

MALTHUS'S DOCTRINE IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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MAN IS BORN AN ANIMAL and animal he remains—unless or until his spiritual or creative nature is awakened. Until then he remains a creature, a mere beggar of life prepossessed with its evils, an existentialist aspiring only to exist. The Reverend Thomas Robert Malthus well represented the unspiritual, the uncreative masses of men whose whole nature was depraved and whose sole destiny was death—save for a meager elect miraculously salvaged by divine favor in this world as in the next. Out of such depraved conceptions this professed man of God formulated a monstrous doctrine, the Malthusian Theory that man is a mere breeding machine like the codfish whose progeny, but for “slaughter of the innocents,” would devour all subsistence and be self-extinguished. Under this theory man does not become a creator but only a destroyer; even the community-living man is as the nomad, a predator upon nature not building and enriching his environment but despoiling and exhausting it.

*This essay by Spencer Heath (1876-1963), penciled on 18 pages of notepad paper, was never transcribed. Though left undated, it was likely composed in 1952 or soon after, since Heath marked for insertion on its sixth page a paragraph from page 17 of his “Progress and Poverty Reviewed” which was published that year. The only editing has been to supply a title. This paper is Item #180 in the *Spencer Heath Archive*, a work in progress of Heath’s writings collected and digitized by his grandson and literary executor Spencer Heath MacCallum. When completed, the Archive will be domiciled and administered at the Universidad Francisco Marroquín, Guatemala.

CITATION INFORMATION FOR THIS ARTICLE:

Spencer Heath. 2017. “Malthus’s Doctrine in Historical Perspective.” *Libertarian Papers*. 9 (1): 78-83. ONLINE AT: libertarianpapers.org. THIS ARTICLE IS subject to a Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 License (creativecommons.org/licenses).

The author of this theory was a very learned man, a philosophical defeatist whose prepossession of evil far outweighed his knowledge of good. He lived through a third of the world's greatest century of production and exchange in the land most central to it, yet he was void of vision that free contract was the rational practice of the Golden Rule of mutual even if unconscious love, through reciprocal service—the creative and thus spiritual relationship among men free from dominance or subservience, rulership or servitude, by any party so engaged. He could not foresee that the bounty thus spiritually created would not impoverish or deplete in any part but would within that century alone so lift and richen the lives of men as to more than double their span and their rate of replacement accordingly decline.

Not only Malthus alone but his contemporaries and purblind successors, the Classical Economists, including the eminent J.S. Mill, also lacking this vision, fell easy victim to his neatly phrased animalism that denied the spiritual and creative powers of a contractually related and thus spiritually emerging, as against a politically dominated and coercively regulated, mankind. Nor is Malthus without purblind successors even to the present day. His contemporary, David Ricardo, reinforced him with his so-called Ricardian Law of Rent based on non-existent premises and expressly limited to agricultural tenancy but which became widely accepted as of general application and thus encrusted along with Malthus in the tradition of academic authority. And the social science professionals, smug in their traditions, still accept Malthus “in principle” almost to a man, imputing none but vague and nebulous qualifications. And, as for Ricardo, they are blinded by Mill's dictum that his ‘law’ is the pons asinorum of political economy.

Ricardo, following Malthus, considered none but a predatory relationship between men and their environment. He premises that for agriculture there are “natural and indestructible properties of the soil” and that those properties differ, as between different lands, from those that are of the highest productivity to that of the poorest land in use. He assumes that upon the poorest as well as the best land both labor and capital are employed and that the poorest land does or at least *could* have the same application of capital and labor as any other land, including the most productive. He further assumes that all supposedly equal applications of labor and capital on the poorest and on the best land yield to them equal returns, any excess above the poorest being due to superior properties of the soil and taken by the land owner as rent. Hence upon the given assumptions, none of which are correct, the rent of any land is the difference between what a given application of capital and labor produce from that land and the produce of an equal application of capital and labor on the poorest land in use.

In the first place, man does not live by bread alone. A purely extractive agriculture is no more a criterion for a universalized exchange economy than hunting and fishing is a criterion for agriculture.

Second, there is in fact no such thing as equal application of capital and labor on the most highly productive land and the poorest land in use. In the system of exchange that distinguishes society from a tribe, a diminishing proportion of labor and capital is applied directly to land—engaged in the transformation of mere land (the natural elements) into wealth. Yet this smaller proportion is highly discriminate in its application. The most advantageous and fertile farm sites are most improved, best stocked and most worked; and even the crudest agriculturist discriminates between his best and his poorer fields. But labor and capital are far more extensively and intensively applied in the further transformation of things that have ceased to be land and have become raw materials or capital goods of some kind. Upon the lands occupied by these secondary (post-extractive) industries there is not an equal but an enormously greater concentration of labor and capital improvements and facilities, both private and public, than upon agricultural lands. And the most intense concentration of labor and capital improvements on land is found in the great marts of trade and finance, where the services performed are exclusively those of exchanges not incorporated in any “produce” at all, yet create and command the highest of values. For in such places the mere distribution of sites, or of the use of them, has the highest social utility and receives, accordingly, its highest recompense. Than that “an equal application of labor and capital” is made to “the best and to the poorest land in use” there could be no wilder dream; yet our author holds (page 161) that rent is gauged by what such fantastic equal application “*could*” produce—by a universal measure that in fact never exists.

