

The Ghost of Parson Malthus

**Book Review by
Gertrude Himmelfarb**

It used to be said that “history is past politics.” Today it is more often the case that history is present politics – with unfortunate consequences for both history and politics.

Progress, Poverty and Population by John Avery recounts the debate between Condorcet and Godwin on the one hand and Malthus on the other – between the glorious vision of infinite progress and perfectibility and the grim specter of over-population and poverty. But that is only a prelude to the epilogue, which leaps over two centuries to bring us into the current over-population and global-warming debate. “Who was right?” Avery asks, Malthus in predicting that population would inevitably trump progress, leaving in its wake “poverty, misery, vice, selfishness, famine, disease, and war,” or Condorcet and

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Godwin in believing that science and education would ensure a world of peace and plenty, “where the benevolent, creative, and intellectual sides of human nature will have a chance to flourish?” Both were right, Avery suggests; Malthus in demonstrating the indubitable fact that population, if unchecked, grows “exponentially,” while the produce of the earth is “finite,” and Condorcet and Godwin in

**Progress, Poverty
and Population:
Re-reading
Condorcet,
Godwin and Malthus**



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anticipating the vast improvement in the condition of at least most of mankind – at least until now, when over-population, resulting indirectly in global warming and all the other assaults on the environment, once again threatens Condorcet’s noble dream of the “progress of the human spirit.”

The book originated, Avery tells us, in his contributions to the annual Pugwash Conferences on Science and World Affairs from 1991 to 1993. Those solemn proceedings must have been much enlivened by the accounts of the curious lives and minds

(and sexual peccadilloes) of some of the characters in this story. There is, to start with, the Marquis de Condorcet, a noted mathematician, member of the French Academy, and pioneer of the discipline of social science, the science that he took to be the rationale for the idea of progress and perfectibility. Welcoming the French Revolution as the incarnation of that idea, he found himself, after criticizing the Jacobin constitution, denounced for treason and forced into hiding, where he proceeded to spend the last months of his life writing his paean to perfectibility. He eluded the guillotine only by dying in prison of starvation. His *Esquisse d’un tableau historique des progrès de l’esprit humain* (*Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind*) was published posthumously in 1795 under the official imprimatur of the Thermidorean regime – the counter-revolution, as it was generally perceived at the time.

Avery relates this story with great sympathy but little sense of irony. It is, in fact, a classic case of cognitive dissonance – the disjunction between one’s ideas and the reality of one’s life. And the work itself is a classic case of utopianism – the triumph of ideas over reality. Among the other unfortunate aspects of reality, Condorcet believed, that would be overcome in the progress towards “absolute perfection” were ignorance, error and vice, inequality, bigotry and slavery,

war, famine and disease. At one point, it occurred to him that in this state of perfection, when life would be prolonged and human beings would multiply prolifically, a time might come when the population would exceed the means of subsistence. But that period, he was confident, was too distant to be of any concern. Moreover, by then mankind would have achieved so high a level of enlightenment that population would be brought under control by contraceptive measures and promiscuity. (Like his contemporaries, Condorcet thought that promiscuity was inimical to fecundity.)

Godwin's great treatise, *An*

realizable end, but as an ideal that was presumed to be eminently realizable. And in both cases, that ideal was far more radical, far more utopian, than Avery suggests. Godwin proposed abolishing not only all governmental and legal institutions, but all social ones as well, including religion, property, schools, marriage and family. (Even such enterprises as clubs, concerts and plays were objectionable, because they were collective and therefore oppressive.) In that state of perfect rationality and uncoerced morality, mankind would be liberated from ignorance and vice, war and disease, poverty and oppression, and such other human infirmities as "anguish, melancholy, and resentment."

Anticipating the problem of population, Godwin went beyond birth control or promiscuity to the ultimate solution: the diminution of sexuality itself. As mind would

triumph over body, so rationality would conquer all sexual passions and men would "probably cease to propagate." And as life would be infinitely prolonged, so men would achieve near-immortality, or even, "perhaps," immortality. In one of the most remarkable passages in the book (not quoted by Avery), Godwin delineated the truly perfect utopia:

The men therefore who exist when the earth shall

refuse itself to a more extended population will cease to propagate, for they will no longer have any motive, either of error or duty, to induce them. In addition to this they will perhaps be immortal.

