CHAPTER FIVE

DOCTRINES OF SOCIAL EVOLUTION

In the *Origin of Species* Charles Darwin (1964:66) claimed that throughout the animal and vegetable kingdoms (in which he included humans), hardship acted as a spur to the process of procreation. Considering all that he observed in nature, he concluded that, “if an animal can in any way protect its own eggs or young, a small number may be produced, and yet the average stock be fully kept up; but if many eggs or young are destroyed, many must be produced, or the species will become extinct”.

Darwin’s demonstration that fertility levels increase with hardship should have represented a serious blow to the Malthusian idea of poverty as a check on population. It was clear to Darwin that since nature spares no expense when it comes to producing certainty, the harshest conditions must result in more seeds, eggs and young being produced. The implication of this was that in order to check the increasing birth rate and reduce pauperism, which Malthusians treated in cause and effect terms, it would be necessary to ease hardship, not maintain it. The remedies proposed by Malthusians could only exacerbate the supposed problem.

Insofar as Darwin’s evolutionary theory was developed within the confines of an existing world-view, of which Malthusianism was part, Malthus is usually given a measure of credit for its emergence (Hawkins 1997:30). Even some later opponents of Malthusianism, such as Bertrand Russell (2001:151), were convinced that the ideas of Malthus led directly to Darwinism. It is easy to understand why the notion prevails. In the *Origin of Species*, Darwin (1964:63) modestly claimed that his theory was nothing more than “the doctrine of Malthus applied with manifold force to the whole animal and vegetable kingdoms”. The first problem with this claim was that it was not actually Malthus that developed the doctrine of natural increase. The doctrine was actually borrowed from Robert Wallace (Bonar 1885:8–9). In any case, when Darwin applied this to the natural world he was introducing it into the only field in which it holds true, as the famous sociologist Lester Frank Ward (1970:279–280) pointed out. The doctrine for which Malthus may be given credit was
nothing other than Wallace’s doctrine plus the suggestion that human increase is set at a faster rate than are the various species of animal and plants upon which human beings depend for subsistence. This is the doctrine attributable to Malthus. It is a doctrine that was rejected by Darwin (1964:66), who explained that “every single organic being around us may be said to be striving to the utmost to increase in numbers; that each lives by a struggle at some period of its life; that heavy destruction inevitably falls either on the young or old”.

Insofar as Darwin (1964:64) insisted that there is “no exception to the rule that every organic being naturally increases,” he could not remain faithful to Malthus’s model. It may have been that Darwin was unaware of the extent to which his system opposed that of Malthus. Marx (1953:124) claimed as much when he suggested that Darwin had overlooked the simple fact that Malthus’s model depended on the opposition of Wallace’s geometrical progression of human beings “to the chimerical ‘arithmetical’ progression of animals and plants”. Insofar as Darwin highlighted geometrical progression in the animal and vegetable kingdoms, he destroyed the very exceptions upon which Malthusianism depended and overturned every doctrine that was unique to Malthus. Darwin was attempting to explain the struggle for existence in nature whereas Malthus was mainly concerned with depicting humankind’s struggle against the existing socio-economic system as though it was a struggle against a naturally determined means of subsistence.

The idea of population pressure had, until the mid-19th century, enabled the ruling classes to dampen any optimism about further human development. With the development of industrial capitalism, evolutionary doctrines offered the means of explaining all of the destructive competition involved in terms of natural processes. Insofar as Darwin emphasized struggle and competition, his theory of evolution was analogous to the prevailing economic system. So prevalent are the terms and phrases of liberal political economy in the *Origin* that Oswald Spengler once complained that it “reeked of the English factory”.

Darwin’s description of relentless competition between and among different species was quickly employed as explanation for the unequal fortunes presenting among the human species. Darwinism was incorporated into political doctrines and employed in such a way as to explain

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1 This quote is taken from D.P. Crook’s *Darwinism, War and History* (Crook 1994:13).