

Malthusian Population Policies and the Growth of Social Science

by Antony Flew

This is neither the time nor the place for a detailed critical examination of the ideas of Malthus about population. In any case, I have myself made such an examination earlier and elsewhere.¹ But a bicentennial celebration does provide an appropriate occasion to consider the contribution, both intended and unintended, of these ideas to the growth of the sciences.

Durkheim, in his essay on "Montesquieu and Rousseau, precursors of sociology," contended that the etiological myth of the inspired and revolutionary legislator had, more than anything else, been the greatest obstacle to the development of sociology. But the people who actually began to show that various fundamental social institutions were not, and indeed could not have been, the creative inventions of mythological culture heroes were not Montesquieu and Rousseau, but Rousseau's very close contemporary David Hume, along with Hume's younger friends Adam Smith and Adam Ferguson. Thus, Hume in *A Treatise of Human Nature*, first published in 1739-40, argued against the doctrine of an original social contract giving authority to the state. He insisted that recognitions of common interest can and often will lead to the regulation of

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conduct in ways which are not derived from prior contracts, and often could not have been:

*Two men, who pull the oars of a boat, do it by an agreement or convention, tho' they have never given promises to each other. Nor is the rule concerning the stability of possession the less deriv'd from human conventions, that it arises gradually, and acquires force by a slow progression... In the like manner do gold and silver become the common measures of exchange.*²

Again, in 1776, in *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, Adam Smith argued that:

The division of labour is not originally the effect of any human wisdom, which foresees and intends the general opulence to which it gives occasion. It is the necessary, though very slow and gradual consequence of a certain propensity in human nature which has in view no such extensive utility: the propensity to truck barter and exchange one thing with

*another.*³

Nine years earlier, Adam Ferguson, in *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*, had shown in case after case how "nations stumble upon establishments, which are indeed the result of human action but not the execution of human design."⁴ This same seminal passage at once proceeds to enforce the point that — at any rate in default of sufficient independence evidence of their particular existence and achievements — there is no longer any need to postulate or to admit creative culture heroes in order to explain the origin of such establishments.

These great Scots must thus be recognized as

the true founding fathers of social science. The contribution of Malthus was to introduce, if not the first would-be explanatory theoretical scheme, then at least the first such scheme to win widespread attention and application. By this introduction Malthus did two things which were of enormous importance for the future development, not only of the social sciences, but also of social policies.

The first was — eventually and very much against his own initial inclinations — to draw attention to a fundamental difference between the

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social sciences and the natural: it is that the former study the doings of members of the peculiar kind of creatures who can and therefore cannot help but make choices. The second was, consistently from the beginning and as the main intended practical moral of all his social scientific work, to insist that any systematic provision for the relief of one particular naturally burdensome condition necessarily diminishes the incentives for individuals — if and when either thing is possible — to avoid falling into and/or to escape from that condition.

Put in this way, and put at this time, these truths may appear obvious. But obviousness actually is — what nowadays so many other things are falsely said to be — essentially relative. What is obscure at one time may become obvious later, and what is obvious to one person may at the same time be altogether obscure to another. That this is so can most relevantly be brought out by considering the development of the thought of Malthus from the *First Essay*, published in 1798, to the later *Second*.

In both works the conceptual scheme for understanding is modeled on classical mechanics, but with the Principle of Population taking the place of the First Law of Motion, and the various checks taking the place of the various countervailing forces which may prevent objects' actually moving

continuously in a right (i.e., a straight line). In the *First Essay*, the idea of choice is to be found only as something implicit in the notion of vice. And the power of increase in human populations is treated unequivocally as a physical power, which cannot be limited or frustrated by any human action or restraint from action — rather than as a personal power.