After this edenic scenario, it is almost anti-climatic to be reminded that Godwin's personal life was the very antitheses of this image of "virtue and happiness." In spite of his proscription of all emotions, he managed to fall in love with the feminist and free spirit Mary Wollstonecraft. And in spite of his contempt for that "most odious of all monopolies," marriage, he married her when she became pregnant. She died soon after giving birth to their child, leaving him with the infant and with her daughter from a previous alliance, whereupon he soon remarried, acquiring two more stepchildren and a son – a quite substantial family, even by the standards of the time. The story of that circle of free spirits would be farcical if it were not so tragic: Godwin's outrage when his admirer and disciple, Shelley, a married man, ran off not only with his daughter Mary but his stepdaughter Jane (the second Mrs. Godwin's daughter) as well; the suicide of his other stepdaughter Fanny (Wollstonecraft's daughter) who was also in love with Shelley; his reconciliation with Shelley and Mary when they got married (after Shelley's wife, pregnant and abandoned by her lover, committed suicide); Jane (now calling herself Clair) having one illegitimate child with Byron and another with Shelley (after his

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Enquiry Concerning Political Justice, and Its Influence on General Virtue and Happiness, was written about the same time as Condorcet's, but appeared two years earlier. Unlike Condorcet, Godwin lived to see the publication of his work, because he did not have the privilege of experiencing the glorious revolution that inspired them both. Both works were utopian in the more radical sense of that word – not as positing an ideal intended as a critique of reality rather than a

marriage to Mary); and, the final irony, his grandson and last descendant, the child of Shelley and Mary, a product of Harrow and Trinity College, Cambridge, a Member of Parliament, and a patron of letters, attaining the respectability that Godwin theoretically despised and passionately coveted.

If Godwin's personal life was an ironic commentary on his doctrine (cognitive dissonance again), the first serious public attempt at refutation came in 1798 with Malthus' *Essay on the Principle of Population*, the first edition of which bore the subtitle *As it affects the future improvement of Society, with remarks on the speculation of Mr. Godwin, Mr Condorcet and other writers*. The thesis of the book was simple enough: no theory of perfectibility, not even a theory of progress, could withstand the ineluctable "principle of population": population, when unchecked, increases in a geometrical ratio; subsistence in an arithmetical ratio. The discrepancy between those ratios was as indisputable as the tables of multiplication and addition. Thus population would increase every twenty-five years at the rate 1, 2, 4, 8, 16, 32 ... , while the food supply was increasing at the rate of 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 ... , so that in two centuries the ratio would be 256 to 9, in three centuries 4,096 to 13 and so on. That is, of course, if the population were unchecked. But it is, in fact, checked, by disease and famine resulting in death and by delays in marriage or "unnatural means," of avoiding birth.

Again, Avery underestimates

the radical nature of his work. He does not make much of the recurrent words of that first edition, which go to the heart of Malthus' thesis: "misery and vice." It is this formula, as much as the inexorable ratios, that dooms any theory of progress, let alone perfection. All the checks on population, Malthus insisted, result in misery and vice – death and starvation most obviously, but delay of marriage as well, for it was misery for the mature man to deprive himself of the natural need for marriage and children, and vice to indulge his sexual instincts without benefit of marriage and children. And any measures government or society attempts by way of melioration (the poor laws, most notable) only make the situation worse, for they encourage people to have more children than the food supply can sustain. (Only in the second edition of his work, in response to criticism, did Malthus admit another check that did not issue in misery or vice: "moral restraint" not followed by "irregular gratification" or "improper arts" [i.e., birth control]. But he reiterated the "principle of population," and the public continued to read the *Essay* as if that additional check did not seriously affect it.)

It is useful to be reminded of this historical debate, because the ghosts of its protagonists hover behind the present discussion of overpopulation and global warming. It is also important to recognize Avery's

strategy in muting both the exuberant optimism of Condorcet and Godwin and the bleak pessimism of Malthus. For this permits him to propose a synthesis of the two. "Who was right?" he asks in the epilogue. Both were right, or would be right, if we learn the proper lessons from them. If we attend seriously to Malthus' strictures about population growth and take the proper measures to curb it, we may look forward to that happy state of peace and plenty

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anticipated by Condorcet and Godwin.

Today, Avery tells us, it is not only the insufficiency of food relative to the population that is the problem. It is the insufficiency of all natural resources. For a long time, science and technology staved off the worst consequences of Malthusianism by providing a food supply commensurate with the population, but now science and technology have turned against us, not only by reducing the death rate, prolonging life, and nourishing and thus encouraging a vastly increased population, but also, in the process, depleting petroleum, mineral and other

resources, degrading the environment, destroying the ozone layer, and contributing to global warming. The consequences – not in the remote future but within several decades – will be infinitely worse than the “misery and vice” contemplated by Malthus. “The resulting ecological catastrophe, possibly compounded by war and other disorders, could produce famine and death on a scale unprecedented in history – a catastrophe of unimaginable proportions, involving billions rather than millions of people.”

That catastrophe (the word appears repeatedly in this account – others, like Vice-President Gore, prefer “holocaust”) can be averted only if population, the source of the evil, is brought under control. And that, Avery tells us, requires the active intervention of governments all over the world in support of birth control. He takes a benign view, for example, of China’s “somewhat Draconian policy” of allowing only one child per family, explaining that “Chinese leaders obtained popular support” for that policy by an educational program showing the ill-effects of uncontrolled population. And he looks forward to its prevailing in rural areas as it already has in urban ones.

