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Rome's Fall Reconsidered

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# POLITICAL SCIENCE QUARTERLY

## ROME'S FALL RECONSIDERED

THE great Roman writers with whom we are familiar seem to have been quite conscious of Rome's progressive disintegration. The testimony of the eyewitnesses of the process is of course of the utmost importance. Let us hear to what fundamental factors they themselves attributed the decline of their commonwealth.

Probably no handy quotation has pursued us through our school years with such perseverance as Pliny's "*Latifundia perdidere Italiam, jam vero et provincias.*"<sup>1</sup> The elder Pliny was not merely a man of great learning, but a much traveled statesman of large and varied experience. Is it not interesting that he is not presenting us with a catalogue of factors that were leading Rome to its destruction? On the contrary, without any apology he is crisply pointing to one predominating factor, which he names. The large estates, the *latifundia*, were ruining Rome as well as its provinces.

More rhetorical in form, but similar in its meaning, is the arraignment of the vast *latifundia* and their owners in Seneca's letters.<sup>2</sup> Seneca himself was one of the richest land owners of Rome, but as a statesman he gave warning, in public, of what the wealthy landowners did not care to hear in private. Seneca asks: "How far will you extend the bounds of your possessions? A large tract of land, sufficient heretofore for a whole nation, is scarce wide enough for a single lord."<sup>3</sup> In fact, Cicero had already reported the statement of the tribune Philippus that the

<sup>1</sup> Plin. H. N. xviii, 7.

<sup>2</sup> Seneca, Ep. 89.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

entire commonwealth could not muster two thousand property owners.<sup>1</sup> The concentration of landed property must have been amazing.

The latifundia, according to one view, therefore, were the cause of ruin; but there was a more popular version of the decline, namely, *corruptio*, the corruption of morals, the corruption brought by wealth, the corruption brought by poverty, the all-pervading moral corruption of Rome. Livy invites us to follow first the gradual sinking of the national character, later on the more rapid tempo of its downward course until the days are reached when "we cannot bear our diseases nor their remedies."<sup>2</sup> And what great Roman of that period did not complain of corruption? Read Tiberius's famous letter to the Senate, which Tacitus has transmitted to us. The Senate complained of luxury and corruption and called on the emperor for action and Tiberius answered:

That these abuses are the subject of discussion at every table and the topic of conversation in all private circles, I know quite well. And yet, let a law be made with proper sanctions, and the very men who call for a reform will be the first to make objections. The public peace, they will say, is disturbed; illustrious families are in danger of ruin. . . .<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps the most striking expression<sup>4</sup> of the progressive moral deterioration of the Romans is in Horace's ode "Ad Romanos"<sup>5</sup>: "Quid non damnosa dies imminuit? Aetas parentum pejor avis tulit nos nequiores, mox daturos vitiosorem progeniem"—What does ruinous time not impair? The age of our parents, more degenerate than that of our grandfathers, made us even more worthless and we will give birth to a still more vicious progeny! Cheerful prospect! But why such a

<sup>1</sup> "Non esse in civitate duo millia hominum qui rem haberent." Cicero, *De Officiis* ii, 73.

<sup>2</sup> Livius, i.

<sup>3</sup> Tacitus, *Ann.*, iii, 54.

<sup>4</sup> Among the picturesque characterizations of Roman degeneracy Columella deserves a very high place with his "Nam sic juvenum corpora fluxa et resoluta sunt, ut nihil mors mutatura videatur." For so limp and dissolute are bodies of the young men, that death seems to make no change in them! Columella, i, 1.

<sup>5</sup> Horatius, *Odae*, iii, 6.

note of despair? What is the cause of this moral corruption and degeneracy of which all Roman writers of the period complain?

In that very same ode Horace tells us why he takes so desperate a view of things. The great deeds of the Romans were the deeds of a sturdy farmer race, of the "mascula proles rusticorum militum, docta versare glebas Sabellis ligonibus"<sup>1</sup>—and these farmers' sons existed no longer. If they could not maintain themselves on their farms, still worse were the chances for a respectable existence in Rome; there they lost what little they had and became demoralized, dependent paupers.<sup>2</sup>

The two complaints, the two Roman explanations of their own decline and disintegration *reduce themselves, therefore, to one single explanation*. For it is clear that the latifundia and corruption are but different aspects of the same social phenomenon. If the moral disintegration was due to the disappearance of the self-supporting, self-respecting farmer class, and the inordinate wealth and fantastic luxury of the small upper class, *the latifundia were but a real-estate expression of the same phenomenon*. The place of innumerable small farms was taken by extraordinarily large estates—the latifundia.

I do not doubt for a moment that the Romans were quite conscious that the latifundia and corruption were but different aspects of the same phenomenon. Take, for instance, Sallust, who states it very clearly in his so-called epistles to Cæsar:

When the people were gradually deprived of their lands, and idleness and want left them without a place to live on, they began to covet other men's property and to regard their liberty and the interests of their country as objects for sale. Thus the people who had been sovereign and who had governed all nations, became gradually degenerate; and instead of maintaining their common dominion brought upon themselves individual servitude.<sup>3</sup>

We are therefore justified, I believe, in stating that the con-

<sup>1</sup> Horatius, *Odae*, iii, 6.

<sup>2</sup> Juvenalis, iii, 21 ff.; Martialis, iv, 5.

<sup>3</sup> Sallust, i, 5.

temporary witnesses of the decline of Rome had but one explanation of its cause; but while some emphasized its moral aspect and others its economic, still others, like Sallust or Pseudo-Sallust, have emphasized the political effect of the economic and moral disintegration of Rome.

