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The old and durable controversy about whether the world's population is outrunning its food supply is still capable of engendering lively interest. Although the approach of modern economists rejects Malthusianism, many demographers, economists, and other social scientists who are disposed to concern themselves about such problems nevertheless follow a close adaptation of the unique type of population-resource astrology developed by Malthus. This adaptation, known as Neo-Malthusianism, holds that population if unchecked will exceed subsistence, but by subsistence in this context is meant a socially desirable or progressively rising standard of living. And in place of the positive and preventive checks of Malthus, the Neo-Malthusians have adopted a policy which they believe to be the obvious conclusion to Malthus' theory of population: birth limitation by the artificial control of numbers.

Neo-Malthusianism has particular relevance to the Caribbean Island of Puerto Rico. For centuries under Spanish rule, and for most of the twentieth century under United States rule, this country languished as a typical underdeveloped area: agriculture as the main source of revenue, limited natural resources, the exportation of a few primary products and the importation of most essentials, maldistribution of wealth and income—in brief, economic colonialism with all its excrescences of poverty and suffering. And compounded with these adversities was a density of population among the highest in the world, with a rising annual rate of population increase. Little wonder, then, that Puerto Rico has become somewhat of a *cause célèbre* in the view of many social scientists. Their measured judgment has usually been that Puerto Rico is a hopeless case; the title of a chapter in a recent book tells the story in itself: "Puerto Rico—Economists Nightmare."¹ For American Neo-Malthusians, in particular, Puerto Rico has become the test tube case and the horrible example of rampant population growth. And finally, the dolorous demographer, who always tends to see the spectre of mass starvation around the Malthusian corner, even in the happiest of environments, has invariably come forward with the

¹ Earl Parker Hanson, *New Worlds Emerging*. New York, Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1949.

expected Neo-Malthusian policy conclusion for Puerto Rico: the population must be limited.

Yet something has happened to this Island during the past two decades, which has become characteristically a twentieth century phenomenon: the accelerated shift, which takes only decades rather than centuries, from an economy of economic colonialism to one of economic diversification and industrialization. Puerto Rico is in the vanguard of this world-wide, atomic age industrial revolution, with the result that there has been a shift, significantly within the last decade, from almost universal poverty to at least justifiable hope that the depths of material suffering will be eradicated completely in the near future.

But despite the impressive economic indicators of the present day, the social scientists who recently have analyzed Puerto Rico's ills still cast their opinions in terms of gloom, and ascribe a future for Puerto Rico akin to Karl Marx's Principle of Increasing Misery. This present prosperity is a mirage, in their view, a paradoxical condition which is just a delusion. Like a taxpayer who has an effective tax rate of over one hundred per cent, or a nation which is so wealthy that intended aggregate saving exceeds intended investment, Puerto Rico is said to be in a position in which it is worse off because it is better off. This is a new twist to the paradox of wealth, and if it is true, Carlyle was undoubtedly right—economics, indeed, is a dismal science.

The explanation of this economics of hopelessness involves a synthesis of demographic and economic analyses, and has received its most comprehensive treatment in a recent study by Professor Harvey S. Perloff.² Although this study is ostensibly an analysis of the socio-economic problems of Puerto Rico and their solution, the entire approach of the work centers about the population-resource ratio on the Island. Puerto Rico is first said to have one of the highest, and perhaps the highest, natural rates of population increase in the world. Statistics for the year 1948 indicate a rate of increase of 28.7 persons per one thousand, while by contrast the United States had an increase of only 14.3 for the same year. This high rate of population increase also exceeds by a considerable margin the rates in other underdeveloped regions; for example, even in the densely populated countries of India and China, the population rate of increase was only 11.0 and 10.0

² Harvey S. Perloff, *Puerto Rico's Economic Future—A Study in Planned Development*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1950. The ensuing argument follows closely the development in Chapters 12 and 13 of Mr. Perloff's study.

respectively for the period 1936 to 1940. Moreover, the population density in Puerto Rico is also one of the highest in the world, rising from 546 persons per square mile in 1940 to 645 in 1949.

