STATE MEASURES FOR THE DIRECT PREVENTION OF POVERTY, WAR, AND PESTILENCE, CONTAINING THREE ARTICLES, STATE REMEDIES FOR POVERTY; CAN WAR BE SUPPRESSED? AND THE EXTINCTION OF INFECTIOUS DISEASES

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State Measures for the Direct Prevention of Poverty, War, and Pestilence, Containing Three Articles, State Remedies for Poverty; Can War Be Suppressed? and The Extinction of Infectious Diseases by Doctor of Medicine

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DOCTOR OF MEDICINE

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Trieste

STATE MEASURES

FOR THE DIRECT PREVENTION OF

Poverty, War, and Pestilence.

CONTAINING THREE ARTICLES, (THE TWO LAST REPRINTED FROM THE "NATIONAL REFORMER"):

STATE REMEDIES FOR POVERTY;

CAN WAR BE SUPPRESSED?

AND

THE EXTINCTION OF INFECTIOUS DISEASES.

BY

A DOCTOR OF MEDICINE,

Author of the "Elements of Social Science"

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STATE REMEDIES FOR POVERTY.

I WOULD here add, to what has been said in previous editions,* a few remarks on a subject of the utmost possible importance. It is a subject which has hitherto been little discussed, but on which many have doubtless, like myself, thought long and anxiously, and which seems to me urgently in need of an earnest consideration. However strongly opposed to the prevailing opinions and sentiments, it will sooner or later, I believe, become the most momentous of practical questions in every country of the world. I refer to the endeavour to extinguish poverty by *direct legal enactment* in the only way in which this could possibly be done, namely, by means of a statute limiting the size of families, and forbidding anyone, whether rich or poor, to have more than a certain small number of children.

Mr. John Stuart Mill, the great thinker whose loss we deplore, was strongly in favour of such a measure. He says in his Political Economy, "It would be possible for the State to guarantee employment at ample wages to all who are born. But if it does this, it is bound, in self-protection, and for the sake of every purpose for which government exists, to provide that no person shall be born without its consent." In another work, in a vindication of the French Revolution of 1848, he says, "The practical result of the whole truth might possibly be, that all persons living should guarantee to each other, through their organ, the State, the ability to earn by labour an adequate subsistence, but that they should abdicate the right of propagating the species at their own discretion and without limit; that all classes alike, and not the poor alone, should consent to exercise that power in such measure only, and under such regulations, as society might prescribe with a view to the common good. But before this solution of the problem can cease to be visionary, an almost entire renovation must take place in some of the most rooted opinions and feelings of the present race of mankind." And, again, he says in his Political Economy, "If the opinion were once generally established among the labouring classes that their welfare required a due regulation of the numbers of families, the respectable and well conducted of the body would conform to the prescription, and only those would exempt themselves from it who are in the habit of making light

* These remarks were first inserted in the edition of the "Elements of Social Science," which appeared in 1878.

of social obligations generally; and there would be then an evident justification for converting the moral obligation against bringing children into the world who are a burden to the community into a legal one; just as in many other cases of the progress of opinion, the law ends by enforcing against recalcitrant minorities, obligations which to be useful must be general, and which, from a sense of their utility, a large majority have voluntarily consented to take upon themselves. There would be no need, however, of legal sanctions, if women were admitted, as on all other grounds they have the clearest right to be, to the same right of citizenship with men. Let them cease to be confined by custom to one physical function as their means of living and their source of influence, and they would have for the first time an equal voice with men in what concerns that function; and of all the improvements in reserve for mankind, which it is now possible to foresee, none would, in my opinion, be so fertile as this in almost every kind of moral and social benefit." I venture to think that even if women were admitted to the suffrage, and other just rights and privileges of citizenship, there would still exist the most weighty reasons in favour of legislation on this subject.

