

Mill on Poverty, Population, and Poor Relief: Out of Bentham by Malthus?

This paper argues that the attitude of Mill to the provision of poor relief echoes in its essentials that enunciated by Bentham in the 1790s. The Bentham of the Poor Law writings looks forward to an expansion of population consequent upon the twin spurs of reduced costs and increased productivity that will be the fruit of the National Charity Company. Malthus views the Poor Laws as a counterproductive indulgence, creating the very indigence they seek to relieve, and looks to moral restraint among the poor to banish hunger. Despite his wholehearted and consistent endorsement of Malthus's principle of population, Mill never adopted a Malthusian, abolitionist, attitude to poor relief, but instead became a resolute defender of the principles of the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act. Mill certainly asserts that any prospect of long term amelioration of economic condition of the labouring classes in England depends upon their readiness to embrace population control and contraception, and so to trade off comfort against numbers.

Michael Quinn