

The GrEco Project

Grenville's Economics

Lord William Wyndham Grenville

Notes on Population and Subsistence with
references to the works of Malthus,
Godwin, and others
[1832]

Transcription: Christophe Depoortère

[Notes on Population and Subsistence with references to the works of Malthus, Godwin, and others] ¹

[f.1]

The proposition on which M^r M. founds his whole theory, appears to me in the highest degree illogical, and incapable of supporting any system of just reasoning. When he asserts that Population, *if unchecked*, would increase in a geometrical ratio, and that subsistence can be augmented only in an arithmetical ratio, he institutes a comparison [f. 2] between infinite and finite progression. He assumes the absence of all limit to the progress of population, and supposes on the other hand, the increase of subsistence limited (as we all know it must practically be) by the known bounds of space, and by the unknown bounds of the fertility of the earth, called forth by labour and capital. With data so assumed it would seem more natural to [f. 3] reverse his proposition. Take any *given* ratio for the increase of population: that of M^r M if you will, which supposes it to double itself in 25 years. And assume on the other hand, that the power of increase inherent in a grain of wheat is *unchecked* by any of the causes which usually limit it. Is it not apparent that, not in 25 years, but in each single year, the increase will be much more than [f. 4] double, and that, if we suppose its produce employed in reproduction, the increase in 25 years will be to a number almost beyond calculation? On such principles of calculation it is just as easy to cover the whole earth, and all the planets, with wheat standing so thick to ripen, as with men standing so thick to breathe.

The practical question at issue between Malthus and Godwin seems to [f. 5] be whether Governments and legislatures should apply themselves to *encourage* or to *check* the increase of population with a view to the interests and happiness of the communities whose welfare is entrusted to them. Is there not a middle course more safe than either; that of leaving the matter to itself without any attempt to tamper with it by law?

In this 2^d Chapter [f.6] Malthus lays down these propositions.

¹ MS in British Library Add. MS. 69127 ff. 1-20. In a copyist handwriting. Watermark 1832.

1. Population is necessarily limited by the *means of subsistence*.
2. Population invariably increases where the *means of subsistence* increases, unless prevented by some very powerful and obvious checks.
3. These checks and the checks which repress the superior power of population and keep its effects on a level with the means of subsistence [f. 7] are all resolvable into moral restraint, vice, or misery.

With respect to these the first point is to come to a clear understanding of the terms employed. What is meant by means of subsistence?

Is it the actual food produced within the country?

Is it the power which the country possesses of producing man food, with or without the aid of additional capital and labour?

[f. 8] Or is it the command which the wealth of the inhabitants of the country in question gives them over the food produced or productible in other countries as well as in their own?

[f. 9] M^r Malthus system rests as is well known, on two propositions. First that *when unchecked*, population goes on doubling itself every 25 years, and increases therefore in a geometrical ratio, or as, 1. 2. 4. 8. 16. 32 &c.

Secondly, that subsistence *considering the present average state of the Earth*, could not possibly be made to increase faster than in an arithmetical ratio or as 1. 2. 3. 4. 5. 6. &c.

[f. 10] Hence he concludes, that population has a constant tendency to increase beyond the means of subsistence: and he proceeds to shew, by a copious induction of example, that it is principally prevented from doing so by checks, which he thinks are all resolvable into misery and vice.

This is the plan of his work; the obvious objection to which appears to be, that his premises [f. 11] though stated with so much appearance of mathematical precision, are so constructed as to be utterly incapable of supporting any deduction, whether of calculation, or of argument. The comparison which he institutes is between a supposed *unchecked* progress of population, and the actual or possible progress of subsistence, *as checked by some of those causes which now operate to restrain it*; by the known limit, [f. 12] and present condition of the Earth, by the unknown limits of its productive power, when aided by capital and labour. From such a comparison, no practical conclusion can be drawn. As well might we attempt to stake a proportion between finite and infinite progression. And it is particularly worthy of remark, that by a

similar process of calculation, it would be quite as easy, perhaps much easier to reverse [f. 13] M^r Malthus's theory.

Take for instance, any *given* ratio for the increase of population. Let it be that of M^r Malthus himself, and let us assume that population, *considering the present average state of the world*, could be made to double itself in 25 years. Then oppose to this the possible increase of subsistence *if wholly unchecked*; and ask what is the *power* of that increase? The answer will be [f. 14] that not in 25 years, but in *one* year, each grain, each bushel, each quarter of wheat, (speaking of that alone) will, if applied to reproduction and in favourable circumstances, multiply itself, not once, but five, ten, twenty, or possibly even¹ one hundred fold: and that in this manner, while population is thus slowly doubling itself, the sum of its subsistence may be carried to millions of millions, till it [f. 15] outstresses all powers of arithmetic.

It is true that our imagination, like his, must at last be controlled by the limits of space. But this difficulty applies equally to both. It is quite as reasonable to figure to ourselves the whole earth, or the whole planetary system, covered with ears of corn standing too thick to ripen, as with human creatures standing too close to breathe. More conclusive [f. 16] and practical form of reasoning are necessary, before we embrace either side of the alternative to which the theories of M^r Malthus and M^r Godwin would reduce us. The one founding himself wholly on the single example of the United States, (such as he believes the fact to be) asserts that population has a constant tendency to outturn subsistence: The other resting much (tho' not exclusively) on the single [f. 17] case of Sweden, maintains no less generally, that the power of increase in the numbers of human species is extremely small. From which assumptions they confidently deduce their principles of Legislation: the one maintaining that for the happiness of society all Governments should discourage the increase of population the other, that for the same purpose they should do their utmost to promote it.

[f. 18] May we not ask whether in this, as in so many other cases, the truth of the fact will not be found between these extremes? In different communities, and in different times and circumstances, through the various states and stages of society, the tendency, and even the power of increase, instead of being governed by any such general and constant laws, seem rather to undergo continual changes; changes [f. 19] almost always referable to numerous other causes quite as much as to the

¹ See Humboldt vol 2. p. 464

quantity or quality of subsistence produced within the particular country or district to which the enquiry relates. And it is at least doubtful whether in the necessary ignorance of the extent and relative bearing of these, as operating at any given place or time, the safest path of duty for Governments studious of human happiness, be [f. 20] not that of forbearing to legislate at all, on a matter so little susceptible of human regulation.