The great reasons for such an enactment seem to me to be that *a law to regulate population, if duly carried out, could of itself with certainty remove poverty and overwork*; that no other law, or laws, could do this, and that the force of public opinion, and the conscience and self-interest of individuals are not strong enough, without the aid of law, to accomplish so vast an object. What is indispensably needed for the extinction of poverty is a restraint on population so powerful and general as to *remove the excessive pressure on the soil*; in other words, by diminishing the demand for food, to enable the margin of cultivation to recede to a sufficient extent, the worst soils to be thrown out of tillage, and the land altogether to be less highly and expensively cultivated. In this way the productiveness of labour would be increased, and wages would rise, while at the same time there would be a reduction in the working hours, and in the cost, and, therefore, the price of food. The country would then be placed somewhat in the position of a new colony, for the essential difference between an old country and a new colony is that in the former population is pressing too heavily on the productive powers of the land. Now it appears to me that a reform of such vast extent and difficulty as this, requiring the co-operation of the whole of society, will never be adequately carried out without the assistance and deliberate sanction of the Government. When the increase of population is left solely to the discretion of individuals, the moderation and self-restraint of some are counteracted by the recklessness and improvidence of others, and thus the overcrowded state is constantly kept up. Even in France, where prudence is most general in this respect, there is still immense over-population; as may be seen by the miserably low rate of wages in many

employments, and the high average price of provisions. It is a fact, thoroughly established by science, that large families are the real cause of low wages and dear food in old and civilised countries, and there can be no doubt that Government has the power, if it only has the will, to suppress the source of the evil, and thereby remove the effect. Anything else which Parliament can do to raise wages must be merely *indirect*, and can only attain its object by the circuitous means of acting on the general intelligence and independence of the people, and inducing them to limit their numbers. Why then should we always be content with indirect and inadequate measures? Why not go at once to the root of the matter, and grapple with the main cause of poverty and pauperism, with the earnest resolution to put an end to them? It seems to me that this question is sure to be asked before long by the working classes and social reformers, when the chief cause of poverty becomes widely known, and is no longer a matter of dispute. The great idea lying at the root of the socialist and democratic doctrines which have spread so widely of late years, especially on the Continent—an idea which I believe to be profoundly true—is that mankind form a community whose interests are bound up together, and who should mutually aid one another, and insure one another, as far as possible, against the ills of life; that society should have an equal care for the happiness of all its members, and should see that all are duly provided for; that therefore it is the duty of society, through its organ, the Government, to take energetic steps for the removal of poverty, and to *guarantee* to every individual who is willing to work, an ample subsistence in return for his labour. Now, a law to regulate population is in reality the *only law* by which it is possible for the State at once and directly to do away with poverty, to shorten the hours of labour, and to raise wages to a satisfactory amount; and if it be true, as was maintained by the Provisional Government of France in 1848, and was inscribed in the project of a constitution, that the State ought to guarantee subsistence and employment to all who are willing to work, such a law is the only means by which the object could be effected. Ought not then the State to adopt this one and only means for ensuring to all a comfortable subsistence? Should we not choose the most direct and certain path to deliver our society from the fearful evils of poverty and pauperism? For my own part, I cannot but entertain a deep conviction that such a law is quite legitimate in the extraordinary difficulties arising from the population principle. I think that it would, if enacted, be the most important to human happiness of all possible laws, and that it will sooner or later be laid down as the very foundation and corner-stone of society, in all the civilised countries of the old world.

It will be said that a measure of the kind described is far too sweeping an innovation, and too despotic an interference with personal liberty to be ever seriously contemplated. But those

