

Population Growth and Political Radicalism.

In his discussion of the history of Russia, John Mynard Keynes wrote:

European Russia increased her population ... from less than 100,000,000 in 1890 to about 150,000,000 at the outbreak of war, and in the years immediately preceding 1914 the excess of births over deaths in Russia as a whole was at the prodigious rate of two million per annum. This inordinate growth in the population of Russia ... has been nevertheless one of the most significant facts of recent years. The great events of history are often due to secular changes in the growth of population and other fundamental economic causes, escaping by their gradual character the notice of contemporary observers, are attributed to the follies of statesmen or the fanaticism of atheists. Thus the extraordinary occurrences of the past two years in Russia, that vast upheaval of Society which has overturned what seemed most stable – religion, the basis of property, the ownership of land, as well as forms of government and the hierarchy of classes – may owe more to the deep influences of expanding numbers than to Lenin or to Nicholas, and the disruptive powers of excessive national fecundity may have played a greater part in bursting the bonds of convention than either the power of ideas or the errors of aristocracy.¹

This is a form of demographic determinism, although Keynes did not discuss the details of how population growth affected the Russian Revolution, except to state that it had an overall disruptive effect on Russian society.

It is possible to clarify this analysis through previous work on population growth. In his book on the enemies of Rome, Philip Matyszak wrote:

Historians blamed the fall of Rome on depopulation, pointing to references in the ancient texts to plagues and *agri deserti* (abandoned fields). Certainly, by the end of the Empire, a few thousand men counted as a substantial army whereas in the glory days of the Republic a single legion contained 6,000 men.²

Roman urbanism in Italy implied large and compact settlements linked by swift communications and thus provided a ready network for infectious diseases to take hold and spread. Significant population growth occurred in the thinly settled west in Africa, Spain and Gaul, but the population of Italy remained stagnant.³ The growth in regions outside of Italy resulted in a greater capacity to launch effective attacks on a stagnant empire and eventually resulted in its decline.

For England, H.J. Habakkuk summarized the long-term relationship between population growth and economic development:

long-term movements in prices, in income distribution ... in real wages ... are dominated by changes in the growth of population. Rising population: rising prices ... low real incomes for the mass of the population ... this might stand for a description of the thirteenth century, the sixteenth century, and the

¹ John Maynard Keynes, 'The Economic Consequences of Peace' in *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money*, 2017, p.370.

² Peter Razzell, 'Demography and the Decline of the Roman Empire', *Online Peter Razzell*, p. 1.

³ *Ibid*, p. 2,

early seventeenth, and the period 1750-1815. Falling or stationary population with ... higher mass incomes might be said to be characteristic of the intervening periods.⁴

Implicit in this analysis is the assumption that population growth created a surplus of labour, leading to a fall of income for the mass of the population, but an increase in the wealth of the owners of capital. Lawrence Stone described this process of social polarisation which took place in England during the sixteenth century because of population growth:

The excess supply of labour relative to demand not only increased unemployment but forced down real wages to an alarming degree ... [there was] a polarisation of society into rich and poor: the upper classes became relatively more numerous, and their real incomes rose; the poor also became more numerous and their real incomes fell.⁵

This is confirmed by data on wealth generated by the Worth and Status Project.⁶

	1550-74	1575-99	1600-24	1625-49
Gentry (N = 367)	£16.00	£8.00	£59.30	£50.00
Yeoman (N = 1104)	£5.34	£7.27	£23.92	£50.00
Trade (N = 2185)	£2.40	£1.40	£2.99	£5.00
Husbandmen (N = 2127)	£4.00	£3.37	£5.93	£5.00
Labourers (N = 273)	£1.58	£1.35	£1.36	£1.03

Although the gentry increased their wealth – increasing by about three times – the yeomen’s wealth grew by nearly ten times, while the labourers’ worth decreased slightly. There was little change among husbandmen and a doubling of wealth among tradesmen. Yeomen were essentially a social status category and were part of the ‘middle sort’ who dominated the support for Parliament in the civil war and were the principal supporters of puritanism at this time.⁷

Wrightson has summarized the situation of yeomen:

‘Like the gentry, they benefited from low labour costs as employers, while as large-scale producers they stood to gain from rising prices ... Again, like the gentry, they took a thoroughly rational and calculating attitude towards profit ... often ambitious, aggressive, [and] small capitalists ... [they] experienced gradually rising living standards, the rebuilding of farmhouses and their stocking with goods of increasing sophistication and comfort.’⁸

An example of this process is to be found in Stratford-on-Avon. Population had grown rapidly during the sixteenth century resulting in a polarisation of wealth. About forty per cent of the population were designated as poor,⁹ whereas at the same time one-hundred-and-twenty of the leading townsmen were found illegally to be hording grain and barley.¹⁰ This resulted in a serious riot, described by Abraham Sturley in a letter to his friend Richard Quiney:

⁴ Peter Razzell, ‘Population Growth and the Development of Capitalism in Britain, 1550-1850’, *Online Peter Razzell*, p.2.

