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Ionel BOSTAN

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SOCIOLOGICAL PRECEPTS AND OF CHRISTIAN MORALITY IN THE ECONOMIC WORK OF THOMAS MALTHUS

Ionel BOSTAN¹

Abstract

In XVII-XVIII centuries in England, the thinking of those who were concentrating on demographic phenomena was dominated by food resources, the development of capitalism and situation of the poor people. Also, profit and wages appeared as two complementary but opposite incomes, the profit maximization supposing to maintain at a low level of wages. Through the conception on the population, related to the fact that the number of individuals increases in geometric progression (it doubles every twenty-five years), while the subsistence means increase in arithmetic progression, Malthus is considered the initiator of demographic studies. In his work are combined the precepts of Christian morality with those of sociological nature. Malthus's model drew attention to a real and major problem, that of the relationship between population development and means of subsistence. From his works results that through the uncontrolled reproduction of mankind, the world is condemned to misery, increased infant mortality, diminution of life expectancy, etc., respectively to the worsening of economic situation in general. To prevent such a development, Malthus proposed the moral type constraint, designed to limit and control population growth, for improving the living standards for the people. The echo of ideas shown was amplified by the fact that the financial allocations to support the expenditures with public assistance were seen by the English ruling class as a bonus granted to laziness and procreation, and the reproduction of the poor was seen as attracting the increase of private entrepreneurs' debts.

¹ Professor, PhD., Stefan cel Mare University, Economics Faculty, Suceava, Romania, Str. Universitatii nr. 13, 720 229, telefon +40 230 520 081, email: ionel_bostan@yahoo.com

Keywords: population; natural resources; wages; moral constraints; the scarcity of means of subsistence; addictions; poverty.

Introduction

According to the conventional thinking of the eighteenth century, the population regulation occurs by itself, by the laws of perfect competition: when is produced an increase of wealth, there is an increase of population. If the wealth decreases, a reduction of the population also occurs, due to the reduced volume of subsistence goods (Blaug, 1992). But, –the evolution of society in the second half of the eighteenth century has shown that as the growth of national wealth and its polarization enhances, the number of poor people increases and their financial situation worsens. Some authors have found that the worsening of economic circumstances of most people is due to causes related to faster growth of residents than the volume of subsistence goods (Malthus and neomalthusians), while others believed that the improvement of living standards can be achieved by creating cooperative alternative structures. Another group argued that the impoverishment of a part of the population is due to inefficiencies in the private property and in the bourgeois institutional system and proposed their removal and replacement with a fairer system (socialists) (Popescu, Gh., 2009). If according to Smith, the increase of nation’s wealth determined the enrichment for some people and welfare for all, according to Malthus, this was accompanied by the rapid growth of poor people and of deprivation (Ivanciu-Văleanu, 1996).

Reasoning and calculations used by Malthus in the foundation of theory of population growth

The Englishman Thomas Malthus (1766-1834), having a theological training (Popescu D., 1999) was part of the thinkers who have put in question the social system - historically determined - and have not incriminated it for the impoverishment of a large proportion of the population. Through his famous theory on population, which aroused a general indignation at the time, he situated, in fact, on the positions of pessimistic, reactionary and apologetic liberalism (Tudosia, 1985). He advocated for free competition and didn’t seek (as the opponents of classicism did) the causes of social imperfections in the existing institutional system (Pohoata, 2008). He gave to the economic reality a mainly demographic explanation, of pessimistic nature (Ivanciu-Văleanu, 1996). His works “Eseu asupra principiului populației” (1798) and “Principii de economie politică” (1817) reflect his adverse position to the classical political economy, especially against the theory of the value based on work (Constantinescu et al., 1974). Beyond any

preconceived ideas, the objective analysis of Malthus's work shows that the theory of population growth – elaborated by him – was a starting point for all future discussions on this issue. If William Petty (1623-1687) considered that the population can double every 10 years, and Swiss Leonard Euler (1707-1783) – at the age of 12, Malthus took into account an annual population growth rate of 3% (Blaug, 1992). With such an average annual rate of growth, the population doubles - in a span of 25 years (Malthus, 1992).

