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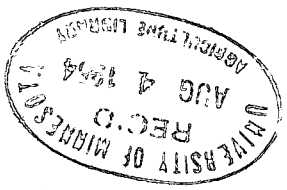
The Problem of Surplus Agricultural Population



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By H. M. CONACHER

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IT is well known that in European countries the increase of population up to the end of the eighteenth century was slow, but that it became rapid during the nineteenth century. This increase is generally put down to the removal of certain checks on population which had operated earlier, especially those affecting the health of peoples, so that the general rate of mortality dropped. The improvement in public health was seen most strikingly in the control of epidemics. Decrease in infant mortality stands as a special achievement. There is also ground for supposing with Karl Marx that the 'industrial revolution' increased population positively, though this in its turn must have been dependent on an increase in food production outside the industrial classes. Of course the industrial revolution was also a consumer of life in its earlier stages, certainly in Great Britain, but on the other hand, after 1815, the nineteenth century was freer from wars than most of its predecessors. The wars from 1854 to 1871 were comparatively short and all of them localized. None of them could compare in duration and destructive effects with the American civil war of 1861–5.

In dealing with surplus agricultural populations in Europe, which are a phenomenon of the latter half of the nineteenth century, it is not proposed to try to estimate the birth-rate in such populations or apply any of the theories which connect fertility with a certain density of population. It will generally appear that the emergence of a surplus population in any agricultural community is connected mainly with the ratio of the increase of population to the increase of the means of subsistence.

The position is also affected by the relative mobility or immobility of labour. In this connexion it is well to remember that in Prussia serfdom was abolished only at the beginning of the century, in parts of Austro-Hungary only in 1848, and in Russia and Russian Poland only in 1864, and that even after that great change had happened it might be a generation before the land worker attained effective mobility, just as in the United States after 1865 the majority of the freed negroes remained in the southern states for more than a generation.

How far can there be any analogy between an industrial population, which has become largely surplus through the existence of persistent unemployment owing to the decline of industry, and any kind of surplus agricultural population? There are two obvious grounds for differentiation: (1) Until recent times large agricultural groups were producing primarily for subsistence and only secondarily for exchange, so that they were their own market. (2) The normal structure of an agricultural community is not like that of an industrial community under the régime of production on a big scale by joint-stock companies. In other words, there is little accumulation of capital in agriculture as compared with other industry. The large landowner who is also an entrepreneur is exceptional, the small business is the rule in agriculture. Further, in a sense agriculture must go on, because otherwise the land goes back to nature, even if the returns in money grow smaller and smaller. Hence short of complete abandonment of land the agriculturist will carry on and get some relief by producing again mainly for himself. So far as agriculture is conducted on a large scale, the effect of low prices may come back on the labourer in a reduced standard of living and force him finally to leave the land.

On the whole a surplus agricultural population is more likely to exist when the land is in the hands of a peasant community, and there is an attempt to support the natural increase of the population from the same area of land without any great improvement in the arts of agriculture. Certain countries, such as Scotland and Switzerland, and the Scandinavian countries, have regularly 'exported' their surplus rural population.

The medieval three-field system, in fact, implied a stationary or at least slowly increasing population, for which latter the waste land of the manor was taken into cultivation from time to time. Simple systems of husbandry depend on land and labour, and labour in such systems is relatively inefficient in the sense of productivity per man, as is most agricultural in relation to industrial labour. Hence, if it is desired to produce more food from an area in order to support a bigger population therein, or to export a surplus, the labour must be made more efficient by being linked up with improved systems either by the greater care of the soil or the introduction of machinery. This is why the provision of credit or loan capital has been a great preoccupation with govern-

ments in European countries with a considerable peasant population, and in India. Such improvements are usually beyond the initiative of a peasant community. It is equally true that there have existed in Europe forms of rural economy in which the large landowner was normally the entrepreneur. But he supplied little capital apart from the land and left the actual cultivation very much to peasant labourers. Such a state of things existed in pre-War Rumania.