The small farms disappeared. Why did they disappear? If we go back again to Roman literature to see just how the small farms disappeared and just how their place was taken by single latifundia, we find little material that may be considered as a direct answer to our question. Such little material as we do find seems to suggest violence. Thus we are told in the *Metamorphoses* of Apuleius how the rich man after he despoiled his poor neighbor's flocks "resolved to dispossess him of his scanty acres and, inventing a fictitious quarrel over the boundaries of their lands, claimed the whole property for himself."<sup>1</sup> An intimation of similar proceedings is to be found in Sallust's "Jugurthine War":

The parents and children of the soldiers, meantime, if they chanced to dwell near a powerful neighbor, were driven from their homes. Thus avarice, leagued with power, disturbed, violated and wasted everything without moderation or restraint, disregarding alike reason and religion and rushing headlong, as it were, to its own destruction.<sup>2</sup>

Similar is the meaning of Horace's famous "Ode on Roman Luxury and Avarice: "

Quid quod usque proximos  
Revellis agri terminos et ultra  
Limites clientorum  
Salis avarus? pellitur paternos  
In sinu ferens deos  
Et uxor et vir sordidosque natos.<sup>3</sup>

These and one or two similar stories<sup>4</sup> are about the only material at hand which bears directly on the wiping-out of

<sup>1</sup> Apuleius, *Metam.*, ix, 35.

<sup>2</sup> Sallust, *Jugurt.*, xli.

<sup>3</sup> Horatius, *Od.*, ii, 18.

<sup>4</sup> Quintilian in his *Apes Pauperis*, xiii, 4; Seneca, *Epist.*, 90.

small farms. Shall we therefore reach the conclusion that the innumerable small farms were wiped out by the violence of the few rich? Have we any other material relating to the life of the petty Roman farmer? None of any consequence. That being the case, it would be contrary to common sense to assume that small farming, once spread over the Italian countryside, was wiped out by violence. There is reproof and horror in the quotations cited; the authors are shocked, and we are shocked only by the unusual. Hence, the element of violence is emphasized in the material quoted, because it is exceptional. It takes too deep a mind to follow what is slow and uneventful, to find beauty in the deep ruts of a muddy country road, and treasures in the day-by-day life of the most humble. The story of the plain farmer we can expect to find in neither literature nor history. History as well as literature is a mountain-climbing expedition.

What do we know about Roman farmers that is not legendary in its nature? We know that in the earlier period of the Republic they considered seven jugera as ample for the support of a Roman farmer and his family. That is supposed to have been the size of the allotments after the expulsion of the kings; that was the size of the allotments in the colonies established by Manius Curus after his great conquests. It is he who is credited with the statement that "the man must be looked upon as a dangerous citizen, for whom seven jugera of land are not enough."<sup>1</sup>

Why did the seven-jugera farms disappear? Why was their place taken by the large private domains, the latifundia? That we are dealing here with the fundamental problem of the Roman commonwealth is indicated by all its external struggles. Only glance at the way the problem is formulated by Tiberius Gracchus:

The wild beasts of Italy had their dens and hiding places, while the men who fought and died in defense of Italy enjoyed, indeed, the air and the light, but nothing else. Houseless and without a spot of ground to

<sup>1</sup> Plin. H. N., xviii, 4. Also Valerius Maximus, iv, 5. Sextus Aurelius Victor (xxxiii) in his account gives 14 jugera as the size of the allotment.

rest upon, they wander about with their wives and children, while their commanders, with a lie in their mouths, exhort the soldiers in battle to defend their tombs and temples against the enemy, for out of so many Romans not one has a family altar or ancestral tomb, but they fight to maintain the luxury and wealth of others, and they die with the title of lords of the earth without possessing a single clod to call their own.<sup>1</sup>

Unfortunately, about the process of the expropriation of the farmer class, Tiberius Gracchus does not tell us any more than did Sallust or Pseudo-Sallust in his letter to Cæsar; but an interesting clue may be found in the size of the Gracchan allotments: they were to be thirty jugera each. Why not seven? Later on we know that the triumviral assignments were, according to Trentinus, fifty jugera, the assignments of Cæsar the dictator were sixty-six and one-third jugera. In the Augustinian colony, Emerita, we learn from Hyginus, the assignments were four hundred jugera.<sup>2</sup>

How then could seven jugera suffice for the farmers of early Rome? Did not the ancients speculate on the subject? Yes, they did. Pliny discusses this very problem. He is wondering about the productivity of the soil in the olden days and here is what he tells us:

What, then, was the cause of a fertility so remarkable as this? The fact, we have every reason to believe, was that in those days the lands were tilled by the hands of generals, even the soil exulting beneath a ploughshare crowned with wreaths of laurel, and guided by a husbandman graced with triumphs—whether it is that they tended the seed with the same care that they had displayed in the conduct of wars, and manifested the same diligent attention in the management of their fields as they had done in the arrangement of the camp, or whether it is that under the hands of honest men everything prospers the better, from being attended to with scrupulous exactness.”<sup>3</sup>

Pliny may have been right in his explanation or he may have been wrong. The important thing is that the simple circum-

<sup>1</sup> Plutarch. Tib. Gracchus, ix.

<sup>2</sup> Mommsen, *Zum Römischen Bodenrecht*. Historische Schriften, ii, p. 87.

<sup>3</sup> Pliny H. N., xviii, 4.

stance that a Roman could in former generations make a living on seven jugera distinctly required explanations.

There were other explanations. Is not one offered, for instance, by Lucretius's lines at the end of his second book? What does Lucretius tell us about mother earth in general and his Roman soil in particular?

Beside she Corn and Wine, and Oil did bear  
 And tender fruit, without the tiller's care ;  
 She brought forth Herbs, which now the feeble soil  
 Can scarce afford to all our pain and toil.  
 We labor, sweat, and yet by all this strife  
 Can scarce get Corn and Wine enough for life.  
 Our men, our oxen, groan, and never cease,  
 So fast our labors grow, our fruits decrease.  
 Nay oft the farmers with a sigh complain,  
 That they have labor'd all the year in vain,  
 And looking back on former Ages bless  
 With anxious thought their Parents' happiness  
 . . . . .  
 Content with what the willing soil did yield,  
 Though each man then enjoyed a narrower field.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Thomas Creech's translation. London, 1683, p. 68. It is somewhat inaccurate but it seems to me the most poetical translation of Lucretius.