The explanation of what has happened in Puerto Rico to bring about this alleged demographic calamity is similar to the explanation for the experience in other parts of the world during the Industrial Revolution; but it is considered to be much more potentially tragic in consequences. It is similar in the sense that the increase in the natural rate of population increase has been due to a fall in the death rate, with the birth rate remaining more or less the same. When this happened to other nations during the Industrial Revolution, however, there was room for expansion, both at home and through emigration to underdeveloped lands; consequently, it was possible for industrial progress and an increase in population to accompany each other, and result, in the long run, in an increasing level of living. And further, while the Industrial Revolution raised output, the cultural changes associated with the development of an advanced industrial economy, operating coextensively and coterminously, brought about a normal downward fertility adjustment. Thus was produced, so runs the sociological argument, the fortuitous long-run equilibrium between resources and population which characterizes present western industrial society.

But in Puerto Rico, there is said to be no such happy coincidence of conditions. In the first instance, the Island is said to have experienced the demographic effect of a full-blown industrial revolution: a declining death rate and a resulting impetus to the rate of population increase. Barriers to a compensatory level of industrialization, however, are believed to be formidable, because of an almost complete lack of natural resources, a substantial and persistent unfavorable balance of trade, and the market competition of more advanced industrialized nations. And this so-called "vicious circle," with population winning the race against industrialization, cannot be broken in the short run by a movement of population to underdeveloped regions at home or abroad; the density of population is already high on the Island, and the possibility of extensive emigration is considered unlikely. And finally, it is argued that Puerto Rico cannot afford to go through the secular type of industrial and demographic revolution involving two or three centuries, which transposed some nations of the world from agricultural to industrial economies, and brought about a relatively high standard of living despite population density. Puerto Rico cannot afford it because the Island is *in*

the population problem; it is a *fait accompli*; the solution must be short run to give short-run as well as long-run relief.

Based on this argument, the dismal choice presented to the Puerto Rican people has been either a program of checking the rate of population growth or facing a future of increasing poverty. Professor Harvey S. Perloff concludes his case succinctly and emphatically when he states:

"Anyone at all acquainted with the social conditions and cultural barriers in Puerto Rico must appreciate the difficulties involved in carrying out a program of population limitation. And yet there seems no other way out. The choice is between facing a future marked by the very definite possibility of increasing poverty and dependence, on the one hand, and carrying out the most difficult of programs, on the other. The latter will call for the highest conceivable level of statesmanship, but it must be recognized that failure to apply such statesmanship is actually to make a choice in favor of the former—increasing poverty and dependency."³

The foregoing discussion constitutes a precis of the facts, reasoning, and the policy conclusion which not only characterizes Professor Perloff's study, but which has also been inherent in the work of most social scientists in Puerto Rico during the past two decades. It is essentially the Neo-Malthusian approach, which proposes that a liberal standard of living can only be attained through the use of artificial devices that prevent conception. In a formal and legal sense, there has been little implementation of the policy; the only statute is Law 136 of 1937, which legalizes the teaching of contraceptive methods to mothers who require freedom from pregnancies for health purposes. But nevertheless, the Malthusian barrage has had a telling effect; more significant than active governmental policy appears to be the inculcated belief in the minds of Puerto Ricans as to the validity of the argument, and the resulting effect thereby on "voluntary" birth limitation. So thorough has been the scare technique, that Puerto Ricans appear to be imbued with a "standing room only" attitude, a condition which will eventually result in some kind of a population Dunkirk if left unchecked. The average educated Puerto Rican does not know the size of the Insular national income, but he does know that nine babies are born every hour, or 80,000 per year; and moreover, he views this as a social tragedy. The birth rate, in other words, is generally and commonly associated with poverty in a cause and effect relationship. And as a result of this belief, some organized groups, in particular those associated with health services, have assumed that it is a desirable social

³ Perloff, *op. cit.*, pp. 208-9.

duty to propagate and assist the practice of birth control, with the direct result that sociological studies indicate that sterilization and contraceptive practices have increased significantly during the past decade.

