

The Malthusian Theory

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“A marriage with a castrated woman is the ideal Malthusian Marriage.”

“When Lawson Tait made splaying popular, that seemed an ideal condition to disciples of Malthus, but a German, name Halberstaedter, concludes that the Röntgen ray is the thing. It destroys the ova in situ.”

These two quotations have appeared in recent medical literature. We have never seen a reference to Malthus in any of the current literature of the day, either lay or medical, which did not clearly show that the writer believed that the “Malthusian idea” is to destroy the fruitfulness of the marital relation, and which did not convict him of having never read one word of the writings of Malthus.

Malthus iterated and reiterated that “I should always particularly reprobate any artificial and unnatural modes of checking population, both on account of their immorality and their tendency to remove a necessary stimulus to industry.”

Malthus recognized the fact that every form of life, both animal and vegetable, down even to bacteria have such power of multiplication that, if unlimited means of nutrition were within reach, anyone of them might, in a few years, occupy every inch of the earth’s surface.

They do not thus multiply for the simple reason that manifold checks exist in the struggle for life, and only the fittest survive. The human race is capable of doubling its numbers every twenty years or less, but it does not do so because of the operation of various checks referred to by Malthus as vice and misery on the one hand, and moral restraint on the other.

More than half of all those born into the world in Malthus’ time died before the age of five years, a fact which he deeply deplored. This high infant mortality was due largely to the ignorance of the

people and to their poverty, and these two causes of infant mortality are still operating with such effect that about 35 per cent of infants die before the age of five years.

The only check to population advocated anywhere by Malthus was that of moral restraint, and he was careful to explain in an unmistakable way what he meant by moral restraint: it was premarital chastity, and entering into the married state only when there was a reasonable prospect of being able to support a family.

This “idea” is quite different from that which we are constantly seeing in the prints and labeled “Malthusian”.

The Malthusian theory of population is this: that the procreative instinct of man is such that population always increases as fast as the means of support will admit. This is a universal law to which there is no exception in the organic world, which determines that in all times and in all places, in all trades, professions and occupations, the population is up to the then limits of support. When old Dr. Fuller was the only physician in the western hemisphere he was unable to support his family in that avocation, but was compelled to operate a farm, and to permit his wife to supplement his earnings as a midwife. The recent medical graduate is no worse off than Dr. Fuller – they both arrived here just a few years too soon.

The “Malthusian idea” is that no man has a right to assume the obligations of paternity until there is a reasonable certainty that he will be able to maintain his offspring until they are self-supporting. Such is the Malthusian theory. Such is the Malthusian idea. And yet we shall see the name of Malthus abused and his teachings distorted, in all probability, for another hundred years.

This is another illustration that “ideas are more stubborn than facts.”

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