

POPULATION AND THE SOCIAL SYSTEM

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Population and the social system by Francesco S. Nitti

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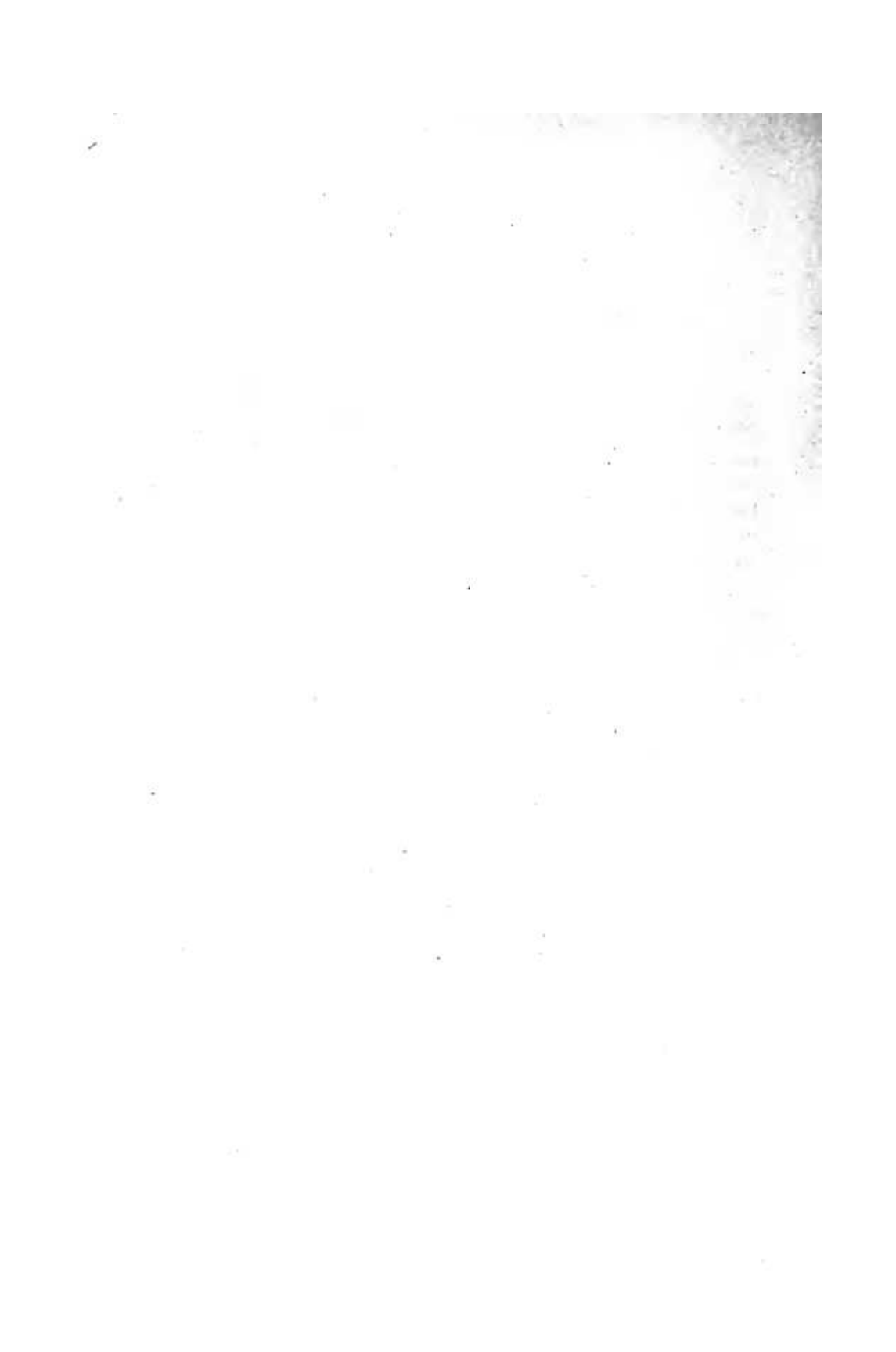
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TO ACHILLE LORIA.