Lucretius Carus, *De Rerum Natura*, Libri Sex, ii, 1157-1174.

praeterea nitidas fruges vinetaque laeta  
 sponte sua primum mortalibus ipse creavit,  
 ipse dedit dulcis fetus et pabula laeta;  
 quae nunc vix nostro grandescunt aucta labore,  
 conterimusque boves et viris agricolorum,  
 conficimus ferrum, vix arvis suppeditati:  
 usque adeo parcunt fetus augentque labore.  
 iamque caput quassans grandis suspirat arator  
 crebrius, incassum manuum cecidisse labores,  
 et cum tempora temporibus praesentis confert  
 praeteritis, laudat fortunas saepe parentis.  
 tristis item vetulae vitis sator atque victae  
 temporis incusat nomen, caelumque fatigat,  
 et crepat, antiquum genus ut pietate repletum  
 perfacile angustis tolerarit finibus aevom,  
 cum minor esset agri multo modus ante viritum:  
 nec tenet omnia paulatim tabescere et ire  
 ad capulum, spatio aetatis defessa vetustæ.

This statement is of great importance, but only if corroborated by facts. To accept Lucretius's evidence by itself as sufficient and conclusive would be rather hasty. Lucretius as a philosopher is dealing here with the decay of the world, and hence the question naturally suggests itself: Did the actual situation, as he observed it, lead him to such a conclusion, or did his philosophy color his observations?

If the lines cited from Lucretius are a true statement of fact, the economic, and hence also social and political, effects of such conditions were bound to be so disastrous that it would be reasonable for us to expect a fairly general outcry.

A general outcry is of course important historical evidence, but it is not the cause that makes us complain, it is the effect, the situation in which we happen to find ourselves. A meat-market riot is not more concerned with the cause of the high cost of living, than the Roman sumptuary and moral laws were concerned with the cause of the much-complained-of corruption. The effects one can always see; of the effects one constantly hears: but the cause one must find. So it is, so it was; hence Virgil's "*Felix qui potuit rerum cognoscere causas.*"

Nor are we always primarily interested in the true cause. There are situations where one is inclined to search for a life-preserver rather than for the cause of shipwreck. It is therefore wise to remember that the attitude of the impartial onlooker is likely to be quite different from that of the *dramatis persona*. Goethe indicates this difference:

Wherein do Gods  
Differ from mortals?  
In that the former  
See endless billows  
Heaving before them;  
*Us* doth the billow  
Lift up and swallow  
So that we perish.

So it happens that the true causes of things are hardly discussed in the markets and meeting-places. It is the future, not the past, that worries politicians. Remedies, not causes, are

what they are bound to discuss. For life is purposeful, and only to its dissector is it a chain of causes. But Rome was not without dissecting scholars.

Let us therefore go and see how the great agricultural scholars of the time analyzed the situation. Let us read thoughtfully the writings of Columella. He was writing under the Principate, about 60 A. D. How does he begin his work? The preface begins:

I frequently hear the most illustrious men of our country complaining that the sterility of our soil and intemperate weather have now for many ages past been diminishing the productivity of the land. Others give a rational background to their complaints, claiming that the land became tired and exhausted from its productivity in the former ages, and hence the soil is no longer able to furnish sustenance to mortals with its former liberality.<sup>1</sup>

Columella does not agree with such a point of view. He ascribes the lack of productivity to poor farming and hence he gives us instructions how to farm well. But is it not of the utmost significance that he published a voluminous treatise distinctly directed against a prevailing exhaustion-of-the-soil theory? These opening lines of Columella are far from accidental. Furthermore we learn from him a very important thing, and that is, *that nearly all agricultural writers of antiquity* (whose writings are lost to us) *viewed their contemporary agricultural situation as due to the exhaustion of the soil*; or, as they put it, as the result of the soil's old age.

Attention is called to the opening paragraph of Columella's second book, chapter i:

You ask me, Publius Silvinus—and I hasten to reply to you—why I began my former book *by refuting the ancient opinion of nearly all*

<sup>1</sup> J. M. Columellae, De Re Rustica, Lib. i, Ad Pub. Silvinum, Praefatio: "Saepe numero civitatis nostrae principes audio culpantes modo agrorum infoecunditatem, modo caeli per multa jam tempora noxiam frugibus intemperiem: quosdam etiam praedictas querimonias velut ratione certa mitigantes, quod existiment, ubertate nimia prioris aevi defatigatum et effoetum solum mequire pristina benignitate praebere mortalibus alimenta."

*agricultural writers, and by rejecting as false their idea that the soil, worn out by long cultivation and exhausted, is suffering from old age.*<sup>1</sup>

Hence we learn that the ideas of Lucretius were not peculiar to him alone, but if we accept the testimony of Columella they were the common conception of nearly all who seriously thought about and scientifically discussed the agricultural affairs of antiquity. If the works to which Columella is referring had survived and had been preserved to us, there would have been little left for us to discuss.

Columella refuted the exhaustion-of-soil conception. Let us see how he did it. We find in his book three arguments. First of all, the Creator has bestowed upon soil perpetual fecundity; hence it is impious to regard the soil as affected with sterility as with a disease. Divine and everlasting youth was allotted to our common parent, mother-earth; hence it is silly to assume that she is ageing like a human being.<sup>2</sup>

His second argument is particularly directed against Tremellius, whose writings (lost to us) he especially esteems. Tremellius is of the opinion that mother-earth has, like a woman, reached that point of her life when sterility takes the place of her former fecundity. To this Columella replies that he would have accepted Tremellius's view had the soil been completely unproductive. But he argues that we do not regard a woman as having reached the barren age, simply because she no longer gives birth to triplets and twins. Furthermore, when a woman has reached that age, the bearing of children cannot be restored to her, while the land, if abandoned for a time, will be found upon the return of the cultivator more fertile.<sup>3</sup>

And, finally, Columella is therefore of the opinion that the soil would never diminish in its productivity if properly taken care of and frequently manured.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, Lib. ii, 1: "Quaeris ex me, Publi Silvine, quod ego sine cunctatione non recuso docere, cur priore libro veterem opinionem fere omnium, qui de cultu agrorum locuti sunt, a principio confestim repulerim, falsamque sententiam repudaverim consentium longo aevi situ longique jam temporis exercitatione fatigatam et effoetam humum consenuisse."