One can conceive of a surplus agricultural population arising in one of the following ways:

1. Under conditions where the Malthusian theorem has come true and the pressure of population on subsistence is severe, usually through excessive fragmentation of land.
2. Under conditions less severe than in (1) where the cultivation of land has come under the formula of diminishing returns through straining a system of husbandry, and this has gone on progressively over a widening area.
3. In cases where the distribution of returns among the different classes of producers is inequitable, with the result that the labourers are in much the same position as might be reached under (2) if they had been landholders.
4. In cases where, apart from the foregoing causes, a rural economy producing for export suffers from a considerable fall in demand especially if such an economy has been using up its capital in the soil.

These various cases may to a certain extent overlap. The first and second will occur in communities where the peasants are in actual occupation of the land, and the third, where it is controlled by large landholders. The fourth case might occur under any régime.

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China, or at least large parts of it, illustrates the first case. Certain rice-growing regions in eastern China have a density of 3,000 and others 6,000 human beings to the square mile, as contrasted even with parts of Bengal which have about 1,160. These lie north and south of the mouth of the Yangtze. In this area 1·7 acres, it is said, can support a family of five in comfort. It appears, however, that in certain investigated districts one-third of the

holdings were found to be less than 1 acre in extent, and rather more than half not more than 1·5 acres. Farther north in the wheat and millet growing regions 4·7 acres seem to be the limit of an economic 'family holding'.

These dwarf holdings are only possible at all because the Chinese peasant has acquired great traditional skill and is a very hard worker. Hence the land produces all that a highly intensive cultivation can get out of it. At the same time a community wrestling with nature on these terms is at the mercy of famine, and famine occurs every few years.

Most of the densely populated areas of China are in the eastern provinces, other parts being more thinly populated. If China had a stable and paternal government, such as India has had, public works of irrigation combined with emigration might give relief. Looking at the scale on which surplus populations exist in China, it seems almost trivial to seek a further illustration nearer home. There is a good one all the same. The population of Ireland was about 5 millions in the early part of the nineteenth century; by 1845 it was more than 8 millions. It had grown mainly through the increase of the cottier class, i.e. through excessive sub-letting of land. Further, the western half of Ireland is not good for growing grain—in fact, the final argument for repealing the duties on corn was the need to relieve distress in Ireland—so the potato came almost to replace bread as the main vegetable food. The people lived on the margin of subsistence, and when the famine of 1846 came they were swept away.

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European Russia, in the latter part of the nineteenth century, would give a fair example of the second type of surplus population. When the serfs were liberated in 1864 the lands of the village communes were to remain as the communal possession of the village, the great landowners being compensated by the state for their interest in the lands. These lands were called the *nadiel* (allotted) lands and at the time were estimated to cover about 60 per cent. of the cultivated land of Russia. The assignment of the lands jointly to the *obstchina* or village community meant that the communal husbandry of the old three-field system would be adhered to.

As was said earlier, this system implies a stationary population, but the enfranchised Russian peasantry increased rather rapidly, and the need to raise more grain led to the hay meadows and other grazing land being broken up for cultivation, so that the live stock fell off, and with it the fertility of the soil, for no other kind of fertilizer than animal manure was known. The further result was that the peasantry were always seeking to get more land from the landowners, in which they were successful, as they were in a position to deny their labour to the great landowners who wished to work their own lands by hired labour. So perhaps another 30 per cent. of the cultivated land gradually came into the occupation of the peasant communes at fairly high rents, and the process of over-cultivation continued. The exhaustion of the soil caused famines in seasons of drought.

It was to remedy this state of things that Stolypin, the Russian prime minister, brought in the law in 1906 to enable the common lands to be broken up and held in severalty, and some progress had been made with this operation when the War broke out. The surplus agricultural population existing over great parts of Russia also found another outlet. There were increasing opportunities for work in industry, but, as the surplus peasant population were free in the winter, many factories were at work in the winter and slack in summer.

At this stage one feels inclined to ask why it is that, in certain countries where the peasant proprietor is common, excessive subdivision of the land and consequent over-population have not come about, even if, as in France and a great part of western Germany, where the code Napoleon was introduced, there are several heirs to a property. The simplest answer seems to be that in the nineteenth century the small farmer in western Europe soon had to take to producing for a market, local or otherwise, and this was only possible on economic holdings. They might still be fairly small holdings, as in the great areas given over to *culture maraîchère* or fruit in northern France and in Campania in Italy.

