

THE
OVER-POPULATION FALLACY

CONSIDERED :

A PAPER READ BEFORE

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BY

JAMES A. LAWSON, ESQ. LL.B.

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The Over-Population Fallacy Considered. By James A. Lawson,
Esq. LL.B.

We hear so much at the present day about over-population and the remedies suggested for that disease, that I think it will not be uninteresting to inquire what over-population is, when it can properly be said to exist, and how we are to determine whether it does exist in a country.

The question of over-population I propose to treat this evening merely in an economic view, in order to determine the proper meaning and application of the word, and to point out the circumstances which indicate its existence. It admits of course of being treated as a statistical question, by ascertaining from actual returns the number, and by comparison with previous returns the rate of increase, of the population, and deriving from other returns the rate of production of these commodities which the population consumed. An inquiry of that kind, properly conducted, would be most important, as showing the relative growths of population and subsistence in any country. It is not my design to enter into that question at present; and, indeed, in order to derive the full benefit from such an inquiry, we should in the first instance investigate some of the abstract relations between population and subsistence.

Public opinion has on these subjects undergone many changes. In the early ages of the world, when much of its surface was unoccupied, of course a large population was esteemed the greatest good, and the state in every way encouraged its growth. In modern times the school of Malthus have rushed into the opposite extreme, and have represented that the great evil pressing upon mankind is the increase of their numbers, and this has led that school to take a very gloomy view of the destinies of the human race, for which there is no warrant. It has also had this practical effect—to damp and discourage the many efforts used for the amelioration of the social condition of our people. I may appeal to those familiar with the writings of Chalmers, Mill, and others of this school, that measure after measure is condemned by them or laid aside, because, although confessedly it would add to the material comforts of our population, yet, inasmuch as this would accelerate the rate of increase, it would only have the effect of placing us ultimately in a greater difficulty, in consequence of the greater inability to provide for a greater number of inhabitants. It has also had the effect of leading governments and individuals to pursue a policy designed to get rid of what is called our surplus

population, thus producing great expense and entailing much suffering. I desire, therefore, to consider what over-population is, and whether it be of so common occurrence as we often suppose.

In the first place, I would observe that the mere fact that the inhabitants of a country are inadequately supplied with the necessaries of life, and suffer from occasional famine, is no indication that the country is over-peopled; semi-barbarous countries have at the same time the fewest inhabitants, and are most exposed to the visitations of want; and it would surely be a strange perversion of language to say that a country, over whose surface were scattered a few savage tribes, was over-peopled, because its inhabitants suffer from hunger, cold, and nakedness. To conclude, therefore, that a country is over-peopled, merely because its inhabitants have not the necessaries of life, is a grievous error. You might diminish the numbers of those inhabitants to any extent, and yet you would never in the least degree thereby improve the condition of those who remained behind. We must endeavour, therefore, to find the true test for determining whether there is over-population or not, and we shall find the question must be solved, not by examining the relation between population and subsistence, but between population and the productive powers of the Natural agents, Capital and Labour of the country. We must look to economic science in order to apprehend clearly the bearings of this important question. Political economists have investigated the laws which regulate the rate of increase of population, as yet without much success. Much has been said about the tendency of population to outrun subsistence in the race, and the existence of such a tendency has been sought to be established by reasoning which appears to me inconclusive. It is said that population increases in a geometric ratio, subsistence in an arithmetical only, and therefore population increases faster than subsistence. The fallacy appears to me to spring from this, that in one part of the argument, namely, that which deals with the law of the increase of population, abstract reasoning only is used; while in the other part, the law of the increase of subsistence, abstract reasoning is put out of sight, and facts and experience are appealed to. We should apply the same kind of reasoning to both. If we apply only abstract reasoning to one, we should apply it alone to the other. If we judge of the one by facts and experience, we should judge of the other by the same rules. Now, the abstract reasoning applied to the law of the increase of population is of this kind. The human race has a tendency to increase by a law of multiplication. If in this generation there are 2, and in the next 4, next 16, next 64, then there will be in the next 256, and so on, whereas subsistence only increases by additions, as in the series, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, &c., and then, as a geometric series outstrips an arithmetical, the result is arrived at, that subsistence does not increase as fast as population. Now what does subsistence consist of? Animal and vegetable food. Have not all other animals and vegetables a tendency to

increase in the same, or even in a greater ratio than man; they increase geometrically too, if he increases geometrically. If from one set of parents 64 or 256 may spring in the course of two or three generations, is not the same applicable to all the animal creation in a greater degree, for they multiply much faster than mankind? Is it not true of vegetables in a still greater degree? one seed will in one year return 50-fold, 100-fold, and so on.