In the physical sense, the only sense in which the word “power” can be applied to inanimate objects and to the non-human elements in inanimate nature, a power simply is a disposition to behave in such and such a way, given that such and such preconditions are satisfied. Thus, we might say that the bomb (“the nuclear device”) dropped on Nagasaki possessed an explosive power equivalent to that of so many tons of TNT. In the latter case, the sense in which the word “power” is applied to people and only to people, a power is an ability at will either to do or to abstain from

doing whatever it may be. Thus we might say that a fertile couple of opposite sexes has, if that is their wish, the power to start a baby.

By introducing into the *Second Essay* his notoriously narrow conception of Moral Restraint, Malthus took a substantial but still insufficient step toward recognizing that, in the context of the human as opposed to the non-human sciences,⁵ the power behind the Principle of Population is a personal and not a physical power. Once this is fully appreciated we have to insist that, for the purpose of scientific understanding, we need a fundamental and value-neutral distinction between preventive checks — checks which prevent births — and positive checks — checks which are causes of death.⁶

If we are to use such a Malthusian conceptual scheme to understand why the populations of some of the healthiest, most prosperous and most long lived countries which have ever existed are presently set to begin a sharp decline, we shall need to recognize that at least two different desires are involved in the production of children — the sexual and the reproductive. Since the former is much stronger and more nearly universal than the latter, we ought not to be surprised to find in such countries, where affordable and effective contraception is universally available, that

increases in population at first begin to slow down and then later are followed by more or less rapid declines.

If all this emphasis on the fact that we are members of a kind of creature which can and therefore cannot but make choices seems too obvious to be worth saying, then we may, for instance, respond by pointing to the sort of reception often afforded to the overwhelming evidence of the far inferior parenting performance of lone-parent as opposed to two-parent families — evidence which certainly cannot be entirely or even mainly explained away by referring to the comparative poverty of one-parent families.⁷ To some of us, facing this evidence, it seems obvious that, enormously difficult though it would be to achieve, it nevertheless ought to be a prime object of social policy to try to reduce both the numbers of such families and the proportion which they represent in the total of all families. Yet against this it is often objected that to try to formulate such a policy is to refuse to accept ineluctable realities: “It is like having a weather policy which instead of providing umbrellas tries to stop the rain from falling.”⁸ But, because the Principle of Population is a personal and not a physical power, it is not like that at all.

Misled by the analogy between Newton’s First Law of Motion and his own Principle of Population, Malthus in the *First Essay* pays almost no attention to those differences between our species and all others which make it possible for us alone to have population policies.⁹ But the title page of the *First Essay* describes it as “An Essay on the Principle of Population as it affects The Future Improvement of Society with remarks on the speculations of Mr. Godwin, M. Condorcet, and other writers.” And in the Abstract to Chapter V we read: “The true cause why the immense sum collected in England for the poor does not better their condition”; and “The powerful tendency of the poor laws to defeat their own purpose.”

These phrases must sound familiar to all those acquainted with the recent history of the tax-financed welfare systems in the United Kingdom and the United States. But writing as he was at a time when the standard of living in England was comparable with that in some Third World countries

today, Malthus also offered arguments which sound very strange to us. Thus:

Suppose that by a subscription of the rich the eighteen pence a day which men earn now was made up to five shillings, it might be imagined, perhaps, that they would then be able to live comfortably and have a piece of meat every day for their dinners.

But, he continues,

What would then be the consequence? The competition among the buyers in the market of meat would rapidly raise the price from sixpence or seven pence to two or three shillings in the pound, and the commodity would not be divided among many more than it is at present.

But also, and repeatedly, Malthus here offers arguments which constitute examples of the operation of Charles Murray’s Law of Unintended Rewards. This law, as originally formulated, states

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that “any social transfer increases the net value of being in the conditions that prompted the transfer.”¹⁰ Like the other established laws of economic analysis this constitutes a logically necessary truth. For, as Murray goes on to observe, if “a deficiency is observed – to little money, too little food, too little academic achievement – and a social transfer programme tries to fill the gap with a welfare payment (then) the programme, however unintentionally, must be constructed in such a way that it increases the net value of being in the condition that it seeks to change – either by increasing the rewards or by reducing the penalties.”¹¹

Perhaps the clearest of the examples of the operation of this law which Malthus provides in this same Chapter V is that of the “general complaint among master manufacturers that high wages ruin all their workmen.” For

it is difficult to conceive that these men would not save a part of their high wages for the future support of their families, instead of spending it in drunkenness and dissipation, if they did not rely on parish assistance for support in the case of accidents. And that the poor employed in manufactures consider this as a reason why they spend all the wages they earn and enjoy themselves while they can appears to be evident from the number of families that, upon the failure of any great manufactory, immediately fall upon the parish...

