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978-0-521-41954-3 - T. R. Malthus: An Essay on the Principle of Population

Donald Winch

Excerpt

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AN ESSAY
ON THE
PRINCIPLE OF POPULATION;
OR,
A VIEW OF ITS PAST AND PRESENT EFFECTS
ON
HUMAN HAPPINESS;
WITH AN INQUIRY INTO OUR PROSPECTS RESPECTING THE FUTURE
REMOVAL OR MITIGATION OF THE EVILS WHICH IT OCCASIONS.
A NEW EDITION, VERY MUCH ENLARGED.

By T. R. MALTHUS, A.M.
FELLOW OF JESUS COLLEGE, CAMBRIDGE.

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Preface

The Essay on the Principle of Population, which I published in 1798, was suggested, as is expressed in the preface, by a paper in Mr. Godwin's *Inquirer*. It was written on the spur of the occasion, and from the few materials which were within my reach in a country situation.¹ The only authors from whose writings I had deduced the principle, which formed the main argument of the essay, were Hume, Wallace, Dr. Adam Smith, and Dr. Price; and my object was to apply it to try the truth of those speculations on the perfectibility of man and society, which at that time excited a considerable portion of the public attention.

In the course of the discussion, I was naturally led into some examination of the effects of this principle on the existing state of society. It appeared to account for much of that poverty and misery observable among the lower classes of people in every nation, and for those reiterated failures in the efforts of the higher classes to relieve them. The more I considered the subject in this point of view, the more importance it seemed to acquire; and this consideration, joined to the degree of public attention which the essay excited, determined me to turn my leisure reading towards an historical examination of the effects of the principle of population on the past and present state of society; that, by illustrating the subject more generally, and drawing those inferences from it, in application to the actual state of things which experience seemed to warrant, I might give it a more practical and permanent interest.

In the course of this inquiry I found that much more had been done

¹ [This PREFACE of 1803 was reprinted in all subsequent editions, but from 1806 onwards the word *spur* was replaced by 'impulse', and Malthus wrote of ... the few materials which were then within my reach ...

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than I had been aware of, when I first published the essay. The poverty and misery arising from a too rapid increase of population had been distinctly seen, and the most violent remedies proposed, so long ago as the times of Plato and Aristotle. And of late years the subject had been treated in such a manner by some of the French Economists, occasionally by Montesquieu, and, among our own writers, by Dr. Franklin, Sir James Steuart, Mr. Arthur Young, and Mr. Townsend, as to create a natural surprise that it had not excited more of the public attention.

Much, however, remained yet to be done. Independently of the comparison between the increase of population and food, which had not perhaps been stated with sufficient force and precision, some of the most curious and interesting parts of the subject had been either wholly omitted or treated very slightly. Though it had been stated distinctly, that population must always be kept down to the level of the means of subsistence; yet few inquiries had been made into the various modes by which this level is effected; and the principle had never been sufficiently pursued to its consequences, and those practical inferences drawn from it, which a strict examination of its effects on society appears to suggest.

These are therefore the points which I have treated most in detail in the following essay. In its present shape it may be considered as a new work, and I should probably have published it as such, omitting the few parts of the former which I have retained, but that I wished it to form a whole of itself, and not to need a continual reference to the other. On this account, I trust that no apology is necessary to the purchasers of the first edition. ²● I should hope that there are some parts of it, not reprinted in this, which may still have their use; as they were rejected, not because I thought them all of less value than what has been inserted, but because they did not suit the different plan of treating the subject which I had adopted. ●²

To those who either understood the subject before, or saw it distinctly on the perusal of the first edition, I am fearful that I shall appear to have treated some parts of it too much in detail, and to have been guilty of unnecessary repetitions. These faults have arisen partly from want of skill, and partly from intention. In drawing similar inferences from the state of society in a number of different countries, I found it very difficult to avoid some repetitions; and in those parts of the inquiry which led to conclusions different from our usual habits of thinking, it

² [This sentence was omitted in 1806 and all subsequent editions.]

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appeared to me that, with the slightest hope of producing conviction, it was necessary to present them to the reader's mind at different times and on different occasions. I was willing to sacrifice all pretensions to merit of composition to the chance of making an impression on a larger class of readers.

The main principle advanced is so incontrovertible that, if I had confined myself merely to general views, I could have entrenched myself in an impregnable fortress; and the work, in this form, would probably have had a much more masterly air. But such general views, though they may advance the cause of abstract truth, rarely tend to promote any practical good; and I thought that I should not do justice to the subject, and bring it fairly under discussion, if I refused to consider any of the consequences which appeared necessarily to flow from it, whatever these consequences might be. By pursuing this plan, however, I am aware that I have opened a door to many objections and, probably, to much severity of criticism: but I console myself with the reflection that even the errors into which I may have fallen, by affording a handle to argument, and an additional excitement to examination, may be subservient to the important end, of bringing a subject so nearly connected with the happiness of society into more general notice.

Throughout the whole of the present work, I have so far differed in principle from the former, as to suppose another check to population possible, which does not strictly come under the head either of vice or misery;³ and, in the latter part, I have endeavoured to soften some of the harshest conclusions of the first essay. In doing this, I hope that I have not violated the principles of just reasoning, nor expressed any opinion respecting the probable improvement of society in which I am not borne out by the experience of the past. To those who shall still think that any check to population whatever would be worse than the evils which it would relieve, the conclusions of the former essay will remain in full force; and if we adopt this opinion, we shall be compelled to acknowledge that the poverty and misery which prevail among the lower classes of society are absolutely irremediable.

I have taken as much pains as I could to avoid any errors in the facts and calculations which have been produced in the course of the work.

³ [In 1817 this was altered:

... as to suppose the action of another check to population which does not come under the head either of vice or misery ...

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Should any of them nevertheless turn out to be false, the reader will see that they will not materially affect the general tenour of the reasoning.

From the crowd of materials which presented themselves in illustration of the first branch of the subject, I dare not flatter myself that I have selected the best, or arranged them in the most perspicuous method. To those who take an interest in moral and political questions, I hope that the novelty and importance of the subject will compensate the imperfections of its execution.

London, June 8th, 1803