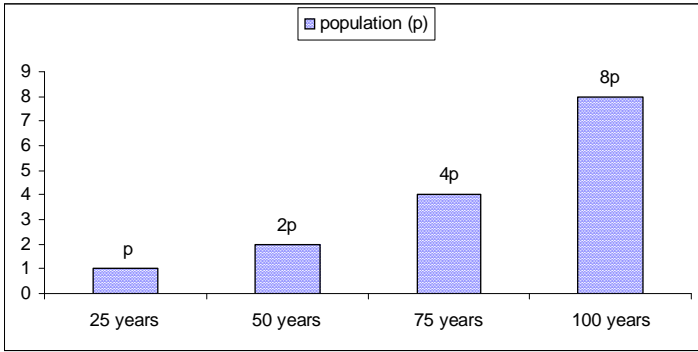


Fig. no.1 The doubling of the population every 10 years, after William Petty

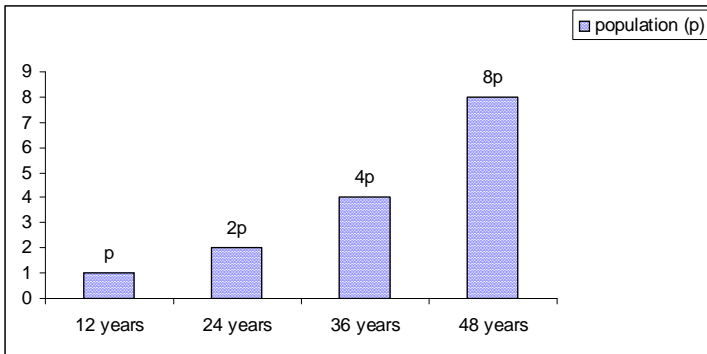


Fig. no.2 The doubling of the population every 12 years, after Leonard Euler

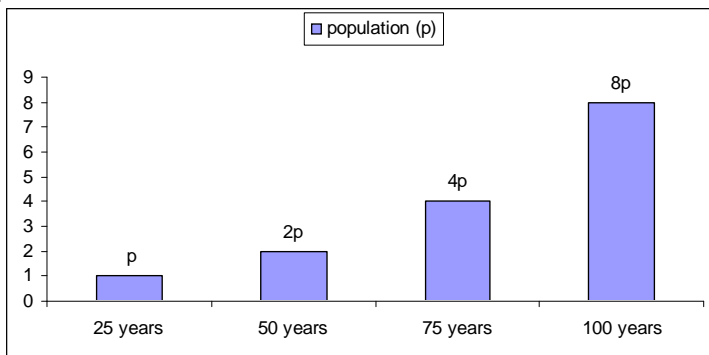


Fig. no.3 The doubling of the population every 25 years, after Th. Malthus

To justify the population doubling every 25 years, Malthus assumed that each family has six children, four of whom, in turn, procreate in the same proportions (Popescu, 2009).

F A M I L Y	Father	C H I L D R E N	C1	N E P H E W S	N1
					N2
					N3
					N4
					N5
					N6
			C2		N1
					N2
					N3
					N4
					N5
					N6
	C3	N1			
		N2			
		N3			
		N4			
		N5			
		N6			
	C4	N1			
		N2			
		N3			
		N4			
		N5			
		N6			
	C5	N1			
		N2			
		N3			
		N4			
	C6	N1			
		N2			
		N3			
		N4			
2 persons		6 persons		32 persons	

Fig. no.4. The numerical evolution beginning with the traditional family consisting of two parents (mather and father), after Th. Mathus

Malthus's assumption reveals that "the population, when it is not stopped by any obstacle, doubles every twenty-five years or increases in geometric progression" (Popescu D., 1999).

