

# No Room for Homo sapiens?

*J. D. Bernal*

HAVING read Ivor Montagu's article in *Marxism Today* (June 1966) and listened to his address at Marx House on the same subject, I would like to put down a few reflections of my own.

In the first place, I am entirely with Montagu in his feeling that the subject of population has not received and does not receive the attention from Marxists that it deserves. That does not mean that I am entirely with him in the arguments he presents, but rather consider that he has reopened an important discussion which deserves to be followed up.

## Short-Term Problem

There appears to be in the subject a confusion between long- and short-term considerations of population growth. I myself am to some extent to blame for this. I recognise that in my book *World Without War*, where I tried to deal with world economic problems, I was guilty of an un-marxist deviation, along Wellsian Utopian lines. I considered what *could* be done by the application of the scientific-technical revolution to the problems of the world as a whole, including those of the underdeveloped parts of it. I considered the resources and needs of the population, allowing for its very rapid recent growth, and showed that they were adequate for raising the level of production and consumption of the whole world to the highest level reached today in the most fortunate countries—in other words, what could be done—and I even included some of the factors, such as imperialism and war preparations, that prevented it from being done. What was not discussed, however, is what ought to have been—that is, I discussed what *could* be done, not what *would* be done. It is in this field that the real application of Marxism to Malthusianism arises. I did point out, however, that this was the crux of the problem—that if it paid to produce a world free from war and want, it would have been done long ago, and therefore surely, it does not pay to do so now.

This is the short-term Malthusian problem—how to provide within the next 30 years—by the end of this century—enough for the 6,000 million people who will be alive in the world at that time. This is a straight technical/economic problem, on which we already possess the essential data. As Montagu says, the developments of the twentieth century have caught up with the Marx-Malthus controversy. The world will starve, not because the population

increases geometrically, but because the methods of production are being held back by capitalist-controlled economies, which cannot (and were not designed to) provide welfare for all. Capitalist firms exploit and will exploit the peoples of the poorer countries just as they have the poorer-paid workers in their own countries. That is the way the system works.

It is no use, as Montagu points out, saying it will be all right once the world has a Socialist economy, for there is not time to achieve that before the situation becomes desperate. It is very doubtful whether anything can be done at all in such a short time to prevent the increase in population, though it is not impossible that a new type of pill will be evolved of which one application will suffice to prevent birth for 20 years or more, and this might serve to limit the increase. We must, of course, do everything we can to hold up war preparations and imperialist exploitation in the next few years, but that will not be enough. We must show all the people in the world that the capitalist governments can only bring a general destruction of humanity, and that it is the people themselves who must demonstrate by their actions against capitalism and imperialism that they will not tolerate their rule any longer. The pressure of a total world resistance to capitalist methods might however be sufficient to check them and liberate more food in time for the greater population, a technically attainable aim, as working-class pressure has succeeded in doing in Britain, even short of a revolution.

## Long Term

It is however, to the long-term aspects of Malthusianism that Montagu devotes most of his essay. Although it is not urgent, he feels that Marxism ought to provide for a state of the world which would enable mankind to flourish indefinitely in conditions which would be at least acceptable to the majority of men and women. This, he says, is more than a matter of food, it is one of room. Here I differ from him widely, and in fundamental principle.

He criticises the theses set down in an article by Tony Chater:

“Of course there are sound reasons for advocating birth control—safeguarding women's health for example.

“There is also a strong case for extending birth

control to deal with the immediate problem of feeding the present world population.

“But in the long term there is no reason to believe that birth control will be forced upon us by limitations in the supply of food.

“Rather, when the immediate problem of hunger has been overcome, we should welcome a bigger population.”

On the first three of these I am already in agreement, and so is Montagu. On the last one I differ widely from him. Montagu definitely does not welcome a bigger population, and fears that the usual Marxist view is apt to bracket us with the Catholics. He seems to think that the Biblical injunction “Increase and multiply” implies concern for the number of immortal souls and the greater glory of God. “Population limitation somehow diminishes his glory.” Montagu maintains that Marxists should not take this view simply because “Marx and Engels showed that wealth is enlarged by the labour of human beings. *Ergo*, the more human beings you have the richer (and, by extensive assumption, happier) you will be”.

### Value of Large Population

My reasons for welcoming a large population are based on science, not on religion. It is because I appreciate the value of human beings in body and mind that I want to see as much as possible of the inorganic materials of the world turned into human beings. That they must be able to live active and satisfying lives, without enslaving women, goes without saying. Montagu feels there would not be room enough for them. Yet if we are considering the amount of available land per person at the present level of development of agriculture, this is an altogether inadequate argument. Only one-tenth of the world's land area is used for agriculture. The rest of it, the waste of mountain and forest, is nine-tenths of the whole, and most of it is what I would consider ideal holiday country, or could be made so with present available means of transport and shelter.