THE ARGUMENT RE-EXAMINED

Not uncommonly in the social sciences, something perversely refuses to turn out the way in which it was expected, because either the premises or the reasoning are at fault. In the foregoing process of reasoning, as it was in the case of Malthus' theory, it was the premises which proved to be in error, rendering the conclusion invalid. And this is understandable, at least by hindsight, for the premises were largely deduced from speculative projections, with a considerable admixture of pure prediction.

In the first instance, industrialization has been much more rapid and successful than had been anticipated. Professor Perloff maintains that "Puerto Rico cannot afford to go through a demographic-industrial evolution spanning . . . a transitional period of two to three centuries."⁴ The experience of the past decade in Puerto Rico, however, merely confirms what has already been the experience in such countries as Japan and present-day Israel, that countries today can be industrialized virtually overnight, in decades rather than centuries. By virtue of a dynamic and bold governmentally-sponsored program of industrialization, the economic indicators after ten years of hard work and determination are enough to surprise even the most optimistic planner. While real output on the mainland increased by about fifty per cent in the decade from 1940 to 1950, output of goods and services in real terms doubled in Puerto Rico. Insular net income rose from \$121 per capita to \$205 in real terms, or an increase of 68.6 per cent per capita; while personal income, which includes transfer payments, rose from \$122 per capita in 1939-40 to \$219 in constant prices for the fiscal year 1948-49. Production per worker increased in Puerto Rico at the rate of four per cent a year, while for the same decade there was an increase of less than three per cent in the United States. Similarly impressive have been the advances in the fields of social justice, such as social security, collective bargaining, maternal and child care, and education.⁵

An unexpected development has also occurred with regard to the rate of population increase. Although net emigration had reached a level of 35,000 in 1946-47, this figure apparently was considered abnormal by Professor Perloff for the purpose of trend extrapolation; rather, he

⁴ Perloff, *op. cit.*, p. 194.

⁵ The statistics in this paragraph have been taken from *Economic Development*, Economic Division, Puerto Rico Planning Board, January, 1951.

accepts a projection assuming a net out-migration of 6,257 persons per annum, or at the annual average of 1937-46.⁶ The pull of continental prosperity on the Puerto Rican propensity to emigrate, however, has continued throughout the postwar period, and remains high, with the result that the net emigration rate has remained at a level of approximately 25,000 persons annually. Consequently, despite a high *natural* rate of growth of about 29 persons per one thousand for the year 1950, the actual population rate of growth for the past decade was 18.3 per cent, which was less than had been expected, and also less than the 21.1 per cent increase during the thirties. In fact, the actual rate of increase of 18.3 per cent for the period 1940 to 1950 is not significantly different than the 14.5 per cent increase in the population rate of growth experienced in the United States for the same period.

The conjuncture of these two conditions—a greater than expected rate of industrialization and productivity increase, with a less than expected rate of population growth—has placed the Puerto Rican per capita income on a par with countries usually construed to be relatively prosperous. For example, out of 70 countries reported on by the United Nations, Puerto Rico occupies the 26th place, and is only exceeded on the list by three Latin American countries: Argentina, Uruguay, and Venezuela.⁷ There is, in fact, no condition of overpopulation on the Island, if by this nebulous term is meant a situation in which economic advance is seriously jeopardized by the rate of population increase. Since the increase in personal income was 161 per cent over the decade for Puerto Rico and 131 per cent for the United States, both measured in current prices, it is conclusive that population growth in Puerto Rico was not a barrier to the realization of a better level of living in the past decade.