<sup>2</sup> Columella i, praefatio.

<sup>3</sup> Columella, ii, 1.

<sup>4</sup> Columella, ii, 1.

Very sound and sensible was his conclusion, but whether his advice could be followed is another question. What interests us is to ascertain not the state of the theory, but the state of the actual practice. That is the crucial and deciding question. Fortunately Columella answers this question in the third chapter of his third book, where he urges going into vine culture rather than into the cultivation of grain, because in the greater part of Italy no one can recall when grain produced fourfold. "Nam frumenta majore quidem parte Italiae quando cum quarto responderint, vix meminisse possumus."<sup>1</sup> In other words, if it did not produce fourfold, it produced three-fold or two-fold. In what situation would our modern farmers be, if the average productivity of their wheat, corn, barley etc. should be somewhere between four and six bushels an acre, a productivity which would completely assure and enforce the abandonment of farming? But the Romans were in a worse situation. We now plough in a nine or ten hour day about two acres with an average team, even in heavy clay or sod. The Romans ploughed in light soil a jugerum, which is five-eighths of an acre; in heavy soil but half a jugerum. But that is not all; we plough but once; they, for lack of effective harrows, had to plough corn land anywhere from five to nine times. Now one can figure out where the Italian farmer found himself in the days of Columella! The game was up, but what stopped it? Many are the answers. Some tell us it was stopped by constant warfare. But Columella complains that the old Sabine quirites and Roman ancestors, in spite of the fire and sword to which they themselves were subjected, and in spite of the hostile invasion which laid waste their fields, nevertheless laid up greater store of corn than his contemporaries were able to do, although during the long-continued peace they might have improved their agriculture.<sup>2</sup>

When Columella wrote in A. D. 60, Italy certainly was enjoy-

<sup>1</sup> Col., iii, chap. 3.

<sup>2</sup> "Veteres illi Sabini Quirites atavique Romani quamquam inter ferrum et ignes hostisque incursionibus vastatas fruges largius tamen considere, quam nos, quibus diuturna permittente pace prolatate licuit rem rusticam." Columella, i, praefatio.

ing a long protracted peace. Furthermore, one must remember that war as such, even if it should drive the farmers away from the land and keep them from cultivation for years, does not in any way exhaust the soil. For if the soil is not exhausted it will grow over with weeds and bushes, which will prevent the washing-away of the top soil, and when again put under the plough, the farmer will find his soil improved, because of the decayed weeds and other vegetable matter. If, on the other hand, the soil was abandoned when substantially so exhausted that it would not readily cover with weeds, then the top soil would gradually wash off and make its reclaiming difficult and costly.

The writers of the Principate look back to the sturdy past of the days of Cato the Censor. They were mistaken. For even in Cato's day agriculture had already declined in the greater part of Italy. His *Husbandry*, the earliest Roman agricultural book that has come down to us, practically disregards the cultivation of grain crops. His attention is devoted to the cultivation of the vine and olive.

Cato, when asked what is the most profitable thing in the management of one's estate, answered: "good pasturage." "What is the next best?" "Fairly good pasturage." "What is the third best?" "Bad pasturage." "What is the fourth best?" "Tilling the soil."<sup>1</sup>

Such a statement requires no comment. And as a matter of fact even in Cato's day Italy had to rely upon Sicily as its granary.<sup>2</sup>

Again it has been said that the free distribution and sale of corn at low prices in Rome ruined Roman agriculture. Mommson takes this attitude in his Roman history, and it is generally accepted—but he is taking the effect for the cause. Importations of corn began when relief had to be given to the

<sup>1</sup> Cicero, *De Officiis*, ii, 25: ". . . illud est Catonis Senis: a quo cum quaeretur qui maxime in re familiari espediret, responderet: 'Bene pascere'; quid secundum: 'Satis bene pascere'; quid tertium: 'Male pascere'; quid quartum: 'Arare.'"

<sup>2</sup> Cato called Sicily the nourisher of the Roman people "nutricem plebis Romanae Siciliam nominabat," Cicero, in *Verr.*, ii, 2. Livy called even the single town of Syracuse "Horreum atque aerarium populi Romani." Livius, xxvi, 32.

growing proletariat of Rome. Mommsen himself, in a later piece of research, admits that one often hears of high prices, and only exceptionally of low prices, of corn, so that as a whole rather too little than too much was produced.<sup>1</sup>

No evidence has come down to us that would indicate difficulties in disposing of grain; all the bitter complaints that we hear are about hardships and difficulties in *raising* grain. Look at Cato. What he thought of tillage we have heard. Yet Plutarch tells us: "As Cato grew more eager to make money he declared that farming was more an amusement than a source of income and preferred investing his money in remunerative undertakings, such as marshes that required draining. . . ." <sup>2</sup>

Here is the story in a nut-shell. An undrained marsh has never been tilled, and therefore never robbed of its fertility. Since one would hardly select low flats for vineyards, which require at least a slope, it is obvious that Cato drained the marshes for purposes of tillage. The initial expenses of drainage are heavy, yet Cato regarded the results as very remunerative, and that, in spite of Sicilian corn on the Roman market. To drain a rich marsh was obviously easier for the Romans than to reclaim large tracts of ordinary exhausted soil.

