

3

Uneasy Litter Mates: Population and Progress

In the fifth century B.C., Herodotus reported that there had been a time when a person could walk across North Africa from the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean and be always in the shade of trees. No more: the land was well on the way to becoming the desert we know today. Herodotus generalized: "Man stalks across the landscape, and deserts follow in his footsteps." In the tenth century A.D., a Samanid prince identified four earthly paradises: the regions of Samarkand, southern Persia, southern Iraq, and Damascus.¹ No one who has visited any of these sites now would dream of calling it a paradise. They have been cursed with wars, but warfare is only a secondary cause of their degradation.

Throughout history human exploitation of the earth has produced this progression: *colonize—destroy—move on*. When the Pollyannas write history they focus only on the first of these three actions, the desirable effects of which were most evident during the rapid colonization of the New World. In 1845 a now obscure American journalist coined a deathless phrase when he spoke of "the fulfillment of our manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence."² "Manifest destiny" is one of those catchphrases we love. We would not welcome the words of a journalist who identified colonization as but a prelude to destruction and abandonment.

The restless "moving on" of the human species has depended on always having fresh land to move to. Optimists are not easily frightened by the results, of course: as late as 1980 one Pollyanna brightly explained how all turned out for the best in this best of all possible worlds: "Each year deserts the world over engulf an area the size of Massachusetts. A great deal of land lost is agricultural. . . . Fortunately, however, land is always being replaced or coming under cultivation to make up for land lost."³ An ecologist—ever guided by the question "And then what?"—would insist on a clarification of the above quotation: Does "always" mean "forever"? If so, it implies that there are no limits to earthly space. It is not surprising that ecologists are not the most popular of people in a growth-oriented economy.

Whenever territorial expansion finally comes to an end, the human population will be reduced to living on the limited resources of the earth. Problems of the allocation of limited resources then become central in human affairs. It was natural for Malthus, the economist, to see population growth as intensifying these problems.

Malthus: Out of Revolution, Conservatism

In writing *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, Malthus⁴ was less than completely original in his views—a fact Karl Marx relished emphasizing decades later. Several predecessors had clearly stated some of the important elements of Malthusian theory, but in their day the attention of the public was directed elsewhere.

The first sentence of the preface tells how Malthus came to write it: “The following *Essay* owes its origin to a conversation with a friend, on the subject of Mr. Godwin’s essay on ‘Avarice and Profusion.’” The friend was his father. Stereotype has it that the parent-versus-child relation translates politically into one of conservative versus radical. In this family the politics were reversed. Daniel, the father, was a friend and disciple of Rousseau’s. (In fact, the French philosopher was a house guest of the Malthus family on a visit to England.) Young Malthus thought Rousseau and his father were wrong in their view of the human future.

Daniel Malthus was no more radical than many another Englishman in his admiration of things French and his belief that the French Revolution signaled a great advance in human history. The revolution was seen as a continuation of the emancipation of the human spirit that had begun with the revolt of the English colonies in America two decades earlier. Happily turning sequence into trend (which is half-brother to “destiny”), some political pundits wondered if perhaps the English people were not the next on destiny’s list of those to be freed from the shackles of entrenched, unearned power. It was a heady time. Wordsworth recalled the atmosphere, after the French Terror had brought about English disillusionment with the revolution:

Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,
But to be young was very Heaven! . . .
When Reason seemed the most to assert her rights
When most intent on making herself
A prime enchantress . . .⁵

Wordsworth was twenty-three when the revolution took place. The poet Coleridge was twenty-one; the essayist Hazlitt, fifteen. The literary crowd was the backbone of the English supporters of the French Revolution. The backbone began to crumple when the Terror took over.

Robert Malthus moved onto a stage that had been set by others, specifically (as his title page tells us) by “the speculations of Mr. Godwin, M. Condorcet, and other writers.” In the literal sense of the word, Malthus’s essay is *reactionary*, but the word is not here to be taken in a pejorative sense. Arguing with his father, thirty-two-year-old Robert so neatly skewered the utopias of the Englishman Godwin and the Frenchman Condorcet that the delighted parent urged him to publish his remarks, which he did. (Whether his father ever changed his opinion is not clear: he died two years later.)

The son’s argument can be put simply: since distress moves people to limit the number of their children, a utopia that, by hypothesis, did away with all hardships and anxiety would be self-defeating because the unhampered reproduction of the happy people would produce overpopulation, thus creating new distress. Distress is the point at which equilibrium occurs—not happiness, as Godwin and Condorcet supposed. (Details of Malthus’s argument are postponed to Chapter 11.)