If, therefore, we employ in both cases only abstract reasoning, only reasoning drawn from the nature of the thing itself, without any reference to actual facts as they exist, no difference whatever can be detected between the powers or capabilities of increase in population and subsistence; nay, the capability of increase is greater in subsistence. But those writers having used only abstract reasoning with respect to the increase of population, in order to determine its tendency, when they come to speak of the increase of subsistence, call in facts to their aid. They appeal to this well-known and familiar fact, that after a certain amount of cultivation has taken place, it is impossible to go on year after year increasing the produce of the soil in a constant ratio. By bestowing more careful and expensive cultivation year after year, one may make a farm produce this year double what it did last year; but this process cannot go on for ever. You must at last come to a point where the expenditure of additional labour and capital upon the soil will yield a lesser and lesser return, till at last it becomes impossible to expend any more on it with profit; the conclusion drawn from all this is, that experience shows us that subsistence only increases in an arithmetical ratio, i. e. by additions, and is not susceptible of geometric increase like population. Apply, however, the same kind of reasoning to population, and we shall find that experience will equally show that population in fact only increases in the arithmetical ratio; that those capabilities of increase which it is asserted do exist in fact are not developed, even under circumstances the most favourable to its increase; and that, as society advances, every increase of population is, under a healthy administration of affairs, accompanied with more than a proportionate increase of subsistence. In discussing questions of this nature, which are really matters of fact, it is absurd to rest on mere abstract reasoning, still more absurd to apply *a priori* reasoning to one part, and *a posteriori* reasoning to the other. With respect to any general law regulating the rate of increase of population, economists and statisticians have not as yet, I conceive, discovered any such. One author tells us that the rate of increase varies directly with the wealth of the people; that when wealth is abundant, the increase is rapid—when a deficiency of wealth is felt, that increase is checked. The fact that our peerage or baronetage do not keep up their own numbers, although abounding in wealth, and not exposed to any danger of wanting the necessaries of life, seems sufficiently to show that this theory is incomplete; and, indeed, we find the very opposite one put forward with as great an appearance of

truth—namely, that the increase is most rapid where there is the greatest pressure of want ; and that when the race is threatened with extinction, it is then it makes the greatest efforts to perpetuate its existence. Another writer, Mr. Sadleir, has put forward a theory, that the rate of increase varies inversely with the density of the population. Where so many conflicting opinions are held, we may safely say that as yet we are not in a position to announce any general law upon the subject, and that it has hitherto baffled our inquiries.

The only fact elicited in the course of the inquiry worthy of our special notice, and to which I have already adverted, is this—that after a certain point has been passed in the cultivation of the soil, the employment of additional capital in agriculture is attended with a diminution of profits, with a continually lessening return. It is when this point has been reached, and then only, that over-population can be said to exist—that is, when the inhabitants are so numerous, compared with the resources of the soil, that with our present knowledge of agricultural science, additional subsistence cannot be extracted from the soil, without a diminution of the rate of profit—then, and then only, population is pressing upon subsistence—but most assuredly, as long as the resources of the soil remain only partially developed, as long as some of it remains half cultivated, as long as that soil would absorb more capital and labour, and yield to that capital and labour as large a return as any other employment of capital would, it is absurd to say that there is any over-population, unless we are prepared to say that a thinly inhabited savage country is over-peopled, because its inhabitants have not the industry or intelligence to stretch forth their hands and draw from nature her treasures in abundance. In such a case, the evil is not *over-population*, it is *under-production* ; not that the people are too many, but that they are not sufficiently industrious—and as any rational man would proceed to teach the savage some useful arts, and induce him to till the ground in order that its power of production might increase, and with it his supply of comforts be augmented, and the danger of starvation averted, so it is the more rational course in any case where we see a wide field for profitable employment at home, rather to turn our attention to making the people produce more, or to removing the obstacles which prevent this increased production, than to any schemes for the diminution of their numbers. This we may be certain of—and it is a good criterion to determine whether over-population or under-production is the real evil—if there be really over-population, the removal of some will increase the wealth of those who remain behind—if it be under-production, no diminution of the number will in the slightest degree improve the condition of those who remain behind. You may decimate, transport, or depopulate, but the remnant will not derive any benefit from the process. If we have reached the margin of profitable cultivation, and our numbers go on increasing,

the difficulty will be daily increasing, and any diminution of the numbers will raise the rate of profit; but if it be because people do not produce enough, the removal of some of our people will not render those who remain behind more industrious, or diminish the obstacles which impede the exercise of that industry.