who rely on such objections would do well to consider attentively the actual state of the facts. The truth is, that population is *already* so powerfully restrained by prudential motives in this and many other countries, that a little more or less of restraint is a matter of much smaller importance, and would be far less felt, than is often supposed. Immense numbers of people, perhaps the majority of society, are obliged at present by their circumstances to exercise so much caution in regard to marriage and offspring, that it would not make the slightest practical difference to them whether a Malthusian statute were in existence in the country or not. To those who are forced to lead a life of celibacy, the change would bring a positive increase of freedom, for if there were no excessive families, a much greater number could marry. The only persons whose liberty would really be interfered with are those who have large families, and in their case the operation of the law would for the most part be the greatest possible blessing to *themselves* as well as to the rest of society. It is no one's real interest in an old and over-peopled country to have a large family. Children, when too numerous, are a source of intolerable difficulties and anxieties among the rich quite as much as among the poorer classes; and it is a remarkable fact that in France and many other countries it is the rich, and not the poor, who most carefully limit the number of their offspring. We see, therefore, that the question does not really lie between liberty and restraint, but between two degrees of restraint, one of them unjust and partial in its action, inefficient, and attended by the most widespread sufferings, and the other, which would be just and efficient, and which would not be practically felt by most people as any increase of restriction, but only by those who would themselves be immensely benefited by the change. I believe that the abolition of poverty, the mightiest of all social revolutions, could be quietly and peacefully effected by this means, with only such an amount of interference with personal liberty as would be comparatively little felt as a positive evil. Moreover, poverty *cannot possibly* be got rid of without an increase in the preventive check to population. It is in vain to wish that there were no poor, and yet object to a further limitation of the size of families; if we will the end, we must will the means to attain it; and if, therefore, society must of an absolute necessity submit to an increased restraint in order to effect this grand purpose, what real difference does it make whether the restraint comes from law, or from public opinion, or from the conscientious feelings, or the interests, or the circumstances of individuals? Another very important matter to be taken into account is, that legal restrictions on population *actually exist at present* in many continental countries, and even in England. Mr. Senior, as quoted by Mr. Mill in his Political Economy, says that in the countries which recognise a legal right to relief, "marriage on the part of persons in the actual receipt of relief appears to be everywhere prohibited, and the marriage of

those who are not likely to possess the means of independent support is allowed by very few." In Norway, Wurtemberg, Bavaria, Frankfort, several Swiss Cantons, and some other parts of the Continent, no one is permitted to marry unless he can show that he has a fair prospect of being able to maintain a family; while in England, by a provision of the poor-law, husband and wife are separated in the workhouse. Now these laws, however excellent their intention, and however efficacious they may have been in diminishing poverty, do not seem to me strictly in accordance with justice, for two reasons: in the first place, because they prohibit *marriages*, instead of prohibiting (what alone, it appears to me, the Legislature can justly restrict) *large families;* and, secondly, because they apply only to the poor, and not to all classes of society alike. The existence of such enactments shows that a statute to regulate population would not introduce any new principle (since restrictions on marriage are really restrictions on population), but would merely be the extension to the community at large of a law which exists in this and other countries in regard to certain classes, and which, in my opinion, is unjust so long as it is confined to them, and is thus only a law for the poor and not for the rich. Is it just that all the restrictions should be laid on the poor or the paupers, when the whole of society has a share in the production of poverty and pauperism? Again, as to the objection that such a statute could never be enforced, we must remember that it could not possibly be enacted without an immense deal of discussion, and till the majority of the nation were strongly in its favour, and that the majority would not seek to impose any obligations on others which they were not ready to submit to themselves. It may, perhaps, be added that it would be possible to make the limit of families rather a high one—perhaps four children as the maximum—since very many would not reach it, and the penalty could be slight, as the great object of the law would be to guide and strengthen public opinion, and the dictates of individual prudence and conscience, and not by any means to supply their place. The mere discussion of the subject would be of incalculable value, and would spread a knowledge of the population truths over the whole country.

Had the population question been openly discussed, so that all might understand it, we should never have seen that perversion of justice by which two of the most gifted of English citizens have been sentenced to fine and imprisonment for seeking to benefit the poor—for earnestly considering the cause of low wages, as laid down by political economy, and pointing out the means by which, in their belief, poverty could be removed from society. It is the duty of all to meet, and not evade, this question. More especially is it incumbent on those who prosecute others to state plainly their own views on the subject. When a remedy for human miseries is put forward, not as a good in itself, but as *the least of several alternative evils*, one or other of which is necessary