In France, too, the limitation of the size of the family is often attributed to a feeling of the desirability of keeping the holding intact. Another process also was going on in peasant communities in the nineteenth century. Such communities were in earlier times self-contained, not only in the production of food, but also in the

'arts and crafts'. These, however, gradually died out as production in factory and workshop increased. The small craftsman usually had a little land, and as he vanished the land tended to be added to the economic holdings of the genuine farmer. In some districts there was a marked tradition for the surplus population to migrate. Galicia, in Spain, is one of the most over-populated rural districts of western Europe by reason of the subdivision of holdings. The Gallego is known throughout northern Spain as a porter, 'hewer of wood and drawer of water'. Similarly in France, the Aubergnat was long known for leaving his native district in search of work.

In countries like south-western France and certain parts of Italy, Tuscany, and Umbria and Catalonia in eastern Spain, where *métayage* exists, the holdings may be small by our standards, but they are unlikely to be subdivided below the economic level, because the owner is above the peasant class.

In the north of France, too, farms let to tenants are fairly common. In the south-west of France there has been quite an exodus from the land, of which more will be said later. In Germany later legislation favoured the succession of the single heir.

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If the over-population of peasant communities arises through the attempt to quarter more and more people on the land by sub-division or otherwise, this, from the nature of things, is less likely to happen on land in the control of great landowners. Apart from the part of Germany usually known as 'Ostelbien' (East of the Elbe), great estates subsist only to a limited extent on the great European plain, in fact only in Poland where the post-War land reform has not gone so far as in Rumania or the little Baltic countries. In Hungary, southern Italy, and southern Spain large estates still survive. In these countries the peasantry do not seem to have managed to root themselves to the soil in the same fashion as in northern Europe. The medieval three-field system was not in force here.

In Hungary there are certain historical reasons. Medieval Hungary was apparently not a very agricultural country, and early in the sixteenth century came the Turkish invasion. In the troublous times which followed, the peasantry seem to have lived mainly in large villages for security, thus leaving the greater part

of the land in the hands of the great landowners, who were accordingly free, when they developed agriculture in the nineteenth century, to let the land out in farms or direct the cultivation themselves. This is true especially of the main Hungarian *alföld*, or plain, between the Danube and the Theiss, and east thereof. The system of agriculture was based largely on the alternation of cereals and maize, together with potatoes and sugar beet. The greater part of the labourers, down to the War-time, were little better off than in the days of serfdom. Stiff laws fettered their freedom of contract. A similar situation exists in southern Spain and southern Italy and Sicily. Hence the only remedy for the condition of the rural proletariat in these countries was emigration. It is not realized how considerable an emigration of Southern Spaniards to North Africa went on before the recent civil war.

The third case of a surplus population is, then, likely to be found in communities where the great landowner still survives. This will vary somewhat according as under a system of large estates something like high farming exists, e.g. in this country and in eastern Germany, or as the large landowner is not a scientific entrepreneur, but either lets a great area of land to a lessee, who deals with the labourers, or lets it direct to small people in holdings under the share system, often on inequitable terms, as in pre-War Rumania, where they supplied their own implements and 'beasts of burden'.

In all such cases the labourer is poorly remunerated, and if the agriculture carried on is such as to require a series of seasonal operations there is likely to be a great mass of casual labour on the margin of subsistence. Such a population may attempt to get relief by migration for seasonal labour elsewhere, as in the case of the Polish labourers who go to Prussia for work on the potato or sugar-beet crops, or by permanent emigration from the country.

In Great Britain the effect of the enclosures and the universal substitution of the individual farm, together with the British laws of succession, maintained the position of landlord and tenant on a durable basis. The labourer was in a miserable plight for the first half of the nineteenth century, and with increasing mobility thereafter he discovered that he was 'surplus' population and migrated to the towns or overseas in great numbers.