NAPLES, *September, 1893.*

MY DEAR FRIEND,—Do you remember Hobbes' immortal aphorism? When reason is against a man, then man is an enemy of reason. To become convinced of the profound truth contained in this saying of Hobbes, it would be sufficient to examine the historical causes of economic theories, to make up, as you have once said, the economic theory of economic writers. If our science has made and still makes so little progress, it is because it is concerned with vital and real interests; to accept one of two directions is not for us, as for the followers of other sciences, merely a question of method, but it means, moreover, that different and opposite conclusions are reached, and that fixed forms of social organisation are justified or condemned. Had the propositions of Euclid affected economic interests, they would not now rank among the definite conquests of science, but would still appear doubtful hypothesis of arduous solution.

Metaphysics, driven out of all the other sciences, have taken refuge in ours, and I daily ask myself what can be the purpose of so many and such useless and vain researches, grounded upon pure hypotheses.

They are very few among the studious who follow a masterly road; just as there are but very few who do not sacrifice objective research to class interests. We have a philosophy of wealth and a philosophy of poverty; what we really lack is a broad and impartial philosophy. On the one side there are those who can see nothing but the miseries of the present hour, and there are those who would wish to change everything. Goethe had for a motto—*to see all the sides of things*. On the contrary, what is now wanted is just this exalted and serene vision, this calm, objective character in research and examination.

During the reign of Frederic II., Sömmering, the anatomist, in an inaugural dissertation at the University of

Mayence, foreseeing a great scientific truth, maintained that the anatomical conformation of negroes in their savage state approximated much more to monkeys than to white men. The canons of Mayence, who preserve the relics of the three Magi, one of whom, Melchior, would seem to have been a negro, were scandalised at this, and protested so vehemently that the honest Sömmering was severely blamed and punished. The teaching of the Darwinian hypotheses is now permitted in the Universities; but if an economist dares to sustain that some economic maxims held sacred hitherto are without any real foundation, or that, like the good Melchior, some economists belong much more to some inferior species of thinkers than to a superior one, he can be certain that he will be anathematised by the canons of our science.

Love, favour, and sympathy are bestowed only upon extreme theories, which gratify the interests of one class or another. On the one hand, quite a host of economists support no hypothesis that does not imply fatality, necessity, and immutability; on the other hand, a herd of authors flatter the passions of the populace, making themselves the apostles of views which necessitated immediate changes and profound convulsions. Both classes are outside of the right way, and have abandoned the great channel of objective research.

I am of the number of those who recognise the full moral and economic importance of modern socialism; to me it seems a great and beneficent reaction of optimism against blind and baneful pessimism, which had penetrated both the souls and minds of men. Hence I have studied socialistic literature with great affection for many years. And though greatly admiring the spirit which animates it, I am necessarily convinced that, after the book of Marx, so defective and yet so great, collectivism has been unable to produce a true and deep work. This is because both revolutionary and conservative collectivism are chiefly theories of an occasion, each destined to safeguard the interests of a different class; and if the former be inspired by broader and better intentions, it also proceeds through a stormy sea of error and illusion.

I do not know if the historic conception of Saint Simon

appears large-minded to you as it does to me. And although I accept it but in part, I am at least convinced that there are organic and critical periods in human history. During organic periods humanity accepts with profound conviction systems of positive belief more or less true or useful. Under the influence of these beliefs, men make all the progress of which the theories are capable, and then at last they come to find themselves in difficulty. Then succeeds a period of negation and criticism, during which mankind loses its former convictions, without acquiring other authoritative ones, except that of judging the former theories to be erroneous. And this is a view which has much truth in it, and which completes that materialistic conception of history which has gained so great a progress during recent years, and that, chiefly, thanks to your endeavours. And now we are truly in a critical period, and the society of our day is, as Dante would say, *entomata in difetto*, from which, if the *angelica farfalla* dreamed of by Utopian reformers does not issue, at least there should issue something better and healthier than our present state.

The economic forms around us are changing, and with them are changing the moral sentiments; and if the critical period be not yet about to end, the more elect spirits are already in great part emancipated from the pessimist stage of thought, to which they have been subjected so fatally and so long.

