

Transcription, January 2023:

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‘Dr. Alfred R. Wallace on Poverty and Population.’

Sir,—Your most distinguished correspondent, Dr. Alfred Wallace, does me the favour in to-day’s *Echo* to criticise my statements as to the birth-rates and death-rates of the rich and poor in Westminster Hampstead, St. George’s, and Whitechapel. I alleged that the birth-rate in comfortable Hampstead was very low last year, 22 births per 1,000 inhabitants, and the death-rate so low (12 per 1,000), as to leave but little to be desired, whilst in some parts of Whitechapel and Westminster the birth-rate is 40 per 1,000, and the death-rate often over 30 per 1,000.

I alleged that, were the people of Hampstead to have a birth-rate of 40 per 1,000, whilst an equal number of the denizens of Whitechapel had a birth-rate of 22 per 1,000, the latter would become rich and the former poor, i.e., that the proximate cause of poverty, low wages, early death, and most of the evils of our race in this country, are due to high birth-rates, which are generally caused by large families.

Dr. Wallace says that if people were rich they would increase slowly, and proposes, therefore, that nationalisation of the land should become the law of the country as soon as possible, believing that when the land was in the hands of the people, they would all be rich, and, having a high standard of comfort, would not people down to bad food again.

Well, there is nothing to prevent a very benevolent person from attempting to make the people happy in Dr. Wallace’s way. I, indeed, prefer the old idea of peasant property, and would vote to-morrow for a Bill to do away with primogeniture and entail, and for making the land as saleable as a share in the London and Westminster Bank, adding possibly some scheme like that proposed by Mr. Barclay and Mr. Howard for securing permanency of tenure and compensation for improvements.

But, may I ask Dr. Wallace why this precludes me from telling the world directly that the immediate cause of poverty, early death, bad diseases, and degradation is the high birth-rate of 34 per 1,000 obtaining in this country? He says I am opposed to the greatest thinker of this century, Mr. J. S. Mill in this matter. Is that so? What did Mr. Mill mean, then, when he said, “it would be possible for the State to guarantee employment at ample wages to all who are born. But if it does so, it is bound, in self-protection, and for the sake of every purpose for which Government exists, to see that no one is born without its consent.”

Or, again, when he wrote, “Little improvement can be expected in morality until the production of large families is regarded in the same light as drunkenness, or any other physical excess.” Or, again, “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 ample 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 measures only, and under such regulations, as society might prescribe with a view to the common good.”

Might I ask Dr. Wallace whether he now holds that J. S. Mill was “one-sided”—an epithet he assails me with, but one I cannot understand without definition? In conclusion, greatly as I respect all Land Reformers, I would remind them that in the Madras Presidency wages are terribly low, whilst the nationalisation of the land is there a *fait accompli*; so that even the best-devised land schemes may end in shallows if only the birth-rate continues high.

—I am, Sir, your obedient servant, C. R. Drysdale, M.D. 65, Regent-st., W., Oct. 24.