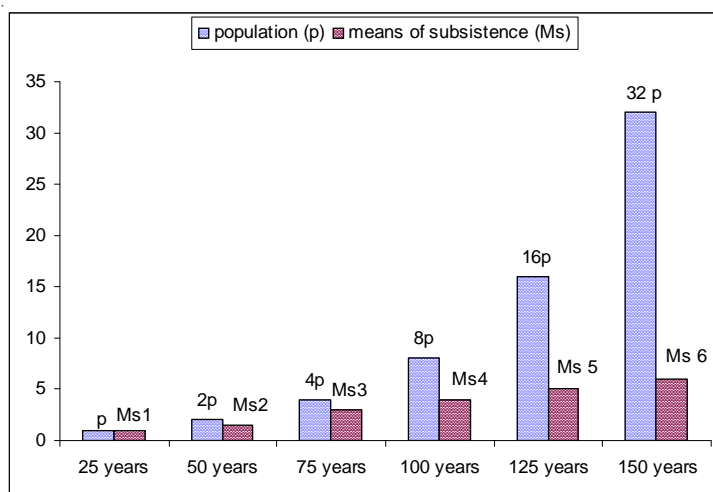


Fig. no.5 The increase of the population in geometric progression in comparison with the increase of the means of subsistence in arithmetic progression, after Th. Malthus

The increase of subsistence means was seen as doubly limited: physically, by the limits of resources and land areas, and economically, due to the increasing in spending faster than the results' increasing, continuously taking places an increased cost of production. In this context we mention that it was considered that the land, due to the nature of soils, gives smaller results, occurring the elements of "returns decrease law". Against this background, Scotsman James Anderson explained some situations in which operates „the law of decreasing returns” and defined the rent as „a process of equalization of profits obtained from lands with different fertility” (Pribram, 1986; Popescu D., 1999; Brăgaru, 2010). Malthus based his whole theoretical approach on elements of this law, stating that if one takes into account the Earth's average state, the means of subsistence, in the most favorable terms for human activity, they couldn't grow faster than in arithmetic progression (Popescu D. et al., 2000). Then, assuming that the population at a time (of his time) is equal to one thousand million, human species would increase as follows: 1, 2, 4, 8, 16, 32, and the means of subsistence: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6. Thus, according to him, in 150 years, the population should be, compared with the means of subsistence, at a rate of 32 to 6, and, in time, the difference would be almost incalculable (Gide & Rist, 1926). The explanation lies in the action of a "natural" and "eternal" law, which causes hunger, epidemics and wars to restore

the natural balance between the population size and the quantity of livelihoods (Chetău, 1978). The conclusion could only be that we are dealing with a “doom-day scenario” (Popescu Gh., 2009).

Obstacles on uncontrolled population growth: misery and vices

What must be borne in mind is that the uncontrolled growth of population is hampered by significant, preventive and positive obstacles (Lupan, 2009), which operate continuously, with a greater or lesser force, in all societies and which maintain the number of people at the level of the means of subsistence. These barriers act in all societies and all times against uncontrolled population growth, the share of either being different in time and space, influenced by many factors (Malthus, 1992; Blaug, 1992). Among the preventive obstacles, the restraint from marriage, which is not followed by satisfactions opposite to rules, can be properly called moral restraint. Promiscuous sexual relations, unnatural passions, adultery and deceptive practices to hide the consequences of relationships outside of marriage are preventive barriers falling into vices (Zane, 1938). In conclusion, taking into account these obstacles against population growth, preventive and positive, we conclude that everything can be reduced to moral restraint, vices and misery (Popescu, 2009). In other words, the obstacles that hinder population growth - positive or preventive - can be found in the limited nature of means of subsistence.