One of the great developments of the last decade has been the growth of the tourist movement, even in the Socialist countries, and it will grow still

further and bring much happiness to millions, to whom automation will mean shorter hours of work and longer holidays. It seems, however, that with tourism people on the whole shun the lonely spots, and favour the Butlins and the Club Méditerranée (or Yalta for that matter). Montagu can keep his depopulated Orkneys for as far ahead as we can see.

### Marx and Malthus

His biological argument is equally invalid. It is true that rats and grasshoppers in crowded circumstances develop unpleasant habits. We need to know much more about how this happens before we condemn human beings for getting together if they want to.

Human beings of the future will know how to deal with these problems when they meet them. It is certain that by having a lot of people the chances of producing a few of quite exceptional powers and skill, such as musical or mathematical skill, will be much increased. I do not agree with Montagu when he says “the bigger the community, the more difficult is democracy”. The enemy of democracy is not the size of the population, but those people to whose interest it is to prevent the people from having any democracy at all.

Montagu supports his case with many quotations from Soviet authorities, for example:

“Today we no longer disregard the works issued on population in the capitalist countries, since in them, too, we find a great deal of useful information, ideas and methods of tackling the problem. All this quickly revealed that reality is more complex than schematic conceptions, which, even if fundamentally correct, by their schematism caused no little harm in the years past.” (Professor Pokrivshevsky, *Novy Mir*, No. 1, 1966.)

One can agree with Montagu on the need to re-examine demographic processes. But that does not mean the need to abandon Marx in favour of Malthus. It is possible to do justice to both at the same time. In any case, it is the short term problem of providing enough food for the people already born, or shortly to be born, that is the urgent one, and no quarrels about possible population in the 21st century can diminish its importance.

## Paul Carter

**T**ONY CHATER'S contribution to the discussion on "No Room for Homo sapiens?" points out that industrialisation is the answer to the food crisis in the underdeveloped countries—the "third world". However he does not show how industrialisation of these countries will help and why it has not already occurred.

Blackett has pointed out<sup>1</sup> that the present day *per capita* income in the third world—approximately £40 p.a.—is one-tenth of that in the West. In real terms this is equivalent to what Europeans were receiving over 200 years ago, that is before the Industrial Revolution. Previous to the industrial revolution in Britain, approximately 5 per cent of our Gross National Product was being invested annually. The rest was consumed by the population. This low level of reinvestment amounted to only paying for the depreciation of existing stock—i.e., the maintenance of a static economy. The reinvestment in the third world today is on much the same level as it was in Britain then.

### The Feedback Process

However in Britain, capital had accumulated from the trading and small scale capitalism of the merchant class, and from the manipulation of the Land Acts by the larger landowners. This was ploughed back into the economy at a rate of something like 15 per cent of the GNP, to create the material basis for the Industrial Revolution. Blackett and others have called this the "take off" period of economic development. This is the stage when accumulation of capital—either public or private—has reached such a stage that the reinvesting of this in the economy exceeds both the demands of the 5 per cent annual depreciation of stock, and the 2-3 per cent annual population increase. There is enough investment left over to produce self-regenerating economic growth and a dynamically expanding industrialisation can take place.

This has direct relevance to the food problem in the third world in that there is a feedback process from industrialisation to agriculture. Mechanisation, reclamation, artificial fertilisers, and strain improvements enable less agricultural workers to produce more food. If fewer workers are engaged in producing the nations food supply then more are available for industrial production, thus production as a whole, and consequentially living standards, goes up. Western countries have only 5-10 per cent of their population living on the land and the whole population enjoy a much higher living standard than

the Asian countries where 90 per cent of the population live on the land.

The Soviet Union provides a good example of this feedback principle. Surplus capital produced by industrialisation is being reinvested in agriculture. A total of 71 billion roubles is being injected into agriculture between 1966 and 1970. This is as large an investment as in housing and construction. Total farm output is expected to be increased by 25 per cent in these 4 years and labour productivity is expected to rise by 35-40 per cent.<sup>2</sup> Since labour productivity will be increasing more than overall production, fewer workers will be needed to produce more food. The present proportion of people living on the land (50 per cent—two-thirds of these actually engaged in agriculture) is therefore expected to drop with a resultant increase in the number of industrial workers, and hence industrial production.