Godwin: The Work

In 1793, while enthusiasm for what was taking place on the other side of the Channel was still glowing, William Godwin (thirty-seven years old) published a two-volume work that furnished the literati an attention-grabbing paean to anarchy, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*. As Alexander Gray says, "it is difficult for us today," nearly two centuries after the event, "to appreciate the horror with which, on its appearance, Godwin's *Political Justice* was viewed by the respectable classes."⁶ However something of this revulsion is imaginable if, looking at the judgments assembled in Box 3-1,⁷ you ask yourself this question: "Which of these ideals would I like to inculcate in a child of my own?" It may be objected that the statements are taken out of context; but that, of course, is precisely the way the average reader takes the *bons mots* of any popular book.

Perhaps the best summary of Godwin's 270,000 words was his advice to "obey no man."⁸ Godwin's message was not welcomed by the wealthy and powerful.

Box 3-1. Shocking Sentiments of William Godwin.

On property. [Man] has no right of option in the disposal of anything which may fall into his hands. Every shilling of his property, and even every, the minutest, exertion of his powers have received their destination from the decrees of justice. He is only the steward.

Of promises. Promises are, absolutely considered, an evil, and stand in opposition to the genuine and wholesome exercise of an intellectual nature.

On cooperation. Everything that is usually understood by the term cooperation is, in some degree, an evil.

Of gratitude. [I]f by gratitude we understand a sentiment of preference which I entertain towards another, upon the ground of my having been the subject of his benefits, [then gratitude] is no part either of justice or virtue.

On obedience to the law. Few things can be more absurd than to talk of our having promised obedience to the laws. If the laws depend upon promises for their execution, why are they accompanied with sanctions? . . . There is but one power to which I can yield a heart-felt obedience, the decision of my own understanding, the dictate of my own conscience.

On war. The utmost benevolence ought to be practised towards our enemies. We should refrain from the unnecessary destruction of a single life, and afford every humane accommodation to the unfortunate.

On work. It seems by no means impossible that the labor of every twentieth man in the community would be sufficient to supply the rest all the absolute necessities of life. If then this labor, instead of being performed by so small a number, were amicably divided among the whole, it would occupy the twentieth part of every man's time . . . It follows that half an hour a day employed in manual labor by every member of the community would sufficiently supply the whole with necessities.

Utopia at last. The men therefore whom we are supposing to exist, when the earth shall refuse itself to a more extended population, will probably cease to propagate. The whole will be a people of men, and not of children. Generation will not succeed generation, nor truth have, in a certain degree, to recommence her career every thirty years. Other improvements may be expected to keep pace with those of health and longevity. There will be no war, no crimes, no administration of justice, as it is called, and no government. Beside this, there will be neither disease, anguish, melancholy, nor resentment. Every man will seek, with ineffable ardor, the good of all.

There was some talk of having the book suppressed; but its price was so high—three guineas—that it was argued there was no need to suppress it. However, in spite of its price, it had a wide readership and, for better or worse, an influence (through derivative literature) that persists to the present time. Many of the ideals espoused by Godwin are still embraced by people who refuse to discuss population.

When an American who has lived through the campus disorders of the 1960s looks over the subjects in Box 3-1 he is likely to experience a feeling of *déjà vu*. Godwin urges his readers to “neither trust in nor give” promises, cooperation, or gratitude. By rejecting law, war, and cooperation with older people, the newly saved are to show their disdain for what was formerly called “the settled order.” (In the 1960s it was called “the Establishment” or “the System.”) And the *Enquiry* sees nothing admirable about a society based on respect for hard work. (Sound familiar?)

Godwin: The Man

The emphasis of the present work is on ideas—their structure, their interaction, their history, and their power to affect history. Personalities will, for the most part, be ignored. But there are times when exceptions are in order, and this is one of them. The two men against whose ideas Malthus reacted had uncommonly interesting personal histories. Malthus’s own history, by contrast, was uncommonly dull.