Limiting and control of population growth through moral coercion

By his concept on population, Malthus is considered the initiator of demographic studies. In his work are both intertwined precepts of Christian morality, with others coming from sociology. Malthus's model drew attention to a real major problem, that of the relationship between population evolution and their means of subsistence (Blaug, 1992). Malthus introduced a pessimistic vision, pointing to a trend of population growth which is quicker than the means of subsistence, the major idea of his conception on population being that, by its uncontrolled multiplying, humanity is condemned to misery, to the worsening of its economic situation (Zane, 1938). Hence, his pessimistic vision on society. To prevent such a development, Malthus proposed the moral coercion, which would restrict and control the population growth. Then he insisted more and more on „personal moral constraints”, as a means of controlling demographic trends. He also showed that in the same sense is acting the wage level, whereas it increases more slowly than labour productivity (Popescu D. et al., 2000). The malthusian doctrine influenced Ferdinand Lassalle in the development of the „brass law of wages”,

according to which wages can not exceed the minimum means of subsistence necessary for the maintenance of the worker and his family, because a wage increase above that level would attract an increasing number of marriages and births, ultimately leading to an increase in population. In its turn, the population growth would lead to lower wages and, consequently, would reduce the number of births. Let's remember that certain works argue that the malthusianism "expects the partial reduction or destruction of production to keep prices high and acts as a means to prevent economic crises of overproduction" (Constantinescu et al., 1974). The appearance of mathematical precision of Malthus's theoretical approach drew heavily on thinkers who wanted to settle the political economy on an equal footing with "natural" sciences (Pribram, 1986). Positive obstacles in the way of population growth, characteristic for wild and backward societies (wars, famine, etc..) are persisting, masked, in civilized societies as well, in the form of physiological misery, malnutrition, infant mortality, low life expectancy, etc. In order not to reach such practices and to improve the living standards of people, Malthus proposes preventive barriers, which have the effect of declining birth rates, claiming exclusively the moral coercion. Among them: chastity and postponing marriage until advanced ages and until ensuring the material conditions necessary to maintain a family in prosperity (Gide & Rist, 1926). According to him, strong and prosperous families could be achieved only by rich people, and poor families were urged to celibacy and small families. Everything was explained - in his view - by the inequality of wealth. On the other hand, he brings into question the moral abstinence in sexual family relationships, with acknowledged limitation of the number of children (Popescu Gh., 2009). Maintaining the social legislation for the poor is considered dangerous because it encourages "laziness and procreation", reducing, at the same time, the means of overall development of society (Freville, 1957). It can be concluded that Malthus „accused” of excessive growth of people number only the poor (Denis, 1983). Such a view has fuelled opponents' criticism, who considered Malthus as the supporter of interests of dominant classes, while other authors have found that the Malthusian theory on population is "devoid of any content" (Blaug, 1992). In fact, through the Malthusian solutions was introduced in the theory on reproduction the idea of parasitical consumption boost as a means of balancing supply and demand. This moment was captured by J.M. Keynes, who made from the Malthusian theory a starting point in formulating his general theory of labour force employment (Ivanciu-Văleanu, 1996).

Conclusions

Malthus attempted to show that the social effects of these two factors (the individual interest and the sexual desire), partly opposed to each other, and are limited by the play of forces that neutralize them. In an economy based on the institution of private property, the effects of personal interest are hampered by competition. As private property and marriage are adjustment factors in demographic trends, "the Principle of Population" provides the missing link between the competition regime and its institutional context. Then, the positive obstacles (disease, famine) adapt the population number for the available means of subsistence, automatically and continuously eliminating all individuals who cannot sustain themselves economically. In order to eliminate the positive obstacles of reduction in population, Malthus proposed „the moral constraints”, respectively the control by the people themselves - through the will and moral conscience - of births and number of children, to the level of the ones that have decent material conditions of existence. Through the „Principle of Population”, Malthus attempted to demonstrate that there is a precise relationship between two heterogeneous progressions - growth of population and growth of subsistence goods volume.

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Additional Resources

- <http://www.ucmp.berkeley.edu/history/malthus.html> (Accessed on 11 June 2010)
- <http://homepage.newschool.edu/het/profiles/malthus.htm> (Accessed on 24 July 2010)
- <http://desip.igc.org/malthus/> (Accessed on 9 Sept. 2010)
- <http://www.economyprofessor.com/theorists/thomasmalthus.php> (Accessed on 18 Oct. 2010)