Ricardo, following Malthus considers none but a predatory animal relationship between men and their environment. He assumes that a civilized community is formed by a number of invaders seizing the best land as animals do and forcing all successive comers to subsist upon the fruits of lower and lower yielding land, subsistence thus diminishing with population increase. However, many late comers choose the alternative of yielding up to the earlier all the value or advantage of using good land above that of the poorest land in use. The late comers supposedly are forced to do this by competition against one another for the lowest returns and all except land owners becoming poorer as their numbers increase.

Third, the same quantities of capital and labor are not equally productive on any land, nor do all accept the least that any can obtain. Competition secures for each the market equivalent for what it supplies, and equal quantities of capital and labor no more contribute equally to the market

than do equal numbers of men or individual men. Competition tends to relegate the least productive capital and labor to the poorest sites and to put the most productive in the most advantageous, thus most enriching the common market for all. For only to the most productive are the services of competing landlords in the allocation of sites of greatest market worth. And without this possession by a market transfer instead of political decree they could not in security produce.

Taking man only in his *creature* aspect, as a mere consumer and destroyer of such subsistence as nature supplies, Malthus was right. Like all animals the animal mankind, the unregenerate man, is a beggar of life, not a creator of it. He had no conception of a spiritual mankind rising out of its animal mendicancy by practicing the Golden Rule of non-coercive exchange, each one in this spiritual relationship creating subsistence for many others and being in turn multiply served, thus extending human life progressively towards its immortal dream instead of merely reproducing it in starved and shortened lives. On such ignoble premises did the Reverend Malthus set up his despairing theory of death and degradation for the vast majority of mankind. He assumed that men must always increase their numbers more rapidly than their food—unless very severely restrained. Accordingly, he sets up a simple mathematical expression of two quantities one of which is indicated to increase slowly and the other very rapidly. He calls the one subsistence and the other population, and gravely propounds such imaginings as scientific and mathematical proof that the masses of civilized men have no natural alternative but increasingly to breed and to die.

And David Ricardo, following Malthus dreamed up his theory that capital and labor do not produce but only appropriate and consume what nature affords. He holds that land owners exercised arbitrary power over the inhabitants of their lands (which they did indeed do until about Ricardo's time, since they alone were government) and would therefore grant or withhold its use at will. Thus politically controlled, much good land was held out of productive use and both capitalists and laborers, thus deprived of opportunity, were forced to bid against one another for the possession and use of what remained. This was supposed to reduce labor and capital to acceptance of the least portion of the produce upon which they could continue to exist, all production above that amount being exacted by the political authority (land owners) in the guise of rent. This was the frame of affairs in Ricardo's day, especially in the rural regions.

In the cities and towns, however, the landed authorities had largely lost or abdicated their political power of taxation and war. Having lost their coercive revenues they could no longer subsist by monopolizing but only by distributing their lands to productive users for such rents as would be

voluntarily offered and paid. For revenue they were reduced to vying and competing with each other for tenants while tenants competed against each other for the most desirable lands. Rent thus became determined by the market instead of arbitrarily as tribute or taxation under the former political administration of land, and any validity the Ricardian theory may have possessed under political administration was lost with the passing of that regime. This doubtless was the reason why Ricardo limited the application of his so-called law strictly to agrarian lands. A further limitation was that his 'law' would operate only under the condition of there being equal applications of capital and labor upon all grades of land from the most desirable to the least desirable land in use, thus making his 'law' dependent upon a state of affairs that never in fact exists, for even the most primitive agriculturist must discriminate in favor of his most desirable and against his least desirable fields.

Malthus and Ricardo were contemporary in a period of transition of the political power—the power to levy taxes and wage wars—from landed proprietors, including kings whose original and primary revenues came from their ownership of lands, to public authorities established by conquest of arms or by the 'democratic' suffrages of those who accepted or elected them. Nature at the social level was in the midst of a mutation of land ownership out of its age-old coercive political administration into the proprietary and contractual, the non-coercive administration over sites and lands—the mode of administration potential ultimately to supersede the political as society evolves.

Mankind, like the individual man, is but little aware of its own development and growth. Conscious thinking in general is imitative, traditional and superficial—especially that which is academic or scholarly. Historians, 'social scientists' are blind to the significance of the events they record, such as the 19th century separation of property in land from the political state and its gradual development into a non-coercive agency of public administration through its *contractual* distribution of sites and resources and thereby of all the services and advantages in any wise either appertaining to or inherent in them. With minds focused on past practice, the Classical Economists were and remain unconscious of the fundamental change. They still regard land ownership as privileged and monopolistic, somehow tainted with coercive practice and look upon political measures designed to destroy it as "social gains."

Yet the development of organic society, a social life form, is presided over and directed by an unconscious mind that directs the pattern of its structure just as development of every embryo or maturing organism is determined and directed by its inherent unconscious mind. The valid science

in any living field is that which uncovers the hidden rationale that guides the development of every part and prescribes the pattern of the whole. And the valid thinking is not that which is brought to but that which is drawn from and thus reflects and parallels the development that it accurately observes.

Human society, even at its least maturity, is the supreme organization of life. The units of which its organization is composed are the end-product of the countless ages of biological evolution which is recapitulated in the development of each. Their integration into an organic society lifts them out of the random chaos of conflict and coercion into the mutual satisfactions of reciprocal relationships. This mighty artistry manifests at its highest the spirit and mind, the Creative Divinity, of the universal cosmos, to become at one with high understanding which is the supreme attainment and exaltation of the individual mind.