Chapter VIII

ON POPULATION

Malthus is widely known as an authority on population. He was among the first to write on the causes which regulate the increase of population; and, in fact, the first to give population an important role in economic theory. Malthus's famous work 'An Essay on the Principle of Population' was originally published in 1798 and was reprinted in several revised editions both before and after the publication of his Principles of Political Economy in 1820.

Malthus's theory of population is based on two postulates: first, "That food is necessary to the existence of man" and secondly, "That the passion between the sexes is necessary and will remain nearly in its present state." The basic statement of the theory is given in terms of the comparative ratios of the increase of population and food supply. It reads:

"...the power of population is indefinitely greater than the power in the earth

* The first edition of the Essay was entitled 'An Essay on the Principle of Population, as it affects the Future Improvement of Society! In the second edition (1803) the title was changed to 'An Essay on the Principle of Population or, A View of its Past and Present Effects on Human Happiness.'

to produce subsistence for man. Population, when unchecked, increases in a geometrical ratio. Subsistence increases only in an arithmetical ratio. A slight acquaintance with numbers will show the immensity of the first power in comparison of the second. By that law of our nature which makes food necessary to the life of man, the effects of these two unequal powers must be kept equal. This implies a strong and constantly operating check, on population from the difficulty of subsistence. This difficulty must fall somewhere, and must necessarily be severely felt by a large portion of mankind. 2

The proposition that subsistence increases in an arithmetical ratio is explained in the following words.

"Let us now take any spot of earth, this Island, for instance, and see in what ratio the subsistence it affords can be supposed to increase. We will begin with

2. Cf. Ibid., p. 189.
it under its present state of cultivation. If I allow that by the best possible policy, by breaking up more land, and by great encouragements to agriculture, the produce of this Island may be doubled in the first twenty-five years, I think it will be allowing as much as any person can well demand. In the next twenty-five years it is impossible to suppose that the produce could be quadrupled. It would be contrary to all our knowledge of the qualities of land. The very utmost that we can conceive is that the increase in the second twenty-five years might equal the present produce. Let us then, take this for our rule, though certainly far beyond the truth; and allow that, by great exertion, the whole produce of the Island might be increased every twenty-five years by a quantity of subsistence equal to what it at present produces. The most enthusiastic speculator
cannot suppose a greater increase than this. In a few centuries it would make every acre of land in the Island like a garden.

Yet this ratio of increase is evidently arithmetical. It may be fairly said, therefore, that the means of subsistence increase in an arithmetical ratio.\(^3\)

Malthus holds that the contradiction between the ratios is solved by checks to population. These checks are of two types; positive and preventive. In the positive checks Malthus includes vice, misery, pestilence, epidemics, wars, famines and other natural calamities. In the preventive checks he includes moral restraint, virtuous abstention from marriage, postponement of marriage etc.

However, the essence of Malthus's Essay is that it is the means of subsistence that regulate the progress of population. Malthus's Principles of Political Economy does not contain an independent chapter on population. But in the discussion of wages, notwithstanding the admission of the influence of the 'habits of the people' on the growth of population, it is the command over the

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'necessaries of life' that is shown to regulate the progress of population. For instance, Malthus says:

"What is mainly necessary to a rapid increase of population, is a great and continued demand for labour."  

Ricardo endorsed the basic idea of Malthus's Essay. In a letter to Malthus, Ricardo describes the exposition of the doctrines in the Essay as "so clear and so satisfactory laid down" that they excited an interest in him "inferior only to that produced by Adam Smith's celebrated work." In his Principles of Political Economy and Taxation, Ricardo expresses his approbation of Malthus's Essay in the following words:

"Of Mr. Malthus's Essay on Population, I am happy in the opportunity here afforded me of expressing my admiration. The assaults of the opponents of this great work have only served to prove its strength; and I am persuaded that its just reputation will spread with the cultivation of that science of which it is so eminent an ornament."

In fact one comes across many passages in Ricardo's Principles that reflect the influence of Malthus's theory of

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population. For instance, in the chapter on 'Effects of Accumulation' Ricardo says:

"...no point is better established, than that the supply of labourers will always ultimately be in proportion to the means of supporting them." 7

Similarly, in chapter XXXII he says:

"...so great are the delights of domestic society, that in practice it is invariably found that an increase of population follows the amended condition of the labourer." 8

However, despite the fact that in the system of both Malthus and Ricardo, the increase of subsistence and the increase of population are correlated, there is also a very important difference in the views of the two. The difference mainly relates to, in the words of Ricardo, "whether food or population precedes." 9

Malthus believes that food and other necessaries of life have a 'peculiar quality' of being able to raise up their demanders. According to him the accumulation of capital leads to a fall in the rate of profits, extension of cultivation and an increase in the food supply. The more abundant food

7. Ibid., p. 292.
8. Ibid., p. 407.
enables the labourers (with the same money wages) to rear larger number of children. This causes an increase in the population. Malthus says:

"It has been sometimes argued, that it is mistaking the principle of population to imagine, that the increase of food or of raw produce alone can occasion a proportionate increase of population. This is no doubt true; but it must be allowed, as has been justly observed by Adam Smith, that "when food is provided, it is comparatively easy to find the necessary clothing and lodging." And it should always be recollected, that land does not produce one commodity alone, but, in addition to that most indispensable of all commodities—food it produces the materials for clothing, lodging, and firing. It is therefore strictly true, that land produces the necessaries of life—produces the means by which, and by which alone, an increase of people may be brought into being and supported."  

Ricardo does not share this opinion. He holds that the successive steps are first an increase in the capital, then an increase in population and then an increase in food. In the Ricardian system the accumulation of capital leads to rising market wages. This raises the standard of living of labourers. The improved standard of living provides facility for bringing up numerous and happy families. It is only when population has increased that more food is produced. In a letter to Place, Ricardo writes:

"You say some think that it is in consequence of there being an increase of people that there is an increase of food. I am one of those. There may be an increase of people without an increase of food, because the same quantity of food may be divided amongst a large number of people, but there can be no motive for increasing the quantity of food, till there is an effective demand for it, and that can never arise without a previous increase of people."\textsuperscript{11}

In his Principles Ricardo says:

"What motive can a farmer have to produce more corn than is actually demanded, when the consequence would be a depression of

\textsuperscript{11} Works and Correspondence of Ricardo, Vol. IX pp.56-57.
its market price below its natural price, and consequently a privation to him of a portion of profits, by reducing them below the general rate."12

To Trower, Ricardo writes:

"Corn is produced because it is immediately demanded, or an additional demand for it is reasonably anticipated, but we should not on that account be justified in saying that corn raises up its own demanders, or that its plenty bribes people to come into existence, because that always supposes a price of corn below the natural or remunerative price, and it is no man's interest to produce it on such terms....The way most effectually to increase capital is to produce a commodity that you know will be demanded and consequently will not fall in value. Pray understand that I am answering Mr. Malthus who contends that there is something peculiar about corn which gives it a character of being able to raise up demanders."13

It is obvious, therefore, that for both Malthus and Ricardo population and food supply are variables which are correlated. But the main difference between the theories of the two is that whereas for Malthus population is a dependent variable and food supply is an independent variable, for Ricardo population is an independent variable and food is a dependent variable.