As population has to be controlled by vigorous government action, so does economic growth. Adam Smith, Avery concedes, was right to see the free market as the dynamo of economic growth.

But the Malthusian theory, he insists, is as much a refutation of economic growth (and thus of the free market) as it is of population growth, for both contribute to the imminent catastrophe. “Instead of burning our tropical forests, it might be wise for us to burn our books on

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growth-oriented economics.” What we now need is not the “empty-world” economics of Smith that “gives profits to stockbrokers,” but a “full-world” economics that will prevent poverty and preserve the environment. Here too a high level of “governmental responsibility” is called for: taxes, for example, to discourage the use of fossil fuels, the reduction of working hours to “ensure a fair distribution of jobs” and, once again, a program of “zero population growth.” (Avery does not specify exactly how the government will promote that program.)

Only then, by heeding the warnings of Malthus, will we realize the dream of Condorcet, a world in which humanity lives without waste or luxury but in comfort and security, free from hunger and unemployment, war

and violence, valuing “human qualities” more than material possessions. The final words of the book evoke that paradisaical state in which we “live in harmony with each other and with other species, guided by reverence for the fathomless complexity and beauty of all life on Earth.”

The trouble with that beatific vision is that neither Malthus nor Condorcet is a secure guide to the past, let alone to the present or future. “The logic of Malthus,” Avery tells us, “is finally catching up with us,” in support of which he cites United Nations figures forecasting a world population of 10 billion by the year 2050, and between 10 to 15 billion by the year 2100. That “population explosion,” he predicts, will result in the collapse of the “biophysical support systems of the planet,” and thus in famine, war, and all the other consequences of the global catastrophe.

Unfortunately (for Avery, but fortunately for humanity), his projections about population growth are as unrealistic as Malthus’ extrapolations from the multiplication table. The latest figures published by the United Nations have a “medium variant” estimate of 9.4 billion by 2050, and a “low variant” of 7.7 billion by 2040 – the former estimate regarded by UN experts themselves as too high and the latter as “reasonable and plausible.” And those figures represent the peak of population growth, the point of zero growth, after which there will be negative growth. A loss of population of about 25 percent in each

successive generation will produce not 10-15 billion in 2100 but perhaps less than half of that. And that decline, the UN foresees, so far from producing “catastrophes such as wars, famines or new epidemics,” will occur under “conditions of orderly progress.”

An incisive article by the American demographer and social analyst Nicholas Eberstadt (originally published in *The Public Interest* and reprinted in England in *Prospect*) cites the new figures, making a compelling case for a

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“population implosion” rather than the familiar “population explosion.” The results will not be entirely happy, but they will be very different from those posited so confidently by Avery. The most obvious changes (which are already beginning to be evident throughout the world) are a falling birthrate, a rising life expectancy, and thus an aging population. In 2050, the ratio of old people to young children is likely to be 8 to 1 in the more-developed countries and 3 to 1 in the less-developed; in Italy, which is already below the replacement level, it will be a phenomenal 20 to 1.

These projections require a

radical rethinking of social problems and policies. Economists are worried about the economic implications of an aging population. Will any social security program be viable with so large a discrepancy between the employed and the retired? Historians are concerned about the shift of population from the more-developed to the less-developed countries (for in spite of the lower birth rates in both, the momentum is such as to create a larger disproportion between the two). What will that imbalance do to international politics and to Western

c u l t u r e ? Environmentalists should be engaged (but unfortunately few of them are) in revising their apocalyptic predictions about global warming, which are based on a new discredited population model of 11.5 billion.

And what is the task of family planners and birth-control advocates in a world anticipating a population implosion?

Indeed, family planners might turn their attention to the more urgent problem confronting the family in an era of negative population growth. The most dramatic part of Eberstadt’s essay is the conclusion where he describes that unprecedented situation: “a world never before inhabited: a world in which the only biological relatives for many people – perhaps most people – will be their ancestors.” Today Italy’s fertility rate is 1.2. If that rate continues for two generations,

“almost three-fifths of the nation’s children will have no siblings, cousins, aunts, or uncles; they will have only parents, grandparents, and perhaps great-grandparents.” The situation of Europe as a whole will be only slightly different; two-fifths will have no collateral relatives. The less-developed countries will take somewhat longer to reach that state, but they will in time.

The family, Eberstadt reminds us, has been the primary socializing unit, where individuals derive their first experiences of rights and obligations, where they learn to live with each other, love each other, play and fight with each other, and where, finally, they take sustenance, material and emotional from each other. How will the new nuclear family – far more “nuclear” than anything we have known – cope with these essential tasks?

We have already confronted one revolution in the family – the revolution reflected in the statistics of divorce, illegitimacy, single-parenthood and cohabitation. The demographic statistics present us with another revolution. In addition to the fatherless family, we now have to worry about a family without peers, a family so impoverished as hardly to warrant the term “family” at all. Neither Malthus nor Condorcet, neither the doomsayers nor the utopians of our own time have prepared us for this.

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