It is interesting that the lands that were first taken up by Roman cultivators were also, judging from our sources, the first to be exhausted. It was in Latium, where once seven jugera were ample to support a family, that Varro finds an example of notoriously sterile soil. He mentions Pupinia in Latium: "Witness Pupinia, where the foliage is meagre, the vines looked starved, where the scant straw never stools, nor the fig tree blooms, and trees and parched meadows are largely covered with moss." <sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Mommsen, "Boden und Geldwirtschaft der Römischen Kaiserzeit" in his "Historische Schriften," Bd. ii, p. 504; "Es ist nicht selten von teuren Kornpreisen nur Ausnahmsweise von besonders niedrigen die Rede, so das in Ganzen wohl eher zu wenig als zu viel produziert ward."

<sup>2</sup> Plutarch, Marcus Cato., xxi.

<sup>3</sup> Ut in Pupinia neque arbores prolixas, neque vites feraces, neques stramenta videre crassa possis, neque ficum mariscam, et arbores plerasque, as prata retorrida, et muscosa." Varro, i, 9.

Two hundred years later Columella no longer singles out Pupinia, but refers to entire Latium as a country where the population would have died of starvation, had it not been for imported grain. So it came to pass

that in that very land in Saturn's own country, where gods taught their children how to till the soil, there at public auction we have to contract for corn imported from provinces beyond the seas, that we may not suffer from starvation, and wine we have to import from the Cyclades, from the regions of Boetica and Gaul.<sup>1</sup>

As the productivity of the soil diminished, and the crops could no longer repay the laborer, then the same process that occurred in England in the 15th and 16th centuries, the turning of arable land into pasturage, began in Italy, about two centuries before Christ. In Rome, too, this process was met by hostile legislation, as was the case in England, but without avail. As in England, so in Rome, it became a matter not of choice but of necessity, although even the thinking heads of both nations refused to admit it at the time, and preferred to ascribe the change to greed and corruption. In England they blamed the poor sheep; in Rome they blamed the attractions of city life. So we hear Varro lamenting:

Our very corn that is to feed us has to be hauled for us from Africa and Sardinia, while our vintages come in ships from the islands of Cos and Chios. And so it happened that those lands which the shepherds who founded the city taught their children to cultivate are now by their descendants converted out of greed from cornfields back into pastures, violating even the law, since they fail to distinguish between agriculture and pasturage, for a shepherd is one thing and a ploughman another.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> "Itaque in hoc Latio at Saturnia terra, ubi dii cultus agrorum progeniem suam docuerant, ibi nunc ad hastam locamus, ut nobis ex transmarinis provinciis advehatur frumentum, ne fame laboremus; et vindemias condimus ex insulis Cycladibus ac regionibus Boeticis Gallicisque." Columella, i, praefatio.

<sup>2</sup> ". . . frumentum locamus, qui nobis advehat, qui satiri fiamus ex Africa, et Sardinia; et navibus vindemiam condimus ex insula Coa, et Chia. Itaque in qua terra culturam agri docuerunt pastores progeniem suam, qui condiderunt urbem, ibi contra progenies eorum, propter avaritiam contra leges ex segetibus fecit prata, ignorantes non idem esse agriculturam et pastionem. Alius enim opilio, et arator." Varro, ii, De Re Pecaria, praefatio.

It seems to me that the progressive exhaustion of Roman soil is, judging by all the sources at our disposal, completely established; but there prevails in literature a diametrically contrary version of the story—that of Rodbertus, who is regarded by economists as their authority. Rodbertus, too, quotes Columella's statement about crops not producing in Italy the fourth grain. He also refers to Varro's statement quoted above, but he explains it all "propter avaritiam." It is through avarice that all good soil was put under pasturage, because cattle-raising paid better. The fact that soil produced next to nothing when cultivated is explained by him thus: only the very poorest soil was under the plow, because wine, oil, and fruits were so much more profitable. The type of production changed, but became by no means worse, and agriculture was certainly not to blame, if Italy was not producing its own grain. "Der Ackerbau selbst war also unschuldig daran, wenn Italien nicht mehr seinen ganzen Getreidebedarf lieferte."<sup>1</sup>

The statement of Rodbertus's can with difficulty be taken seriously. First of all, the Romans not only failed to produce their grain; they failed to produce their vintage as well, in spite of the premium put on Italian wine by prohibiting the planting of vines in Gaul. Secondly, as a farmer, Rodbertus must have realized that if they practiced rotation of crops, which he assumes, the fact that the Romans of Columella's time could not produce a fourth grain would indicate sterility, not of their poorest field, but of all their arable fields. Thirdly, to assume that the Romans would select their very worst fields, not out of necessity but out of choice, that they would be satisfied to plough and work and harvest those fields for a gain of one or two bushels over and above the bushel of seed, is to assume that the Romans had become insane.

The soil of Italy did not get exhausted over night. It was a long process and many were its stages. Besides, exhaustion is a very relative term; not only relative from an agro-technical point of view, but also relative to the physical needs as well as the economic capacities of the owner.

<sup>1</sup> Rodbertus, *Zur Geschichte der Agrarischen Entwicklung Roms*. Hildebrand's *Jahrbücher* Bd. ii, 1864, pp. 218-19.