The continental country which shows the nearest parallel to the English case in the creation of a rural proletariat is old Prussia,

i.e. Prussia east of the Elbe. The reforms of Stein and Hindenburg at the beginning of the nineteenth century transformed the status of the peasantry, abolished serfdom, broke down the almost 'caste' distinction between the three types of land, according as it was occupied by noble, burgher, or peasant, and left the peasants in possession of two-thirds of their land, the other third being surrendered to the nobles as compensation. After 1815, however, there was a certain reaction, and legislation was passed to restrict security of tenure to holdings over 25 acres, the occupiers of holdings under that extent being left as merely tenants at will. The landowners, who themselves were to a large extent new men as many old families were impoverished and had to sell out, gradually squeezed out the small men, partly to get as much land as possible in their own hands and partly to guarantee themselves a supply of labour. As one associates the large estates of old Prussia with high farming (and the farms are often 1,000 acres in extent), it may seem surprising that one connects such a system with badly paid labour. The name *Gesinde*, however, almost implied a bondsman, and the great areas under potatoes and sugar beet in north Germany have always involved much casual labour. The successful peasant succeeds in distributing his labour power well over the year.

As labour lacked mobility the system they introduced lasted till after the middle of the nineteenth century. When, however, the great industrial development of modern Germany began, the rural labourers found their way to Westphalia and other industrial regions where wages were much higher, declaring themselves 'surplus' as it were, and thereafter eastern Germany has been greatly dependent on migratory Polish and other labour to work the fields. Since the last War the whole system of the large 'Ostelbien' estates has been precarious, but all projects for breaking them up into smaller holdings were resisted, and a state fund called the *Osthilfe* was formed in the time of Hindenburg to enable the junkers to keep their heads above water.

One does not think of France as a country where one would find labour gradually failing to support a régime of landlord estate management. It is, however, well known that there was a flight from the land in the south-west of France in the latter part of the nineteenth century. A recent study has been made of fluctuations

of population in the region of the middle Garonne, roughly the country between Toulouse and Bordeaux, by P. Deffontaines of Lille. The population increased up till 1840, decreased slowly till 1880, and more rapidly thereafter. The author attributes the decline to the gradual disappearance of the 'small people', i.e. the occupiers of 'dwarf' holdings, who had to work on other people's land. The relinquished land went to consolidate the medium peasant properties which survived. Not that the peasant property is the characteristic tenure of this region. The system of *métayage* has survived here from old time; the bourgeois owners usually had a number of *métairies* in their possession, in fact the cultivation of the land was carried out largely under some form of share system with all sorts of gradations and refinements so that the 'small people' worked largely under this contract even for a short term, apart from the standing *métayer* tenancies. In the view of the author of the study the dominant form of husbandry, cereals and maize, was pushed too far, the fallow land was contracted, the manure from pigeons and *transhumants* Pyrenean sheep was not enough. To make good these defects more and more labour was required, particularly on the maize or cleaning crop, but late in the nineteenth century the labourer, the small man, gave it up, and so the system tended to collapse. The landlords had to give more and more favourable terms to the *métayers*, but even so found their lands on their hands. Shall we then call the ensuing depopulation the departure of a 'surplus' population? Was it not in another form like the departure of the east Prussian labourers because too much was asked of them for too little reward?

There was a curious spontaneous effort to resettle parts of the south-west of France early in the present century, when a further class of 'small people,' coming from more thickly populated regions, took up the *métayer* holdings which the former tenants had left, and the owners were glad to have them. Since the War another type of immigrants has come into the region of the Garonne, persons who made some money in the War or post-War years and wanted to buy some land. A good many of these were aliens. Within France the new-comers (in either group) were conspicuously from La Vendée, others from the central *massif* of France (Auvergne and the Cévennes), from Savoy, and in the earlier days from Brittany—but the Bretons do not seem to have felt at home on the

Garonne. The strangers were mainly Swiss, Italians, and Spaniards. The Swiss, accustomed mainly to dairying, did not prosper outside this branch of husbandry. Something similar accounted for the failure of the Bretons. The Italian migration was from the north, Lombardy and Venezia, and is interesting because it was drawn from a surplus population in a region where relatively large estates and large farms are common, as they are on the great Italian plain. So the land available for peasant holders was restricted, whether as owners or tenants of *métairies*. Thus there was a surplus population, especially in the province of Padua. Formerly emigration from north Italy had gone towards Switzerland, south Germany, and South America, but these outlets were less freely available after the War. There was also this in favour of coming to south-western France, that the prevailing scheme of agriculture in the Garonne region was like that of north Italy. A good many of the immigrants were peasants who had sold their own lands and bought new property in the Garonne region. The smaller people followed; they took up share tenancies on land some of which their wealthier countrymen had bought. They widened the range of products grown, renewing the old local planting of mulberries and hemp, and introducing rice in some districts. The Fascist laws against emigration stopped this movement. The Spaniards were mainly labourers coming from Aragon and part of Catalonia. In some cases they earned enough to buy smallholdings.

