
The Philippines - An Example of Creeping Malthusianism?

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(On Leave in the Philippines)

The Republic of the Philippines embraces an area slightly in excess of 115,000 sq. mi., or about one and two-thirds times that of Oklahoma. Philippine population is about 22,500,000 at present - roughly ten times the population of Oklahoma. Many glowing accounts about the population support potential of the Philippines have been written, but most of them have failed to be objective or realistic. Any unbiased observer will admit that living standards of the great majority of the Philippine people are abysmally low by American or European standards, and presently there appears to be little hope that this situation will be measurably improved in the foreseeable future. A Philippine press report, recently released, pointed out that 86 per cent of Filipinos had an annual income of less than p2,500 (one peso officially equals 50 cents American, but in terms of purchasing power a more realistic conversion is four pesos to one American dollar), another 10 per cent of the populace had an income between p2,500-p5,000. This illustrates, of course, that only 4 per cent of the population has an annual income in excess of p5,000.

The Philippines is primarily an agricultural country. According to Mr. Dalisay (Undersecretary of Agriculture) in a statement on October 24, 1958 more than 43 per cent of the gross national product was attributable directly to agriculture. Other basic occupations, individually, are of negligible significance when compared to agriculture. What is the status of Philippine agriculture? Agriculture within the Philippines hinges on a delicate balance of food production on the one hand and commercial crops on the other. Rice is by far the most significant crop, and the Philippines is now a deficit producer. Corn and lesser food crops do not compensate for the rice deficit, and the Philippines have become a significant importer of food. Commercial crops such as coconuts, pineapple, abacá, and sugar all suffer from some physical or economic malady. To illustrate, the Philippine coconut industry is combating a mysterious virus disease known as *kadang-kadang*, which is decimating the ranks of coconut trees (the Philippines has more than 165,000,000 bearing trees). In addition, Philippine copra bears the stigma of being the world's worst. Pineapple meets rigid competition from Hawaii, Taiwan, Singapore, and elsewhere. Abacá suffers competition from a variety of natural and synthetic fibers. International sugar agreements assign a very low tonnage quota to Philippine export sugar.

In short, population has already outdistanced food supply and in my humble opinion will continue to outstrip agriculture at an even faster rate. Philippine population is showing a net annual increase of 3 per cent, and the birth rate (perhaps the world's highest) is showing every indication of a continuing precipitous rise. All logic points to a population which will increase at an increasing rate.

Unbiased reporting requires a realistic assessment of the possibilities for increased food supply. Why not turn commercially cropped areas into basic food production? The obvious answer is, of course, that these commercial crops are vitally significant in bringing foreign exchange to the Philippines. Foreign exchange is so critical to the Philippines that these areas *must* remain in commercial crops.

What of expansion into pioneer areas on Mindanao and elsewhere? Suitable areas for expansion are much more limited than commonly realized. Further large areas are annually being destroyed by *caingin* (slash and burn) agriculture - even pioneer expansion serves only as a check against land lost through misuse.

The use of algae and plankton for food is not currently practical, and indeed algae production would add measurably to the already difficult health problem. Fishing will undoubtedly decline in the face of overfishing and pollution. Forestry, mining, and manufacturing help to alleviate the problem somewhat, but decimation of forest resources and depletion of ores are the obvious prospects of these industries as presently conducted. An unfavourable governmental climate and other difficulties will measurably modify investor's enthusiasm in Philippine industry.

Philippine aspirations for a better life envisioned by all because of their knowledge of American institutions and living standards are doomed to disappointment in the foreseeable future. Economic props in the form of American aid appear to be only a temporary palliative.

It is obvious to this author that the Philippines can support on the order of 20,000,000 people with a reasonable standard of living, provided certain basic steps are undertaken. Perhaps the most pressing need of the nation is a thoroughgoing land inventory to provide the essential data for agricultural expansion and improvement, resettlement and rehabilitation and land reform. The population must be stabilized by a far-reaching birth control program (there is little chance of this in a Catholic country).

Governmental responsibility and stability are to be encouraged as background for the attraction of foreign investment.

Ever present in the current situation and probable future are Malthusian wolves of starvation, pestilence and disorder nibbling at the heels of the population of the Philippines. Only major shifts in emphasis or unforeseen developments can prevent the serious population problem of the Philippines at present becoming a critical problem in the next two or three decades.