⁵ Peter Razzell, ‘Essays in Historical Sociology’, *Online Peter Razzell*, p. 238.

⁶ Data from *Perceptions of Worth and Social Status in Early Modern England*, ESRC Reference Number RES-000-23-1111.

⁷ See Peter Razzell, ‘A sociological analysis of the English civil war’ in *Online Peter Razzell*.

⁸ K. Wrightson, *English Society 1580-1680*, 2013, pp. 134, 135.

⁹ E. Fripp, *Master Richard Quiney*, 1924, p. 177.

¹⁰ B. Rowland Lewis, *The Shakespeare Documents*, 1940, p. 284.

‘U shall understande, brother, that our neighbours are growne with the wantes they feelee throughe the dearnes of corne ... malecontent. Thei have assembled together in a great nomber, and travelld to Sir Tho. Luci on Fridai last to complaine of our malsters; on Sundai to Sir Foulke Gre. and Sir Joh. Conwai. I should have said on Wendsdai to Sir Ed. Grevll first ... Tho. West, returning from the ij knights of the woodland, came home so full that he said to Mr. Baili that night, he hoped within a weeke to leade some of them in a halter, meaninge the malsters ... to se them hanged on gibbettes att their owne dores.’¹¹

This can be seen as an anticipation of Marx’s account of the conflict between capital and labour, although it was fuelled more by population increase than an independent development of the economy.

The polarisation of social classes in England was prominent in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, leading to the growth of political radicalism.¹² The poverty of labourers and the poor was a contributory factor in the wealth for those owning capital. As Malthus wrote: ‘farmers and capitalists are growing rich from the real cheapness of labour.’¹³

The pauperisation of labourers and other working-class groups was most powerfully documented by the Reverend Thomas Howlett. Howlett compiled figures of income and expenditure, using details of wages from farmers’ wage books and local knowledge of family incomes and consumption, for the two ten-year periods, 1744-53 and 1778-87. The annual expenditure per family in the first period was £20.11s.2d and earnings £20.12.7d, leaving a surplus of 1s.5d. In the second period the figures were £31.3s.7d and £24.3.5d, leaving a deficit of £7.0s.2d.¹⁴ Howlett concluded that

Of this deficiency the rates have supplied about forty shillings; the remaining £5 have sunk the labourers into a state of wretched and pitiable destitution. In the former period, the man, his wife, and children, were decently clothed and comfortably warmed and fed: now on the contrary, the father and mother are covered with rags; their children are running about, like little savages, without shoes or stockings to their feet; and, by day and night, they are forced to break down the hedges, lop the trees, and pilfer their fuel, or perish with cold.¹⁵

This poverty was also a factor in the revolutionary condition of Buckinghamshire in the 1830s:

Numbers of men were out of work, bread was dear, and the Chartist agitation was violently active. Copies of the *Northern Star* and other Chartist papers found their way into every workshop. Meetings were held almost every evening and on Sundays. Some of the speeches advocated physical force as the only remedy ... Lectures on Peterloo, the Bristol Riots, the Monmouth Rising, and the Pension List were common. Bad trade, low wages, and dear bread were the stimulating causes of widespread discontentment. Men were driven to their lowest depth of hatred of the governing classes... the country was passing through the throes of a political convulsion which was fast ripening into a revolution. The mechanics institute gradually degenerated into a violent revolutionary club.¹⁶

¹¹ Ibid, 227.

¹² E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Classes*, 1966.

¹³ T.R. Malthus, *Essays in the Principal of Population*, 1989, p. 28.

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 48.

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 49. Enclosure may have played a role in generating surplus labour, but this is a controversial thesis. See J.D. Chambers and J.D. Mingay, *The Agricultural Revolution, 1750-1850, ???*.

¹⁶ J. Buckmaster, *A Village Politician*, 1982, pp. 98, 99, 124, 153.

This is when the writings of Thomas Paine became so prominent, with the emergence of the London Correspondent Society and associated political radicalism, along with the political reaction involving draconite legislation.¹⁷

A further example of the effect of population growth on political radicalism occurred during the French Revolution. It has been estimated that 'Frances population grew by roughly fifty per cent from 19.7 million in 1700 to 29 million by 1800.'¹⁸ According to Wikipedia 20% of the population 'lived in towns or cities, Paris alone having over 600,000 inhabitant. This was accompanied by a tripling in the size of the middle class, which comprised 10% of the population in 1789. Despite increases in overall prosperity, its benefits were largely restricted to the rentier and mercantile classes, while the living standards fell for wage labourers and peasant farmers who rented their land.'¹⁹

This polarisation of socio-economic statuses is similar to what happened in England, as summarized by Habakkuk, It is essentially the result of population growth, that has historically created in England, France and Russia the social inequality and associated political radicalism.

¹⁷ Thompson, *The Making*.

¹⁸ Wikipedia, Population of France 1700-2020, *Online*.

¹⁹ Wikipedia, Overview, French Population History, *Online*.