That progress has been made is indisputable, but grievous problems remain: production has not increased to a desirable level, unemployment persists, there is considerable underemployment disguised as employment, and there is still suffering, and misery, and desperate conditions of life. The objective to do away with extreme poverty has not been achieved. Yet, the goal is at least definitely realizable. Current governmental plans have an objective of tripling the present production by 1960, on the entirely reasonable assumption that the transition to industrialization is still in its infancy, and that what the country has

⁶ Perloff, *op. cit.*, p. 225.

⁷ Puerto Rico Planning Board, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

done in the past ten years is merely indicative of what it is capable of doing.

But the diehards, even when confronted by the achievements in Puerto Rico, are still indefatigable. Professor Kingsley Davis, in a recent appraisal of the Puerto Rican economy,⁸ ascribes some of the Island's success to good luck, to the fortuitous occurrence of World War II and defense expenditures, and to the unprecedented emigration rate in the postwar period; therefore, in his view, there have been no fundamental solutions. There is little acknowledgement in this and other recent studies of the idealism which has erupted into active politics, and which has canalized the power and capacity of the Puerto Rican people into more effective production. Moreover, one should imagine that the development of the past decade would be conducive to caution; but contrariwise, Professor Davis, undaunted by past temerity, blandly predicts a population of 8,800,000 by the year 2020; and then casting all restraints aside, predicts a condition in which there will be standing room only within 150 years, even assuming a rather high rate of emigration.⁹ He concludes, not unexpectedly, that fertility must come down for a permanent improvement of living standards in Puerto Rico, and urges a vigorous birth control policy on the part of the Government.

POPULATION THEORY

The experience in Puerto Rico during the past decade is indicative of the difficulty involved in enunciating universally valid general laws of change. In a static model, and with the conceptual aid of the principle of diminishing returns, Malthus' law of population has some reality: there is, conceivably, a certain size of population which, if exceeded, would yield diminishing returns. In the hypothetical and abstract case, therefore, it is reasonable to say, although scarcely an immutable principle, that the factors which maintain a balance between population and resources are vice, famine, and moral restraint. Under the same static conditions, the contention of the Neo-Malthusians that population if allowed its full physiological extension will exceed a progressively rising standard of living is also probably valid. But the facts of economic development alone disprove Malthus' pessimism; while the experience in Puerto Rico during the past decade indicates that a larger number of people may be maintained at a higher standard of living even in a country with a high population density, if the state of productive tech-

⁸ Kingsley Davis, "Production and Progress in Puerto Rico," *Foreign Affairs*, July, 1951, pp. 625-636.

⁹ *Ibid*, p. 632.

nique is changed.¹⁰ What the Malthusians and their successors, the Neo-Malthusians, have attempted to do is to relate three variables: the fecundity of man, the fertility of the earth, and technological development; then having related them in a stationary equilibrium, to apply the same premises to conditions of change. Obviously, such postulations can only have validity with reference to time and institutions.

In the pursuit of a more comprehensive, dynamic, and socially utilitarian population theory, modern economists have discarded the traditional analysis in terms of numbers and subsistence, and now attempt to draw a relation between the size of population and productive efficiency, or the *optimum population* consistent with given means of subsistence. This concept of an optimum population has as its policy goal a size of population which will operate available productive resources at the point of maximum per capita output. Any decrease of the population below that size will diminish the output, and hence result in underpopulation; any increase, conversely, will result in overpopulation.

But again, as in the Malthusian framework, the concept of an optimum is more a conceptual ideal than a practical policy guide. The optimum size of population is constantly changing with the development of techniques and the growth of capital; consequently, it is very difficult, and perhaps impossible, to say if any country at a particular time is overpopulated. Poverty in Puerto Rico, for example, may be more attributable to the maldistribution of wealth and the unproductiveness of man than to the size of population. This presumption is borne out in the present study, for it is clear that the Neo-Malthusian position that an increase in population tends to reduce per capita income is inadequate. Rather, what has happened during the past decade in Puerto Rico is that capital, technical knowledge, and other factors have altered, along with an increase in population, with the result that the

¹⁰ Professor Emilio Cofresi, in a recently published study on Puerto Rican population problems, remains true to the static model of Malthusian economics. In this study, the changes in productive technique and the consequent increase in real income during the past decade are considered to be abnormal, and thus are not held to be relevant. Cf. Emilio Cofresi, *Realidad Poblacional de Puerto Rico*. San Juan, Imprenta Venezuela, 1951, p. 6.