The expropriation of the Roman peasantry, the concentration of ownership of land in the hands of the few, to which the Romans ascribed the ruin of the Empire, is also a very gradual process and runs parallel with the process of soil exhaustion. Compared with the seven-jugera holdings of the early Republic, the hundred or hundred and fifty acre plantations to which Cato refers are large estates. These "estates" of Cato, which in size correspond to an average American farm, gradually disappear and their place is taken toward the end of the Republic and under the Principate by vast domains measuring thousands and thousands of acres. The process of transformation was slow but constant. If this process was agonizing to the people, it was sapping the very life of Rome as a nation, decreasing its population, undermining its morale and convulsing its political fabric. The beginnings of this process are almost lost in the darkness of Rome's legendary period. For the first violent expression of Roman social life to which we are introduced is the outcry of the indebted and bonded farmer class. In the growing wholesale indebtedness of the Roman farmer some historians have seen the key to Rome's political struggles, but the cause of this indebtedness was either not discerned or was viewed more or less as a mystery. So, for instance, Büchschütz tells us that if the origin and character of the debts are veiled for us in darkness, the fact remains that the plebeians were the debtors and the patricians the creditors. The division between rich and poor coincides with the division of the orders, and the struggle of the debtors against the creditors was therefore fought out as a purely political struggle.<sup>1</sup>

There are two kinds of indebtedness: debts for productive purposes and debts for purposes of consumption. If the

<sup>1</sup> "Ist somit die Entstehung und das Wesen dieser Schulden für uns sehr im Dunkel gehüllt, so wird die Sache noch dadurch bedenklicher, dass als Schuldner die Plebejer, als Gläubiger die Patricier erscheinen, der Unterschied von reich und arm genau mit dem Unterschiede der Stände zusammenfällt und infolge dessender aus der Schuldnott entstandene Zwist zu einem Kampfe der Stände gestaltet und lediglich als solcher ausgefochten wird." B. Büchschütz, Bemerkungen über die Römische Volkswirtschaft der Königszeit (Wissenschaftliche Beilage zum Program des Friedrichs-Werderschen Gymnasiums zu Berlin 1886) p. 34.

reports of American banks should show a growing extension of credit it would be fair to assume a growing extension of industry, because banks as a rule deal with credit for productive purposes only. If, on the other hand, the report should reach us that the volume of business of our pawnshops had greatly increased, it would indicate that poverty is on the increase, that the incomes of the borrowers are insufficient to meet their ordinary expenses and hence that they are borrowing for purposes of consumption. The wholesale indebtedness of the Roman farmer class obviously suggests indebtedness for purposes of consumption.

If the farmer is borrowing to meet the exigencies of a so-called bad year, his distress is temporary, and he is likely to square himself during the next good year; but if his distress is due to the progressive deterioration of his farm, he will be unable to extricate himself. Such indebtedness is hopeless. The increasing weight of accumulated interest on the loan and the decreasing productivity of the land seal the fate of the landowner. He certainly is not in an economic position to increase his land-holdings to a point where the larger product might supply his wants. Because he does not have enough land, what little he has will be taken from him and be given to him that has both land and economic capacity. In this way a farmer will be driven off the land and the holdings of some one else increased. That is the process of concentration of landed property. If this process should appear as a general phenomenon, as it did in Rome as well as in Greece, it is a factor of momentous social significance.

The entire history of Rome is but a series of illustrations of this story. Steady is the legislation against interest and drastic are the measures against the money lenders, but unchecked is the concentration of landed property even in spite of social resolutions and social wars. Because of this peculiar character of credit in certain historical periods, money lending was not a savory occupation. The gentleman, therefore, who in our industrial and mercantile life is a pillar of society and a respectable financier, is known by a different name under agricultural conditions. His name is *Usurer*. Not that his profits from money-lending are any

larger, but that he is lending money for purposes of consumption to a man as a rule already economically doomed, while the "banker" is lending money for productive purposes and as a rule to the advantage of the borrower. Hence the different attitude towards the "financier" now and in ages past. Hence Cato, when asked what he thought of money-lending, answered: "What do you think of murder?"

One must not, however, get the idea that all concentration of real property is necessarily due to indebtedness. Just as one is as a rule unwilling to part with a lucrative piece of property, one may be willing and anxious to part with property that is unproductive, and that, even without pressure of debts.

We have pretty illustrations of this in Roman literature. Cicero in his second harangue against P. S. Rullus tells us that Publius Lentulus was sent by the Senate to purchase a private farm in Campania that projected into the public domain, but he was unable to purchase that farm for any money, because its owner could not be induced to part with his most productive parcel of land.<sup>1</sup> Let us read carefully, on the other hand, a most remarkable letter of the younger Pliny to Calvisius Rufus, from whom he is soliciting advice. The younger Pliny is contemplating the increase of his *latifundia* by adding an enormous neighboring estate, which is offered as a bargain. Here are two extracts from his letter:

I feel tempted to purchase, first, because the conveniences resulting therefrom would be as great as the pleasures it would give me. . . . But the fertility of the land is overtaxed by the lack of capital of the tenants. For the last proprietor was constantly selling their whole stock, and though he reduced the arrears of the tenants for the time, he weakened their efficiency for the future, and as their capital failed them their arrears once more began to mount up. I must therefore set them up again and it will cost the more because I must provide them with honest slaves, for I have no slaves working in chains in my possession, nor has any landowner in that part of the country. Now let me tell you the price at which I think I can purchase the property. It is three million sesterces, though at one time the price was five, but owing to the lack

<sup>1</sup> Cicero, *De Lege Agraria*, xxx.

of capital of the tenants and the general badness of the time the rents have fallen off and the price therefore dropped also.<sup>1</sup>

Here we have the typical *latifundia* of imperial Rome, sublet to tenants. They could not pay their rent; the owner thereupon sold their stock, which did not strengthen their productive and paying capacity. The fertility of the estate is admittedly impaired by this lack of stock and it is offered as a bargain. Is the younger Pliny attracted by it as a money-making proposition? Hardly. But "*prædia agris meis vicina atque etiam inserta*" and the "*pulchritudo iugendi*"—the old story of rounding up one's estate, by buying the adjoining one. The elder Pliny in telling us how the *latifundia* were ruining Rome must have had in mind precisely such purchases as his nephew contemplated, for without any too obvious connection he adds: "With that greatness of mind which was so peculiarly his own, Cneius Pompeius would never purchase the land that belonged to a neighbor."<sup>2</sup>

Still do not let us simplify the process of concentration too much. It undoubtedly had as an underlying cause the relative unproductivity of the soil. The process of concentration followed many parallel routes. Indebtedness was undoubtedly the greatest factor in abolishing small holdings. Unproductivity of agriculture naturally led to cattle-ranches which required much larger holdings. Wealthy men acquired and accumulated vast domains rather for the pleasure of possession than as a paying investment. But the process of deterioration went on, and legislative interferences could neither stop the robbing of the soil nor the depreciation of land values. Negligent cultivation of one's own land was punishable, so was conversion of arable land into pasturage; but neither law proved effective. To maintain land values, as early as 218 B. C., the Claudian law excluded senatorial houses from mercantile occupations and compelled them to invest in Italian land. Since Trajan's time, one-third of their wealth had had to be invested in land. Tiberius, in A. D. 33, put in force an old law and compelled all bankers to invest, so

<sup>1</sup> Plinius, *Epist.*, iii, 19.