To this and all similar suggestions about the operation of Murray's Law the objection is often made that the people concerned do not in fact make such calculations before they do or fail to do whatever it is which puts them into conditions prompting social transfers. That is probably true. But to this objection the proper response is to insist that they would be much more likely to make appropriate calculations if they knew that there would not be such transi

1995), Ch 2.

⁸For the name of the professing social scientist who made this claim see Note 1 to the Chapter cited in note 7 above.

⁹ See Note 5, above.

¹⁰ *Losing Ground: American Social Policy 1950-1980* (New York: Basic Books, 1980), p.212.

¹¹ Ibid.pp.212-3:emphasis in original.

¹² As a final illustration of the relativity of obviousness we may notice that in presenting his proposals for a negative income tax (NIT) Milton Friedman — of all people — seems never to have considered the relevance to its introduction of the economists' general Law of Supply and Demand, of which Murray's Law is one special case. For, as we may learn from Murray (pp.148-153), it was in an attempt to meet the objection that the introduction of such a guaranteed income would cause people to reduce their work effort or to drop out of the labor force altogether that the Office of Economic Opportunity set up "the most ambitious social-science experiment in history." The result was totally decisive, demonstrating unequivocally that the objectors had been and were right.

NOTES

¹ In the Introduction to Thomas Malthus *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (London: Penguin Books, 1970).

² *Treatise*, III(ii)2,p490 in the standard OUP edition.

³ I(ii),p25 in the standard OUP edition.

⁴ Pp.122-123 in the edition by Duncan Forbes for the Edinburgh University Press.

⁵ It is noteworthy that Darwin, who was of course primarily interested in non-human populations and their natural powers of increase, saw at once the crucial relevance of choice in humans and the lack of it in the brutes. He first saw this when he read what seems to have been the *Second Essay* in September 1838. But he put it most incisively when in *The Origin of Species* he wrote of the struggle for existence: "This is the doctrine of Malthus applied with manifold force to the whole animal and vegetable kingdom; for in this caes there can be no artificial increase of food and no prudential restraint from marriage." (p.117 in the Penguin Books edition).

⁶ Malthus records in the *Second Essay* Jesuit warnings of historical disasters caused by population explosion in China. Claire and W.M.S. Russell have recently published in the *Galton Institute Newsletter* (Issues 18-25) a series of articles on "Population Crises and Population Cycles" not only in China but also in various areas in Europe, Asia and North Africa.

⁷ Patricia Morgan, *Farewell to the Family? Public Policy and Family Breakdown in Britain and the USA* (London: Institute of Economic Affairs Health and Welfare unit,

The Growing Use of E-mail

In this issue of THE SOCIAL CONTRACT we have given, as often as we knew it, the e-mail address of each author in the hope that our readers would communicate their responses to the articles, furthering the dialogue about population issues. Each writer would like very much to hear from you.

The several organizations which are active in the population field also have e-mail addresses which you will find useful for quick communication. Some of these are:

- <fair@fairus.org> The Federation for American Immigration Reform
- <center@cis.org> Center for Immigration Studies (CIS)
- <103527.3545@compuserve.com> Negative Population Growth (NPG)
- <ccn@igc.apc.org> Carrying Capacity Network (CCN)
- <caps@calweb.com> Californians for Population Stabilization (CAPS)
- THE SOCIAL CONTRACT's e-mail address is <soccon@freeway.net>.