Professor Felix S. Cohen utilizes a dramatic way of illustrating the error of population extrapolations, without, at the same time, projecting income trends. Based on the actual increase in real wages in Puerto Rico during the decade of the forties of approximately 8 per cent per annum, Professor Cohen has computed that on the demographers own assumption of continuing trends, this would lead to an average family income of \$125,840 by the year 2000. Cf. Felix S. Cohen, "Puerto Rico's Human Resources," *Caribbean Economic Review*, Vol. II, No. I, May, 1950, p. 123.

Unwittingly, however, despite their "scientific" pretensions, moral judgments *have* entered into their policy conclusions. If it is hypothesized, for example, that birth limitation is desirable on purely economic grounds, or that the principle of the end justifies the means should hold, the specific means of population control should merely be a matter of pragmatic choice between means of obtaining the desired end. It is interesting to note in Puerto Rico that abortion has never been advanced as a public program by the social scientists. In Japan, for example, the Government has been much more "scientific"; abortion has been legalized on economic grounds. And the Nazis were even more "scientific"; they exterminated the aged as well as the young.

By flagrantly ignoring ethical considerations, the social scientists who have prescribed for the ills of Puerto Rico have done incalculable and grievous harm. Over ninety per cent of the people of Puerto Rico are Catholics. Followers of this religion believe that the primary natural purpose of marriage is the reproduction or multiplication of the human race; consequently, birth control is viewed as the most insidious sin in marriage. Whatever the name or the manner, if the purpose is the same, namely positively to prevent conception whilst exercising the rights of marriage, the parties concerned are guilty of a mortal sin.

There is no ambiguity about this; there is no such thing as the Catholic Church condoning the theory but not the practice of birth control. Professor Perloff by inference ascribes a sympathetic view to a program of "humane" population limitation to the Catholic Church.¹² This is an unfortunate error. The Church's view is unequivocal: there can never be any justification for this act under any circumstances imaginable. No stress of poverty, no health reason, no prediction of a doctor, no economic struggle—in a word, no reason whatsoever, can render it allowable. The Church, on the other hand, does not say that married people must have children; or that they must have children in the first years of married life; or that they must have many children. All that the Catholic Church teaches is that married people, if they use the rights of marriage, must accept the consequences. Self-control is considered to be the only virtuous birth control.

The assumption, therefore, that moral considerations are not an aspect of the population-resource problem in Puerto Rico is tantamount to assuming that the religion of over 90 per cent of the Puerto Rican people is not a relevant consideration. Or to put it more bluntly, moral considerations are of no pertinence whenever an economist or sociolo-

¹² Perloff, *op. cit.*, p. 233.

gist encourages birth control practices as public policy, although, in effect, he encourages mortal sin for over 90 per cent of the people of Puerto Rico. Moreover, such a policy is not merely a breach of ecclesiastical law, but also a violation of natural moral law; consequently, it has a deleterious effect on all Puerto Ricans, regardless of their religion.

POLITICAL FREEDOM

But even if the ethical and moralistic argument is abstracted from the discussion as being irrelevant, or of little importance, there still remains the question of political freedom. Any respectable social scientist will at least identify himself as being sympathetic with a liberal philosophy, if not a moralistic one; thus he is concerned with the consideration of maintaining freedom.