What sort of man was William Godwin? One might reasonably suspect that the extreme position he took was a reaction against his early mentors—as indeed it was. His father was a Calvinist minister of the most rigid sort. For our Oedipus only one road seemed open, and William took it. Against the Calvinist view that all evil comes from within, the son declared that individual men and women are inherently good: it is human institutions that are the source of the evil. We should banish institutions, said Godwin. Marriage is an institution, so out with it! When William met Mary Wollstonecraft he discovered a soul with kindred views. While writing *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, she had lived, unmarried, with an American naval officer by whom she had a child. Wollstonecraft and Godwin were plainly made for each other.

In our own century, in the early days of the sex revolution, some young couples indulged in the game of “Let’s not get married, but pretend we have.” Ironically, Mary and William found themselves forced by their ideals to play the opposite game. When Mary became pregnant the couple realized that their child would suffer real civil disadvantages if it was born a bastard, so they got married. But because both were embarrassingly on record as being opposed to marriage for the most principled of reasons, they could hardly hold their heads up in public—their public—if they were known to be married; so they kept their legal union a secret as long as they could. Their game was, “Let’s get married, but pretend we’re living in sin.” (Pride produces paradoxes.)

It was unquestionably a happy marriage, perhaps because biology stepped in to see to it that it did not last too long. The fond mother contracted childbed fever and died two weeks after the birth—a common enough occurrence in the days before Semmelweis and Pasteur. Godwin was left with young Mary.

The widower felt keenly his inadequacy as a single parent, but he found no way out of his predicament until the initiative was taken by a widow, a Mrs. Clairmont. While he was sitting on his little balcony of an evening a clarion voice floated over to him from a neighboring apartment: "Is it possible that I behold the immortal Godwin?" William was hooked. The second marriage was not a happy one for Mary, who was six years old when it took place. The stepdaughter got out of the home as soon as she could—how, we shall see presently.

Godwin supported his family by writing, which was no better paid an occupation then than it is now. He was a wretched manager: the money he touched vaporized. He was perpetually in debt, and to some of the best people in England. Few were the men of letters who had not kissed many guineas goodbye as they disappeared into the Godwin household. Even the solid industrialist Josiah Wedgwood, son of the founder of the famous pottery works and fond uncle of young Charles Darwin, "lent" Godwin large sums.⁹ Francis Place, a pioneer fighter for birth control and himself a successful businessman, estimated that Godwin muddled away 1,500 pounds a year over a ten-year period, "notwithstanding he had for the last four or five years paid no rent for the house he lived in, which was worth 200 pounds a year."¹⁰ "To thine own self be true," advised Polonius in *Hamlet*; Godwin was scrupulously true to the shocking ideals he had expressed in *Political Justice*.

No account of the Godwin family is complete without mention of the elopement of Mary and Shelley. Godwin, remember, was opposed to the institution of marriage. But when adolescent Mary, unhappy with her position as a stepdaughter, ran off with the married poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, Godwin was beside himself. Hoist with his own petard! He berated the young plutocrat, moderating his reproaches only after wealthy Percy coughed up large sums of money.

A year and a half after the elopement, Mary gave birth to a son, and before another year had passed Shelley's wife had committed suicide. The elopers married. We hear of Mary Shelley once more when she wrote *Frankenstein*. Though the high Brahmins of literature may disagree, one could argue that the wife's best-known novel has had more enduring influence than all the husband's much-praised poetry.

As for Mary's father, he continued to be, as one Victorian commentator epitomized him, "the prince of spongers," borrowing his way to the end of a long life. Unhappily for Godwin, his influence declined after the publication of Malthus's work. He tried his hand at annihilating Malthus some two decades later, but not even his best friends credited him with a kill. A suitable tombstone for this revolutionary might well read:

WILLIAM GODWIN
1756–1836

Father of the Author of *Frankenstein*
and Irritant That Produced Malthus

Condorcet: Courage in Extremis

Marie Jean Antoine Nicholas de Caritat, Marquis de Condorcet, was both a nobleman and a man of learning. It is never easy to combine the two careers: the intrusive and frequent demands of social life disrupt the sustained effort required for original

thinking. Nevertheless Condorcet managed to make himself into a passable mathematician. He dearly wanted to be a member of the French Academy, but his family thought that "le titre et métier de savant" was beneath the dignity of a nobleman. Finally they relented and permitted the Academy to make Condorcet a member.¹¹

Condorcet was nobility's ugly duckling in another way: as the revolution approached he found himself in sympathy with the proletariat. Being a fellow traveler to a revolution is apt to be more dangerous than opposing it; the Parisian lawyer Pierre Vergniaud said before being guillotined in 1793, "the revolution eats its children." When fair-minded Condorcet proposed that Louis XVI be imprisoned rather than beheaded, he aroused the suspicions of his bloodthirsty compatriots. Recognizing the danger of his situation, he went into hiding.