### Investment in Third World

Heavy capital investment is obviously needed in the third world in order to boost their economies beyond the "take off" level, so that they can achieve a self-generating industrial economy. Capital feedback into agriculture can then help to produce the food necessary to banish the widespread starvation. Blackett reckons that £1 per head, or a total of £1,000 million annually, would be the barest minimum necessary for starting industrialisation. Powell<sup>1</sup> and others calculate that the amount needed would be upwards of £10,000 million annually for twenty years for the "take off" level to be reached. Certainly at least £4,000 million—the equivalent of a 10 per cent increase in the GNP for the 1,000 million population of the third world—is needed annually to start the process.

How is this surplus over the needs of already desperate nations going to be produced for this massive capital investment? The answer is that it is already being produced. There is a capital outflow from the third world to the West in the form of returns on investment, and from unfair trade prices, that is at least equal to the amount needed for industrialisation. As Idris Cox pointed out in the July *Marxism Today*—Britain gains more than £1,243 million annually from property and investment abroad. The USA gets £3,000 million per annum from its foreign investments. A substantial proportion of these returns are from the third world. On top of this downright robbery the third world lost £5,200 million between 1951 and 1961 due to the falling prices of the primary goods that they produce,

<sup>1</sup> *The Science of Science*, Pelican.

<sup>2</sup> *The Economist*, October 15th, 1966, p. 239.

and the rising prices of manufactured goods from the West. The Geneva Conference on Trade and Development showed that the developing countries would be losing £2,800 million per annum by 1970 due to these GATT controlled price changes. The surplus capital necessary for industrialisation is being produced by the third world—but is immediately expropriated by Imperialism. In human terms their peoples are suffering the same privations, or worse, as did the British people during the first stages of our Industrial Revolution. But they are not getting any industrialisation to show for it.

### Western "Aid"

The first political requirement then, for halting starvation in the third world, is to halt neo-colonialism and enable the capital produced there to be used there. The second requirement is to render honest aid to these countries so that their peoples need not suffer the birth pangs of industrialisation. Western aid does not fall into this category. Western aid is dropping, and carries high interest rates, 70 per cent of British aid now carries interest rates of up to 7 per cent.<sup>3</sup> A very great proportion of Western aid—at least half American aid—is for military purposes. Much of the rest is not used for the necessary industrialisation of the third world. Instead the economic infrastructure of the country is built up to ease the way for private capital investment from the West.

Perhaps worst of all, Western aid is given with strings, it is not given where it is needed most, so much as where it can shore up puppet states. For instance British aid runs at £16.73 per head in Swaziland, and £6.70 per head in Lesotho. By contrast independent India receives only 1s. per head, and Pakistan only 2s.<sup>4</sup> American aid has to be paid back in the currency of the receiving country, so that America now holds such a stock of rupees

<sup>3</sup> Idris Cox, *Marxism Today*, July, 1966.

<sup>4</sup> *The Times*, November 2nd, 1966, p. 2.

that India can be threatened with financial slaughter should she not toe the line.

### Soviet Aid

By contrast Soviet Aid is carefully directed to helping the countries of the third world throw off neo-colonialism. Seventy per cent of all Russian aid goes on industrialisation, and tens of thousands of skilled workers and specialists have been trained either in the Soviet Union, or on industrial sites run on Soviet aid. Between 1956 and January 1965 the total Soviet economic and technical aid commitments amounted to nearly 4,000 million roubles—of which 3,500 million roubles have already been spent.<sup>5</sup> Approximately 500 million roubles has been in the form of free gifts, the rest as credit carrying only 2½ per cent interest—which only just pays for servicing the loans.<sup>6</sup> The loan is paid back after 12 years, during which time the investment will have more than paid for itself, so that repayment of loans in no way depletes the capital resources of the receiving country. Most important of all, Soviet loans are paid back in the form of goods, the primary goods naturally produced by these countries. No hunting around for foreign exchange is necessary, and the Soviet Union cannot build up reserves of the currency of other nations as a threat to their independence—as does America.

The Socialist countries are carrying out the two political prerequisites for the industrialisation and hence prosperity of the third world. They are fighting neo-colonialism, and rendering real aid. By contrast the West is exploiting these countries far more than it is giving aid, and its very aid is neo-colonialist in character. The British people must be made aware of British Imperialism's contribution to the crisis in the third world.

<sup>5</sup> *The USSR and Developing Countries*, Novosti Press Agency Publishing House, 1966.

<sup>6</sup> Mr. Makarov, Attaché USSR Embassy, London. Speech at teach-in on "Crisis in the Third World", Birmingham University, October, 1966.

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