of many population theorists before and after him, was based on the equation 'sexuality = marriage = procreation' or 'childlessness = moral restraint' as well as 'few children = relative moral restraint'. However, this should in no way be interpreted as if this clergyman was absolutely blindly biased by Christian morals. His equation was instead based - as indicated above - on calculation. He knew that absence of marriage and childlessness were not a 'bad' thing for the individual wage labourer. When Malthus blamed the King,

who was directed by mercantilistic policies, then this was for the encouragement of a too high number of children, not, however, for the state encouragement of carrying out of procreation in general. The fact that Malthus supported a form of 'police'-state production of human beings and in doing so at the same time an enforced establishment of Christian morals, or the violent repulse of their opponents who wanted to separate sexuality and reproduction, was made absolutely clear by him:

Indeed I should always reprobate any artificial and unnatural modes of checking population, both on account of their immorality and their tendency to remove a necessary stimulus to industry. If it were possible for each married couple to limit by a wish the number of their children, there is certainly reason to fear that the indolence of the human race would be greatly increased, and that neither the population of individual countries nor of the whole earth would ever reach its natural and proper extent. But the restraints which I have recommended are quite of a different character. They are not only pointed out by reason and sanctioned by religion, but tend in the most marked manner to stimulate industry. It is not easy to conceive a more powerful encouragement to exertion and good conduct than the looking forward to marriage as a state peculiarly desirable: but only to be enjoyed in comfort by the acquisition of habits of industry, economy, and prudence. And it is in this light that I have always wished to place it. 11)

It is not only this calculating approach to religion which discloses how Malthus was completely aware that wage labourers do not need children and also that he knew of effective methods of contraception. In the first edition of his Principles of Population in 1798, which was published anonymously out of fear of prosecution,¹²⁾ Malthus already opposed the Marquis de Condorcet (1743-1794). In his Esquisse d'un tableau historique du progrès de l'esprit humain (1794), Condorcet had discussed the "natural law of procreation" and asked:

Is this natural law imposed on man? During intercourse necessary for the continuation of the species, he alone out of all other animals was able to separate carnal pleasure from reproduction - for other species the former is the involuntary cause of the latter. Not only do inducements of a distant, permanent interest give man the strength to resist this temptation, but rather he can also submit to it and prevent its results. In this way, man's will, even though it is of a great sacrifice to him, may establish - in a manner which in a better way takes care of the species - that equilibrium which in the case of other species can outlast only by violent shocks and barbarous actions. 13)

Condorcet was an exemption amongst the political philosophers of his time in openly doubting the equation 'sexuality = reproduction', without, however,

questioning why this equation historically came about. As Condorcet also discussed methods of contraception, Malthus inveighed against him:

Having observed, that the ridiculous prejudices of superstition would by that time have ceased to throw over morals a corrupt and degrading austerity, he alludes, either to a promiscuous concubinage, which would prevent breeding, or to something else as unnatural. To remove the difficulty in this way will, surely, in the opinion of most men, be to destroy that virtue and purity of manners, which the advocates of equality, and of the perfectibility of man, profess to be the end and object of their views. 14)

Malthus' analysis was taken up by Francis Place (1771-1834) in 1822 in a treatise with the title Illustrations and Proofs of the Principle of Population. Contrary to Malthus, however, Place did not take the attack on Condorcet into consideration; he became instead the first person in England systematically providing instruction of contraception: "It is time, however, that those who really understand the cause of a redundant, unhappy, miserable and considerably vicious population, and the means of preventing the redundancy, should clearly, freely, openly, and fearlessly point out the means".¹⁵⁾ (Here we would like to add that Place was not a member of the upper class, nor a university don, but rather the son of a large family whose father was a baker). Malthus remained unimpressed by this first 'neo-Malthusian'. In his summing up of the debate on population in 1830 in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* he repeated his arguments against contraception:

All other checks (despite moral restraint), whether of the preventive or the positive kind, though they may greatly vary in degree, resolve themselves into some form of vice or misery.

The remaining checks of the preventive kind are: the sort of intercourse which renders some of the women of large towns unprolific; a general corruption of morals with regard to the sex, which has a similar effect; unnatural passions and improper arts to prevent the consequences of irregular connections. These evidently come under the head of vice.

The positive checks to population include all the causes, which tend in any way prematurely to shorten the duration of human life. 16)

5. Malthus applied Christian morals not merely for a calculation of population policy, but also as an educational calculation. Even though we recognize today that both calculations were a failure, we would still like to document how Malthus described over 150 years ago the sublimation of sexuality to parental affection through the prohibition of sex outside marriage and the recommendation of a relative moral restraint in marriage:

It is a very great mistake to suppose that the passion between the sexes only operates and influences human conduct, when the immediate gratification of it is in the contemplation. The formation and steady pursuit of some particular plan of life has been justly considered as one of the most permanent sources of happiness; but I am inclined to believe that there are not many plans formed which are not connected in a considerable degree with the prospect of the gratification of this passion, and with the support of children arising from it. The evening meal, the warm house, and the comfortable fireside would lose half their interest if we were to exclude the idea of some object of affection with whom they were to be shared (...).

In European countries, where, though the women are not secluded, yet manners have imposed considerable constraints on this gratification, the passion not only rise in force, but in the universality and beneficial tendency of its effects; and has often the greatest influence in the formation and improvement of the character, where it is the least gratified.