His family had to be taken care of. His marriage, like that of many of the nobility, had been one of convenience, but he had grown to love his wife, Sophie, who was now reduced to selling underclothes in a women's shop.

At this juncture Condorcet wrote, "I shall perish like Socrates and Sidney, for I have served my country."¹² Then what would happen to his daughter? As the scion of a convicted criminal she could not inherit the paternal property. A divorce could change the situation in the child's favor. At this point we encounter a new variation on the marriage theme. Whereas Godwin and his paramour married for the love of their child, Condorcet and Sophie divorced for the same reason.

Now ensued months of hiding and writing. Lying low in the modest home of an artist's widow he scribbled away on a work that, when finished, comprised some 68,000 words, just one-quarter the length of Godwin's treatise. Starting work in July 1793, Condorcet completed his book (in rough form, it is true) in a mere nine months. Then, in March 1794, hearing rumors that the Jacobins were hot on his trail, and not wanting to endanger his hostess, he left his hiding place to look for

Box 3-2. Condorcet: The Dream of a Condemned Man.

How admirably calculated is this picture of the human race, freed from all these chains, secure from the domination of chance, as from that of the enemies of its progress, and advancing with firm and sure steps towards the attainment of truth, virtue, and happiness, to present to the philosopher a spectacle which shall console him for the errors, the crimes, the injustice, with which the earth is still polluted, and whose victim he often is! It is in the contemplation of this picture that he receives the reward of his efforts towards the progress of reason and the defense of liberty. He dares then to link these with the eternal chain of human destiny; and thereby he finds virtue's true recompense, the joy of having performed a lasting service, which no fatality can ever destroy by restoring the evils of prejudice and slavery. This contemplation is for him a place of refuge, whither the memory of his persecutors cannot follow, where, living in imagination with man restored to his rights and his natural dignity, he forgets him whom greed, fear, or envy torment and corrupt; there it is that he exists in truth with his kin, in an elysium which his reason has been able to create for him, and which his love for humanity enhances with the purest enjoyments.

[Here ends the book.]

Sketch for an Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind, 1795.

another. Legend has it that he was recognized as a person not used to taking care of himself when he stopped in a bistro for a bite to eat. He ordered an omelette. "How many eggs?" the proprietor asked. "A dozen," answered the noble mathematician, thus revealing his unfamiliarity with the numbers of the household. He soon found himself in the prison of Bourg-La-Reine. The next day he was dead. Whether he voluntarily took poison, or was killed by others, was never found out: but does it matter? One way or another, a revolution eats its children.¹³

Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain was published the year after the author's death. The English translation came out the same year. It is a compact work, filled with enthusiasm. Considering the circumstances of its writing, the concluding paragraph, given in Box 3-2, can truly be called noble.

The Idea of Progress

It is not easy to develop an awareness of the large ideas that frame our unconscious pictures of reality. To help render the unconscious conscious, the physicist-turned-philosopher Thomas Kuhn popularized the term *paradigm*.¹⁴ This Greek word for "pattern" refers to something more global and less focused than "theory" or "hypothesis." Whether it is the best word may be debated, but it can help us understand human history. As we pursue this goal we will be guided by one paradigm after another. Three great historical paradigms have been identified and labeled. These are the golden age, the endless cycle, and the idea of progress.

The golden age paradigm presumes a wonderful world that once was but never more shall be (or shall be only after we have won our way to it through acts of virtue). This view is incorporated in the myth of the Garden of Eden. Somewhat different is the endless cycle paradigm, which sees unremitting repetitions in history with little enduring advance: *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*.

Both of these paradigms come down to us from ancient times. They were named long after they were born. Both must have been products of a gerontocracy, a society ruled by its elders. It is natural for the old to feel that things have gone to hell in a handbasket since the good old days; or that every improvement is followed by its deterioration. Are these conclusions the legitimate products of experience, or are they merely by-products of the speaker's hormonal changes? Where is one to find an age-free arbiter to judge?