I wish it to be understood, that throughout this inquiry I put out of view altogether importations of food from abroad, and, for the sake of simplicity, consider each country as isolated for the purposes of this argument. Of course, if the produce of labour and capital at home can procure food from abroad, that has the effect of postponing the period at which over-population can be said to exist. Let us, therefore, always remember that the existence of over-population is to be determined not by the actual amount of food raised, but by the amount which the present state of agricultural knowledge would enable the population with ordinary diligence to raise; that it exists only where additional food cannot be raised save at a comparative loss.

In manufacturing industry this check, arising from diminished productiveness as we advance, has not been found as yet to operate; the greater the supply of manufactured articles which is required, the greater is the facility of producing them, the more perfectly can the division of labour be carried out, and more economy can be introduced into the process; and therefore the check which is felt in agricultural industry would only exist in manufacturing industry when the raw material began to be scarce, and any additional quantity of it could only be raised at an increased expense, or when some staple article employed in it, as coal, was worked out. This difficulty and straitness in the department of agriculture, which from time to time is felt, although averted from time to time by improved modes of culture, and the great advance of agricultural knowledge, is one of the circumstances impelling mankind to diffuse themselves over and subdue the whole earth; and a voluntary emigration proceeding from that feeling is beneficial to those who go and those who stay at home; while, on the contrary, the emigration which takes place involuntarily, or is brought about by State or other interference, from a country where under-production prevails, is not productive of any benefit to that country, and surely argues an unsound and unnatural constitution of society.

If these principles be well founded, it follows that the over-population of Ireland, so often deplored, really has no existence. There is no *over-population*, but enough of *under-production*. *Our population is too great compared with the actual amount of subsistence which is produced for their use, but not too great in proportion to the productive powers of our soil.* We have not even approached the point at which over-population can be said to exist, namely, when the powers of the soil are taxed to the utmost, and will yield no longer a living profit to any further capital expended upon it. There is scarcely a single estate in Ireland whose cultivation

might not be carried much further with profit—not one which would not absorb additional capital, and yield to it a remunerative return. Surely when this is the case, if our population suffer for want of the necessaries of life, it must be from some other cause than the excess of their numbers; there must be something to check and oppose the production of wealth; and if the rural population is not more than would be absolutely required in order to cultivate the soil with a moderate degree of care and skill, it must be vain to expect that we shall increase the wealth of the country by ridding ourselves of some of the people, who in the present state of things are an incubus on that soil of which they ought to be the industrious cultivators. At present a gulf seems placed in many places between the people and the soil; there are people able to work, land able to produce, and they are not brought in contact. I believe much of this is to be attributed to the *bad laws and usages which regulate the relation of landlord and tenant*, and exercise an evil influence on the conduct of both these classes, and by improving them we may hope that the productive powers of the country will be developed, and an union effected between the people and the soil, without force, fraud, or injustice to any class or individual.

I would not wish to be understood as speaking against emigration, or as suggesting that it should be interfered with. I think it should be left entirely to itself. My object is to show that we ought to regard the emigration which takes place not as a remedy for our domestic distresses, which it never can be, but as an infallible indication and result of a vicious state of things at home, which prevents our land at home from being sought as a safe and profitable investment for capital and labour.

In society every man (except the pauper) is a producer, and produces to the same or a greater extent than he consumes. The landlord is a producer, for he gives his land to carry on production—the capitalist his capital—the labourer his personal exertions. No man can consume unless he has produced, and his consumption is limited by his production. If he produces much, he can consume much; if he produces nothing, or has no store of accumulated wealth, he can command nothing for his consumption, and must be sustained from the resources of others, as the pauper is. When, therefore, we aim at diminishing the supply of labour, we should recollect that we are in the same proportion diminishing the demand for labour, for every labourer added to the supply brings his wants to increase the demand for the products of labor. Experience shows us that thinly peopled countries are generally poorer than densely peopled ones; and we need not go beyond our own country for an example of this, when we find the population of Armagh 453 persons to a square mile, that of Galway and Mayo 170 to 180 persons to a square mile: it is difficult to see how a country, whose soil is comparatively uncultivated, can be benefited by the loss of her able-bodied labourers.