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INTRODUCTION

THERE are few problems today more fundamental than the distribution of land amongst those who till it.

As populations grow, there comes a time when the land available for cultivation cannot be expanded to keep pace. Thereafter it tends to be split up, until the average size of unit in which it is worked becomes too small to provide a decent living for a man and his family. Nor does it end there, because tradition or laws of inheritance all too often aggravate the problem by causing the holdings themselves to be further split into numerous plots dispersed over wide areas. In the result the cultivator's energies are dissipated: he has to travel unprofitably to and fro, he lacks the opportunity to embark on up-to-date methods, he regards as futile, or more often perhaps as impossible, the introduction of machinery, and even if he takes the risk of introducing it he suffers appalling waste of time in travelling and frequent turning. In fact he undergoes every kind of hindrance to economic cultivation, and it is this which contributes so largely to the situation in which rural populations, too many of them, hardly manage to maintain a bare subsistence level.

Conditions such as these are not confined to any particular region of the globe. Asia, Africa, and the Americas embrace many examples, but it is with western Europe that the present series of articles is concerned. There, while the population has increased more than five times in the last 300 years, the extent of land available for cultivation has hardly altered. Not all countries have been affected in the same way by these developments. Sometimes it has been possible to break up the larger estates, or to reduce their size, to make more room for smaller holdings. In Denmark, for example, some of the church lands and entailed estates have been called upon to make contributions of this kind, while in Finland the sudden need to settle the population displaced by the loss of territory in the recent war provided a special stimulus towards similar action. Outstanding examples of making new holdings are to be found, of course, in the Netherlands. In other places land is actually going out of cultivation, as is true, for example, of some of the less productive soils in Sweden which are being turned over to forest. But whatever steps may be taken here and there to adjust the

land to its people, it is a fact that in large areas of Europe the point was reached long since when subdivision and fragmentation of holdings became a major social and economic problem.

Alleviation may be sought in the direction of drawing off surplus man-power from the land into other occupations, or of intensifying agricultural production, but these policies do not go to the heart of this particular problem. However great the benefits to be derived from them, they would be still greater if it were not for the irrational layout of the farms, and it follows that wherever the subdivision of the land has been excessive, some kind of land reform should be among the first, as it is among the more fundamental, lines of attack.

By far the most intractable facet of the problem is to devise plans which will give each man a holding large enough to be economical without interfering with his neighbours, let alone displacing them. Yet in places where the land is fully taken up it is impossible for the acreages of holdings to be increased without in some measure reducing their number; it is only too obvious that a farming unit which is too small to be efficient cannot be enlarged merely by bringing its separate parcels together. However, the political and social implications of changes of this kind are so formidable as to fall, nearly always, outside the range of present practical reforms.

Fortunately, there remains the less dramatic but still hopeful possibility of relieving the situation at least to the extent of redistributing the various scattered plots among the cultivators in such a way that each of them has a more or less compact block of land, even though in acreage it may be no larger than his original holding. Even this rather less ambitious objective is hard enough to achieve as the following pages show. Quite apart from a man's attachment to fields and places with which he is familiar, there are variations of soil, of aspect, of water-supply, of natural drainage, and so on, which make it a far from simple matter to rearrange the layout of farm land so as to be fair to all. A countryman, however disadvantaged he may be, develops a harmony with his surroundings which makes it difficult for him to distinguish between the buffetings of Nature which are inevitable and his man-made afflictions which are not, and so it is that he becomes suspicious of change, and the more sudden or drastic it is the less he likes it. Land reforms he views with particular distrust. Add to this the cost of surveying the land and replanning it, and it is not surprising that reorganization is at best a slow process which even the most expert and tactful handling cannot easily carry through.

This, then, is the main theme of the following pages. They describe for six countries of western Europe—Denmark, Finland, France, Holland, Italy, and Sweden—the scattered nature of many holdings, how they came to be as they are, and the methods which have been evolved, and which are in use, for rearranging them so that each, so far as possible, may be in one place.

No two countries are alike in this. On the whole the problem has been less severe in countries where landed property descends to a single heir as has been the rule in Denmark from time immemorial, and where incidentally the pressure of population on the land has been less acute than in many other parts of Europe. In France, in Finland, and in Sweden, on the other hand, the general rule, now modified, of dividing an inheritance equally between the children has been responsible for the break-up of many holdings. Systems of tenure, which have played no small part in creating the problem, still give rise to controversy over efforts to relieve it, as for example in France where it is found that consolidation based on *ownership* does not necessarily result in satisfactory units for *farming*. Countries such as Sweden again, where owner-occupation has always been the rule, are spared this particular difficulty, though it is open to question sometimes whether a cultivator who owns the land he works may not be even harder to convince of the benefits of exchange than a tenant would be. Where there is a tendency for farmsteads to be clustered in villages, following the open-field system, there is the problem of building steadings for those of the new holdings which have to be out in the country and persuading families to go there to live.

In all this work there is a common feature in that voluntary effort has nowhere been sufficient; legislative provision seems to be necessary, not only to promote consolidation, but also, sometimes, to prevent further fragmentation. The unfortunate failing that many holdings, even when completely consolidated, are still uneconomically small is beyond the purpose of these papers to discuss in any detail. As already mentioned, it is an insistent problem in many lands, but reformers are wise, no doubt, to feel their way in such delicate matters and in the meantime to forge ahead with the more practicable measures which these pages describe.