Finally there is the idea of progress, born of a figurative extension of a spatial concept into the realm of historic time. This idea also has ancient roots, but it did not become influential until the eighteenth century. By that time the age composition of European populations was shifting in favor of the young, and the rate of technological change was accelerating. In the past two hundred years the idea of progress has become the ruling paradigm of Western society. It has penetrated every corner of our life; and it is intimately connected with theories of population dynamics. The classic account of the development of this concept was given in 1932 by the English historian J. B. Bury in *The Idea of Progress*.¹⁵ There is now a large literature on the subject.

The idea of progress made a significant upward thrust into people's consciousness when Condorcet's book was published. In some respects his dreams were not

so different from Godwin's: "Our hopes regarding the future state of humanity can be reduced to these three important points: the destruction of inequality between nations; the progress of equality within one and the same nation; and, finally, the real perfecting of mankind."¹⁶

Condorcet's argument, however, put less emphasis on political and moral aspects of the change. He divided the history of mankind into ten epochs, of which the first nine were complete and the tenth was just beginning. The epochs were characterized by the invention and development of material things: bow and arrow, animal husbandry, the tools of agriculture, manufacturing, and so on.

There is something schizophrenic about progress as promoted by Condorcet. The title of his book refers to something that is certainly nonmaterial, "the human mind" (*esprit*); and he bravely announces that "nature has assigned no limit to the perfecting of the human faculties." But he buttresses his argument with material examples—inventions, for instance. During the succeeding century the emphasis of the idea of progress shifted from matters of the spirit (Condorcet's emphasis) to more material matters. Now when people say, "You can't stop progress!" they generally mean "You can't stop *material* progress." We should not wonder at this change of emphasis: the shift, as it affected the psychology of consumers, created new opportunities for all those who are in the business of *selling* material things. Extracting profits from the sale of ideas is more difficult.

Condorcet was the supreme optimist. As mankind approached perfection there would be an increase in both the human population and in per capita wealth and income. But, he asked,

must there not come a time when . . . the increase in the number of men surpassing that of their means, there shall result necessarily, if not a continual decrease in prosperity and in population, if not a truly retrograde course, at least a sort of oscillation between the good and the bad? And will not this oscillation, in societies arrived at this point, be a constant source of almost periodic calamities? Will it not mark the point where all further improvement shall become impossible, and in the limits of perfectibility of the human race, which it shall reach in the course of the ages, and which it can never pass? . . .

But, supposing that this time should actually come, there would result nothing alarming, either to the happiness of the human race or to its indefinite perfectibility; if we suppose that prior to this time the progress of reason shall have advanced on a par with that of the sciences and the arts . . . men will know then that, if they have obligations towards beings who are yet to come into the world, they do not consist in giving to them existence only, but happiness. . . . There could, then, be a limit to the possible means of subsistence, and, in consequence, to the greatest possible population, without there resulting that premature destruction, so contrary to nature and to the social prosperity, of a portion of the beings who have received life.

As we become acquainted with Malthus's writings we will see that his conclusions are objectively not very different from those of Condorcet. The sharpest difference is in emphasis. No matter how frankly Condorcet admitted the dangers of population growth he always managed to give an optimistic "spin" to his rhetoric. Malthus, on the other hand, generally managed to accentuate the negative.

Condorcet and his followers have had more influence on the climate of opinion in our time than has Malthus. Optimism is more attractive than pessimism. In his-

tory, causation is a tricky concept but it seems most likely that the idea of progress has had immensely constructive effects on the development of our world. Confident that there are no limits, our movers and shakers have managed to find ways around *apparent* limits. (Their success leaves unanswered the question as to whether some limits are real and inescapable.)

What of Progress in the Future?

Our increasing anxiety about the depletion (of material wealth) and the increase of pollution (by material wastes) makes us wonder whether we are not at last approaching “the limits of perfectibility” of our materialistic world. Though not decisive, the present trend is clear enough to make some of us have second thoughts about our much-vaunted “progress.”

Even if material progress is throttled down we need not give up hope of further improvement in the overall conditions of life. The inventory of possibilities is immensely enlarged if we reinstate Condorcet’s original emphasis on the human mind (*esprit*—“spirit”), which may indeed be possessed of “indefinite perfectibility.” (“Indefinite” is not the same thing as “infinite,” though it is often read as such.) We need to re-establish the pristine meaning of the idea of historical progress, calling attention to inadequately exploited potentialities in the nonmaterial realm. Such is one of the goals of this book. But before much advancement can be made toward this objective we need to dismantle many delusions about the characteristics and consequences of human population growth that have grown up in the protective shadow of the insufficiently examined idea of progress.