<sup>2</sup> Plinius H. N., xviii, 7.

far as can be made out, two-thirds of their working capital in Italian lands.<sup>1</sup> Such measures maintained for a time the land values but they could not touch the underlying cause—the process of spoliation and exhaustion of the fields as well as the process of proletarianisation, corruption and depopulation of the nation.

Some questions suggest themselves in this connection. First of all, did not the Romans know how to conserve or improve their soil and thereby make their agricultural labor more productive? The answer to this can only be that nothing could be more startling than the Roman knowledge of rational and intensive agriculture. The knowledge of the Roman *Scriptores Rei Rusticae* is superior to any agricultural practice of the Middle Ages or even of modern Europe at the beginning of the 19th century.

Why then did the Roman farmers fail to improve their methods of agriculture even when pressed by necessity to do so, even when threatened with extermination? It was easier said than done. Behind our abstract agricultural reflections are concrete individual farms. The owners of the rundown farms are impoverished, and when a farmer is economically sinking he is not in a position to improve his land.

Only one with sufficient resources can improve his land. By improving land we add to our capital, while by robbing land we add immediately to our income; in doing so, however, we diminish out of all proportion our capital as farmers, the productive value of our farm land. The individual farmer can therefore improve his land only when in an economically strong position. A farmer who is failing to make a living on his farm is more likely to exploit his farm to the utmost; and when there is no room for further exploitation he is likely to meet the deficit by borrowing, and thus pledging the future productivity of his farm. Such is the process that as a rule leads to his losing possession of his homestead and his fields, and to his complete proletarianisation.

<sup>1</sup> See Mommsen, *Boden-und Geldwirtschaft der Römischen Kaiserzeit*. *Historische Schriften*, Bd. ii, p. 595.

The exceptional man might pull himself up under adverse conditions, but on the other hand a man of such exceptional resourcefulness and ability will not permit such deterioration of his farm. But whatever the exceptional man may or may not do, here we are dealing with the average men, the habitual victims of circumstances. In this connection let me point out that already Columella as well as Tremellius fully realized the situation, and they therefore regarded the ability to lay out money as the essential condition for improved agriculture. "For, neither knowing nor willing can be of any use to any person whatsoever, without those expenses which the operations require."<sup>1</sup>

The great agricultural knowledge of the Romans must not however be dismissed lightly. It opens up many serious questions. All that is implied by the agricultural revolution, the seeding of grasses and legumes, the rotation of crops, yes, even green manuring, all that was perfectly known to the Romans—why was it not practiced for two thousand years or more? I do not know. It shows up so-called intellectual knowledge in rather an unenviable light, but that does not solve the problem involved.

The only interesting and important conclusions we may draw from the agricultural history of antiquity, the Middle Ages and modern times is that the talk about agricultural evolution from an extensive to an intensive culture belongs in the class of generalizations which should not be taken seriously. The opposite development is the more likely—probably the development from the intensive garden plot culture to extensive agriculture. Thus the intensive farming of the Romans on seven-jugera farms was, like the farming of the Chinese and Japanese, very intensive, their small grain fields being planted in rows, hoed and weeded and carefully manured with excrements and ashes and stable dung. The experience of China and Japan has

<sup>1</sup> "Qui studium agricolationi dederit, antiquissima sciat haec sibi advocanda, prudentiam rei, facultatem impendendi, voluntatem agendi. Nam is demum cultissimum rus habebit, ut ait Tremellius, qui et colere sciet et poterit et volet. Neque enim scire aut velle cujusquam satis fuerit sine sumptibus, quos exigunt opera." Columella, i, 1.

proven that on very small land plots such intensive agriculture can maintain itself indefinitely without any recourse to scientific repletion of the soil by mineral fertilizers. Why did Rome fail, where China and Japan succeeded, after a fashion? We do not know. Certain it is that the intensive agriculture in Rome was ill-fated and that Virgil was well justified in drawing from it the conclusion: "Thus fate drags all to ruin with a backward pull, as when a rower hardly drives his boat against the stream: if once he drop his arms, forthwith the rushing current whirls him down."

Already in Cato's time the growing of grain crops was so utterly unprofitable that he did not even take the trouble to instruct us on this point. All he could tell us was that ploughing was less profitable than the worst pasture. In the case of Varro, instruction on intensive grain-raising is a tradition of earlier times. His preface to the second book frankly admits that there is no use talking of crop-raising, when agriculture has been abandoned for grazing. In the case of Columella the literary tradition is still more pronounced. The estates, he tells us, are as large as provinces; nowhere in Italy in the memory of mankind have they raised a four-fold grain crop; yet he outlines for us a most intensive culture of grain which is evidently a long extinct tradition. The mistakes that he occasionally makes also prove that he never was an eyewitness to the operations, in spite of his wide experience. Thus he suggests seeding alfalfa one cyathus for fifty square feet, which amounts to several bushels per acre—an impossible proposition, fifteen pounds being a very liberal amount. The well-known botanist, Mattioli, who wrote in the 16th century, tells us that while alfalfa was obviously grown once upon a time in Italy, he has never found anyone who has seen the plant in its seed.<sup>1</sup> I believe that Columella was even in his own time in Mattioli's position.