This rural colonization of the Garonne region by Italians and Spaniards is part of the general movement of an alien working population into France to make good the gaps in the French stationary population.

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We have not touched so far on the fourth case of a surplus rural population. The other classes of surplus do not necessarily tend to the abandonment of a whole rural economy, except in cases where an extensive pastoral régime may succeed one of mixed husbandry, however primitive, as in the Highlands of Scotland. Yet such cases are not unknown. Thus in New England there has been a certain abandonment of farms in woodland areas, proceeding as the more fertile regions of the United States were opened up. Similarly in the more droughty regions of the great plains west of

the Upper Mississippi Valley, where the cultivation of grain was pushed during the War, there has been a definite reaction since. The same might be said of parts of Saskatchewan. The case of North America, however, will be dealt with elsewhere. The ruin of vineyards by the phylloxera in France and Italy in places led to a transformation of the rural economy. In one part of France (the Charente) a new type of farming (i.e. dairying) took the place of the growing of the vine.

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Perhaps it might be worth adding a little on the agrarian reforms which took place after the War in eastern Europe, and in this connexion we must remember that the new peasant landholders, being exporters of their produce to industrial Europe, felt the full effect of the fall in prices after 1929. How far were these reforms designed to relieve a surplus population? Rumania is the country in which they were carried out in the most thorough-going fashion. There it might be said that on the whole the object was to raise the standard of living among the working peasantry, in so far as less wheat was exported. The large Rumanian estates were cultivated largely through share tenancies, to which, as we have seen, the landowner contributed little besides the land. So the husbandry was on a primitive scale with low efficiency. The exports of Rumanian grain were made at the expense of the peasant cultivator. From a recent survey it appears that there has been no improvement in the technique of agriculture since the reforms.[1] The wheat and corn (maize) régime of the Danubian region is a snare, unless the corn is treated as a fodder crop and largely eaten by live stock. It cannot be said on the whole that the breaking up of the large estates has secured a much higher standard for the Rumanian peasant.

In Czechoslovakia the latifundia were mainly in southern Bohemia, Moravia, and Slovakia, including, especially in Slovakia, great areas of forest land, and it is on these estates that the greatest number of new holdings were made. Apart from this measure, peasant landowners, who had also leased land from large landowners, were enabled to buy such land outright, and this was followed by the sale of numerous parcels of land to peasants. The

[1] *Economics of Peasant Farming*, by Dr. D. Warriner.

general tendency of the agrarian law in the republic was to consolidate the position of those who already held some land, and provide land for the landless. And in Bohemia and Moravia the system of farming was more like the mixed live-stock and arable farming of western and northern Europe, and therefore on a more economic level.

In fact, the economic function of the 'wheat and maize' cultivation of the Danubian countries and north Italy in modern Europe seems a little dubious, whether it is carried on under a régime of large estates or peasant holdings. It tends to imperil the fertility of the soil, and if the maize crop becomes the staple food of the peasant, it marks a low standard of living, but otherwise its profitableness depends on it being largely a forage crop. At present pigs and cattle are fed otherwise in south-eastern Europe.

In Prussian Poland the distribution of land had followed the rule of the other Prussian provinces and the very small holdings had disappeared. Further there had been a Polish movement in pre-War days to buy up estates coming into the market and sell them to peasants as a reply to the anti-Polish colonization schemes of the Prussian Government. In Congress Poland the accounts of the reform show that it largely took the form of regulating the mutual rights of landowners and peasants, which had not been touched at the time of the liberation of the serfs. The consolidation of peasant holdings was another important measure.

In Galicia there was an attempt to enlarge existing holdings and make fresh ones, but the subdivision of the peasant land had gone so far that it was very difficult to provide an adequate remedy from the land available. It was found that there were in Galicia 1 million holdings not exceeding 5 hectares, and most of them not more than half of that extent.