Considering then the passion between the sexes in all its bearings and relations, and including the endearing engagement of parent and child, resulting from it, few will be disposed to deny that it is one of the principal ingredients of human happiness. 17)

Here we come across what Hajnal has characterized as the "European Marriage pattern",¹⁸⁾ the producing of a type of womanhood and the desire for a family culminating in the belief in a 'natural desire for children', which had not existed at any other time and anywhere else. The formation of this pattern was instead the outcome of an historical process, which also was characteristic and unique for Christian Europe of modern times and which we have discussed elsewhere:¹⁹⁾ the large-scale persecution and liquidation of the "witches=midwives" for hundreds of years and still existing in a minor scale in remote parts of Europe when the first edition of Malthus' Principle of Population was published. Malthus never explained, not even asked how the "European marriage pattern" historically came about. Contrary to many population theorists of his time and even today, however, his demographic analysis gives clear evidence of the fact that he did not regard this pattern as 'natural'.

Summary

Thomas Robert Malthus was one of the few demographers who was aware of the fact that the 'natural desire to have children' can be manipulated by man's reason, i.e. that this desire in reality is not natural at all. When formulating his "principle of population", Malthus, however, denounced the use of man's reason and applied instead their 'natural desire for children' for a particular calculation of population policy, which has not be recognized

sufficiently by interpreters of his population theory. Our paper demonstrates that Malthus' fear that men would not procreate sufficiently was at least as large as his well-known fear of the misery of increasing population and that he, therefore, had to propagate moral restraint, not contraception as check to population.

Notes

- 1) For a detailed discussion of this historical process, cf. our Chapter D, in: Menschenproduktion...; cf. also G.Heinsohn, and O.Steiger, "The large-scale murder for the consecration of life: Jean Bodin, the 'universal genius of modern times' or: the true master thinker - Nine theses on population theory", Fourth European Population Seminar, Athens, October 2-5, 1979, and the original German version of this paper, "Jean Bodin, das 'Universalgenie der Neuzeit' oder: der wahre Meisterdenker. Neun bevölkerungstheoretische Thesen", European Demographic Information Bulletin, Vol. X, 3, 1979, 97-108; cf. further G.Heinsohn, and O.Steiger, "Why historical demography has failed to explain the population developments of modern times", Diskussionsbeiträge zur politischen Oekonomie, No. 31, University of Bremen, March 1980, par. 3-10.
- 2) In the first edition of his Principle on Population, 1798, there can also be found a critic of A. Smith's assertion of a balanced relationship between welfare and population; cf. Th.R. Malthus, An Essay on the Principle of Population as it affects the Future Improvement of Society, 1798, ed. by A. Flew, Penguin Books, 1970, Chapter 16, p. 183 ff.
- 3) Cf. Th.R. Malthus, An Essay on the Principle of Population or a View of its Past and Present Effects on Human Happiness, 1803, 2nd ed. (1826, 6th ed.) London, 1872, p. 381.
- 4) Cf. Malthus op.cit. (1826⁶), p. 2, our underlinings. In the first edition, Malthus still used a true biological explanation: I think I may fairly make two postulata. 1. that food is necessary to the existence of man. 2ndly, that the passion between the sexes is necessary and will remain nearly in its present state. These two laws, ever since we have had any knowledge of mankind, appear to have been fixed laws of our nature; Malthus, op.cit., 1798, p. 70.
- 5) Malthus, op.cit., 1826⁶, p. 3; 6) *ibid.*, p. 5 ff; 7) *ibid.*, p. 266;
- 9) *ibid.*, p. 406; 10) *ibid.*, p. 405 underlined by the authors;
- 11) *ibid.*, p. 512, underlinings by the authors.
- 12) On the challenge of the Church by Malthus, cf. D. Levy, 'Some normative aspects of the Malthusian controversy', in: History of Political Economy, Vol. 10, p. 263.
- 13) Quoted by J.L. Flandrin, Familles - paranté, maison, sexualité dans l'ancienne société, (1976); citation from the German translation, Familien, Frankfurt a.M., 1978, p. 263.
- 14) Cf. Malthus, op.cit., (1798), p. 124, underlined by the authors.
- 15) Cf. F. Place, Illustrations and proofs of the Principle of Population, 1822, ed. by N.E. Himes, London, 1930, p. 173 ff.
- 16) Cf. Th.R. Malthus, "A summary View of the Principle of Population", 1830, in: Malthus, op.cit. (1798), p. 250, authors' underlinings.

- 17) Cf. Malthus, *op.cit.* (1826⁶) p.392 f., authors' underlinings.
18) Cf. J.Hajnal, 'European Marriage Patterns and Perspective', in: D.V.Glass and D.E.C.Eversley (eds), Population in History, London, 1965, p.101 ff.
19) Cf. above, footnote(2).

A STATIONARY OR A DECLINING POPULATION?

by

Erland Hofsten

There have been periods in the past, when a large population was considered essential for a country. In extreme form such arguments were popular during the mercantilist period in the eighteenth century. On later occasions related arguments have rather referred to the growth than to the size of the population. This was the case when J.M.Keynes and Alvin Hansen during the 1930's gave the slow population growth in Europe and the United States the main blame for the low investment rate and consequently also for the world economic depression.

Today most people have come to the conclusion that continued population growth must be avoided. The arguments used may be of an economic character, but they may also refer to ecology, to limited material resources, to overcrowding etc.

In particular arguments of this kind are forwarded with reference to the developing countries. However, also with regard to industrialised countries it is often maintained that for ecological reasons population growth should come to a stop. The Keynes-Hansen arguments are no more accepted.

In the developing countries population growth is still rapid and will continue to be so for at least the next decades. In Europe, on the other hand, the long period of population growth now seems to be drawing towards its close. In country after country it looks as if population growth is going to be replaced by a future characterized by a stationary or a declining population. Against the background outlined above, this is a development which by many is considered satisfactory.

However, it would seem that before such a conclusion is drawn, a clear distinction must be made between a stationary and a declining population. This is not always done.