The part of political economy which is still less studied every day is that which concerns the distribution of wealth. Walras maintains that "the fact of appropriation is an essentially moral fact, and the theory of property is an essentially moral science." And, in fact, where are the laws which regulate the distribution of wealth, and which can be accepted without essential modification or change? Turgot's classical figure about the rate of interest is anything but exact; Ricardo's theory on income has at least as many opponents as upholders; Lassalle's iron law about wages is now repudiated even by socialists; Malthus' hypothesis is belied by a century of research; the deductions of the new Austrian school are in truth a building upon sand; the other theories of Turgot, Smith, Ricardo, and Mill are either false or incomplete.

Among all these essential problems still a prey to prejudice and error, the most important of all is doubtless that of population, from which it would seem as though every other were derived. Intelligent demographers and economists have written with sufficient fulness on this subject in recent times; you yourself have studied it with that admirable method and great acumen which are recognised in you by friends and enemies.

Remembering what has been written on the subject hitherto, I believe that I have studied the question of population solely according to its objective aspect. In the first part of this book I have demonstrated how all the most important theories are directly derived from the surroundings which produced them; in the second I have striven, with the help of biology, statistics, and political economy, to formulate what I consider to be the true law of population.

Le savant doit avoir l'esprit douteur is a saying of Claude Bernard. And although I have performed the present research with sincere desire, I do not dare to think that my conclusions are absolute truths. If you or others should wish to demonstrate the falsehood of my thesis, I may regret that I have laboured in vain, but I shall be the first to recognise the truth, by whomsoever or however it be made clear.

I have resolved to dedicate this book to you simply in order to testify to you my sincere admiration and friendship. Reading it you will see that we are not always in agreement, and that some of my conclusions differ from your own. But what does it matter that we are not in perfect agreement?

Comte had for motto—*Love as a beginning, order as a basis, progress as a purpose*. Morality, economy, and politics have not yet been able to invent anything better. And in your great and noble work, as in my small and humble one, the same sentiment is active which suggested to Comte his immortal motto, and one passion—the single passion for what is truthful and good—influences both your mind and mine.

I beg you, therefore, my dear friend, to accept the dedication of this my book, to the fortune of which, I am convinced, your name will contribute not a little.—Affectionately yours,

F. S. NITTI.

CONTENTS



PREFACE	Page v.
-------------------	---------

BOOK I.

THE HISTORIC CAUSES OF ECONOMIC THEORIES ON POPULATION.

THE philosophy of wealth and the philosophy of poverty, 1—The mainstay of the individualist theory, 1—The problem of population always a problem of present importance, 2—The two fatal influences in the science of political economy, 2—The term and idea of population, 2—Why the study of the question of population was neglected before the time of Malthus, 3—The phenomenon of over-population a modern phenomenon, 4—Former theories about population, 5—The problem of population before Malthus, 6—The number limited in ancient Greece, 6—Until Malthus no one had scientifically studied the problem of population, 6—The precursors of Malthus, 7—Nor did Smith modify the old opinions, 9—Economic and philosophic optimism, 9—The Malthusian theory as the basis of the philosophy of wealth, 10—The Optimism of Smith's great work, 10—The optimistic conception of progress, 10—England in the time of Smith, 11—Causes originating the optimism of Smith, 11—The great scientific discoveries, 11—The optimist theory of progress, 12—Smith's philosophy and sympathy as the scope of human actions, 12—Schopenhauer and Adam Smith's theory of sympathy, 13—England in the days of Malthus, 13—The economic and social crisis of England at the time of Malthus, 14—The evils of English society in the time of Malthus, 14—Public relief in its hurtful consequences, 14—The causes of the pessimism of Malthus, 15—W. Godwin, 15—Examination of Godwin's optimistic theory, 15—The optimistic ideal of the pacific anarchist, 16—Condorcet and progress, 16—Godwin and Condorcet, 16—Faith in human perfectibility at the end of the eighteenth century, 17—Causes of the pessimist reaction, 17—The pessimist reaction, 17—Publication of Malthus' work, 18—Malthus the precursor of pessimism, 18—Mutual dependence of economy and the moral science, 18—Malthus