

CHAPTER II

MALTHUSIAN DOCTRINE

Population problems have attracted the attention of writers of all ages. But, it is only in the modern age that scholars have tried to investigate, systematically, the determinant factors of population growth or decline, and the specific ways in which population changes may influence social institutions and human welfare. "Early writing on population theory was crissed with moral preconceptions and superficial observations. Generally, scholars failed to differentiate between factual evidence and hearsay or folklore."¹

Population theory in the modern sense began with the books of Thomas Robert Malthus, especially his essay on the Principle of Population. Malthus, however, was not only the founder of modern population theory but also the leading figure in the field of demographic theory. "His essay on the Principle of Population has a more direct relevance today than the works of any of his predecessors, and even of many successors."²

In his essay on the Principle of Population, Malthus argued that population is limited by the means of subsistence. Thus, population inevitably increases where the means of subsistence increases unless prevented by some very powerful and obvious checks. According to Malthus, 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 reducible into moral restraint, vice and misery. By moral restraint, he meant the restraint from marriage which is not followed by irregular gratifications; by vice, promiscuous intercourse, unnatural passions, violation of the marriage bed, and improper arts to conceal the consequences of irregular connections; and finally, by misery, he implied wars and conquests. Among these preventive checks, moral restraint, he thought, is the principal check. In addition to preventive checks, Malthus postulated positive population checks which include untobesome occupations, severe labour and exposure to the seasons, extreme poverty, bad nursing of children, great towns, conquests of all kinds, the whole train of common diseases and epidemics.

¹Hardinson, Raph, Population Dynamics, New York, 1965 P. 50

²Potterson, William, Population, New York, 1961 P. 507

Malthus insisted in his discussion the argument that the tendency of every species, including the human one, is to increase at a geometric rate, while under the most favorable circumstances usually to be found, its subsistence increases at an arithmetic rate. He simply suggested that population, when left unchecked, increases in a geometrical ratio while subsistence in an arithmetic ratio. Thus, the human species would increase as the numbers 1, 2, 4, 8, 16, 32, 64, 128, 256 and the subsistence as 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9. In the centuries the population would be to the means of subsistence as 256 to 9, in three centuries, as 4,096 to 18, and in two thousand years, the difference would be almost incalculable. Malthus' argument, therefore, rests upon the supposition that man's capacity to increase his means of subsistence is much less than his capacity to multiply.

It is a fact that the ideas of Malthus were not wholly original. James Boser pointed out that the "Essay was original in the same sense that Adam Smith's Wealth of Nations was. In both cases, the author got most of his phrases and even many of his thoughts from his predecessors, but he treated them as predecessors were unable to do, he saw them in their connection, perspective and wide bearings." Malthus' contribution lies not in the novelty of his ideas, but in the comprehensiveness and depth of his analysis. Adam Smith, Robert Wallace and other held similar opinions concerning the relationship between population and resources, but none achieved the thoroughness that came from a lifetime of work devoted to the subject. Many pre-Malthusian writers such as Richard Cantillon partially anticipated Malthus' precepts. Concerning the relationship between population growth and the standard of living, Cantillon came to the conclusion that population increases to as large a size as can be sustained by the prevailing economic system, and that as the standard of living improves, the population grows at a decelerating rate. Robert Wallace, however, argued that overpopulation would wreck schemes for human betterment. The ideas of Cantillon and Wallace were thus akin to those of Malthus.

The Malthusian doctrine, however, has imperfections. It has not been free from criticisms. Criticism has been directed at the Malthusian doctrine, mainly from four directions. Firstly, Malthus is criticised for placing undue emphasis on the limitation of the supply of land. His predictions of low productivity from limited supply of land, did not come about, partly because of the nineteenth century revolution in agricultural methods such as crop rotation, chemical fertilisers, plant and animal breeding and improved livestock feed. Secondly, he failed to recognise the possibilities for improvement in the standard of living

through industrialization, better methods of distribution, through improved transportation and through superior techniques. He seemed to underestimate the potential for inventions and technological innovations. Thirdly, Malthus had not foreseen the settlement of newly discovered lands nor the possibility of colonial producers providing additional raw materials, and thus, acquiring an exploitable labour supply, in a sense, and new markets for their products. Emigration from crowded Europe to the New World, thus, afforded a solution to the population pressure. Fourthly, believing birth control as immoral, he did not grasp the possibility of widespread use of contraceptives which might help to reduce high birth rates.

The interest in the Malthusian doctrine, which fell off in the latter half of the nineteenth century, is in the present day, in the ascendant. "The force of this revival of interest is attributable to an increase rate of growth, a greater awareness of the consequences of rapid growth and a widening realization that certain natural resources are being worsened and even exhausted."⁴ Most of the underdeveloped parts of the world are facing the problems as described by Malthus. As such, "the ghost of Parson Malthus is still abroad."⁵ Thus this revival of interest in the Malthusian doctrine is due to its relevance to the population problem of the underdeveloped world.

⁴Thomlinson, Raph, op.cit., P. 57

⁵Ibid, P. 47