The world today hears much of inherent rights and freedoms, and we are reminded that free men must rededicate themselves to the cause of freedom: a concept which is usually formalized into a broad constitutional statement of essential human rights. Primary among these rights is freedom of religion, or the right to one's soul, and the right of each man to approach God in his own way. This implies that a man has the right to possess his mind and conscience for himself; and conversely, that the State can have no sovereignty over the mind and soul. In other words, there is the implicit assumption that the State should be the guarantor of law, not its source: "Man is older than the State, his human rights are inviolable; the family is older and more dignified than the State; the rights of the family, among them most prominently the parent's rights, are inviolable; . . ." ¹³ Moreover, it imposes on the State the duty to abstain from enacting laws which impair the right of religious freedom, and even the duty to enact laws to prevent persons within its jurisdiction from impairing the right.

We are also warned, ". . . that those who attack freedom in the name of freedom are no less dangerous than those who attack it in the name of authority and discipline."¹⁴ In Puerto Rico, political freedom is being attacked in the name of economic progress, developed within the superficially convincing framework of Neo-Malthusianism; for Puerto Ricans have been emphatically told that a necessary condition for the attainment of economic progress is State control of the birth rate.

As an underlying rationale to these birth control measures, there are characteristics which savor of Neo-Liberal political notions: that an

¹³ Oswald von Nell-Bruening, S.J., "Vocational Groups and Monopoly," *Review of Social Economy*, Sept., 1951, Vol. IX, No. 2, p. 98.

¹⁴ "Declaration of Freedom" written on the tenth anniversary of Freedom House by a Freedom House Committee, *New York Times*, Oct. 6, 1951.

obstacle to economic progress may be swept aside if the program of reform is espoused by a majority decision; that basic freedoms may be maintained, although a restriction is made here and there for expediency purposes; and lastly, that progress is measured in terms of material gain. Freedom of the individual is not considered to be a quantum in itself, desirable as a goal in its own right. Since freedom does not enter as a statistic in national income accounting, it is a variable relegated to the economic philosophers; it is foreign to the planners and the cult of logicians who work in the realm of economic determinism; and it is expendable if the price is right.

An alternative interpretation of freedom, and one which characterizes the whole body of traditional liberalist thought, is that freedom is a measure of progress. It follows from such an hypothesis, that the measure of per capita income over time is not the only criterion of economic gain; and it follows, also, that if Puerto Rico's economic progress is to be bought at the sacrifice of freedom, the price can be too high. No one will condone poverty and hunger, but there are two objectives, not just one; and they are not, of necessity, mutually exclusive. There is freedom and social justice, on the one hand, and economic progress on the other. Both are desirable, and possibly also, neither achievable without the other.

CONCLUSION

Regardless of ethical and political considerations, and regardless, too, of the desires of the Puerto Rican people, the tide of Neo-Malthusianism continues to run high on the Island, with the epitome of progress interpreted in terms of birth control pills which can be taken orally. Meanwhile, the Puerto Rican people have quietly transformed their country. But meanwhile, also, they continue to live in an intellectual vacuum, unaware, even, that perhaps the majority of social scientists disclaim the desirability of population limitation. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, for example, concluded a recent study of underdeveloped areas with the following observation:

“Manpower must be increased. The vicious circle must be broken. Ignorance, disease and malnutrition produce a pitiful specimen that is only one-tenth of a man. He cannot produce enough even to feed himself. He lacks energy for any self-improvement. And so it continues—with more ignorance, disease and malnutrition. This cycle can be broken at any point, with education, better hygiene and sanitation, better land use and

increased manpower. The whole cultural complex must be dealt with.⁴⁵

From the point of view of the social, political and spiritual life of the Puerto Rican people, the alternative which has been posed to them is a dismal one: the acceptance of the dogma of a planned secular society, or economic retardation. Fortunately, however, such a choice is not a necessary one; in other words, it is reasonable to presume that the technical means are available to provide for a still greater population in Puerto Rico at a higher standard of living. That is not to say that Puerto Rico is free from serious problems, nor is it to approve of the *status quo*; but it is to maintain that this Island has suffered from an overpopulation of Neo-Malthusians whose weakness in economic theory is hardly less than their ethical debility.

⁴⁵ Italics added. Reported in the *New York Times*, Nov. 4, 1951.