<sup>1</sup> Pietro Andrea Mattioli, *Discorsi ne i sei libri di Dioscoride Venetia* (1621) p. 329. Ordinary varieties of clover were regarded by the same writer as rare medicinal plants. So *Trifolium Asphaltine* could occasionally be found on uncultivated fields near Lucca, *Trifolium pratense* near Naples. See also the German edition of Mattioli "Kräuterbuch." (1586) p. 291.

In her early days Italy was famous for her wheat, which provided not only her own population but also that of Greece. The fertility of Italian soil was probably the reason for the establishment of Greek colonies in southern Italy. The importation of Italian wheat into Greece in Sophocles's time is still famous. But in Cato's time Italy was already dependent upon Sicily, which Rome's great old man called the provider for the Roman people. In all probability this dependence upon Sicily as its granary was the paramount reason for Rome's conflict with Carthage. Province after province was turned by Rome into a desert, for Rome's exactions naturally compelled greater exploitation of the conquered soil and its more rapid exhaustion. Province after province was conquered by Rome to feed the growing proletariat with its corn and to enrich the prosperous with the loot. The devastations of war abroad and at home helped the process along. The only exception to the rule of spoliation and exhaustion was Egypt, because of the overflow of the Nile. For this reason Egypt played a unique rôle in the Empire. Tacitus tells the story in a nut-shell. He is describing Germanicus's travels in the east, including Egypt:

Another point appeared to him [Tiberius] of greater moment. Among the rules established by Augustus, it was a maxim of state policy that Egypt should be considered forbidden ground, which neither the senators, nor the Roman knights, should presume to tread upon, without the express permission of the prince. This was no doubt a wise precaution. It was seen that whoever made himself master of Alexandria, with the strongholds which by sea and land were the keys of the whole province, might with a small force, make head against the power of Rome, and, by blocking up the plentiful corn country, *reduce all Italy to a famine*. Germanicus, without authority, had entered Alexandria; and this, to the jealous temper of Tiberius, was little short of a state-crime.<sup>1</sup>

To provide with grain the dwindling population of Italy was a life and death question to the Empire even in the days of Tiberius, and Tiberius freely admitted it. When his attention was called by the ædiles to the growing luxury of the rich and their breaking the sumptuary laws Tiberius answers:

<sup>1</sup> Tacitus, *Ann.*, ii, 59.

But after all, is the mischief, of which the *ædiles* complain, the worst of our grievances? Compare it with other evils, and it vanishes into nothing. Italy stands in need of foreign supplies, and yet who is considering how much the commonwealth is every day at the mercy of the winds and waves? The produce of colonies is imported to feed the landlord and his slaves. Should these resources fail, will our groves and our villas support us? That care is left to the ruler. Should he neglect that essential duty, the commonwealth is lost.<sup>1</sup>

The commonwealth was not yet lost in Tiberius's days, but it was already doomed and Rome knew it. The fundamental trouble could not be cured. In Italy, labor could not support life, and men and women were not reared to maintain the population and Rome's dominion over the world. Yet Rome's livelihood was its dominion; it lived, as Seneca put it, on "the spoils of all nations." And in view of the fact only too obvious that Italy's population was dwindling, it was quite natural for Seneca to point out to his fellow-citizens, that "it is more easy for all nations to retake that from one people, which one people at different times has taken from all nations."<sup>2</sup>

But we are told that Italy's depopulation was due to the civil strife and wars, to the ever-increasing marsh areas, and growing unhealthiness, and to a thousand and one other cherished explanations—all of them to a large extent based on contemporary documents and to a greater or lesser extent true, but all of them, at best, important symptoms or minor effects rather than fundamental causes. Thus they ascribe the lack of daily bread from which Rome was suffering to the circumstance that Italy found it more profitable to grow vines, to go into grazing and leave the grain production to its provinces. Of course, if in Nero's days the fourth grain could not be produced anywhere in Italy, it is perfectly true that it was profitable for Italy to leave grain production to the provinces. To claim for Italy a choice in the matter is somewhat misleading.

Misleading as well is the talk about economic differentiation: Italy producing this or that, while Africa or Spain or Sicily produced grain. The truth is that the granaries of Rome, with

<sup>1</sup> Tacitus, *Ann.*, iii, 54.

<sup>2</sup> Seneca, *Epist.*, 87.

the exception of Egypt, were undergoing the same process of exhaustion and devastation. Recall Sicily, Sardinia, north-western Africa and Spain, not to mention Greece which antedated even Italy in her exhaustion. Neither can the opinion be taken under serious consideration which regards the growing insalubrity of Italian lowlands as the cause of depopulation, which led to undermined national strength, a diminishing agricultural area etc. For those who hold such an opinion seem to forget that many other provinces of the Empire underwent the same process of rapid depopulation without turning into swamps, but rather that many parts of them, like Libya for instance, were turning into arid deserts. As a matter of fact, the same fundamental causes that were increasing the swampiness of Latium and Campania were turning northwestern Africa and portions of Asia into deserts. These causes were, or this cause was: *agri deserti*—abandoned fields. Any farmer who is working his fields takes care that they shall drain properly. On any large farm one has dry land and wet land. Some lands drain rapidly and are fit for early ploughing and sowing, while other lands perhaps situated in hollows remain wet for a longer time. There are many ways in which the farmer attends to a more or less proper drainage. Only advanced farmers in modern times are putting in tile drains that do not choke and that permanently improve wet or springy land. As a rule the farmer in times past did what most farmers do now. They drained wet fields every year by draining furrows perhaps a week or so before ploughing time, or if the situation required they drained them with somewhat more permanent open ditches, or they drained the superfluous water with deep ditches filled with stones and covered with earth. In England and in western Europe the medieval farmer was cultivating most of his land in ridges—an extremely wasteful system of drainage. You can find pictures of it in medieval manuscripts. Just as every road, as a matter of routine, is so built as to allow the water to drain, so is minor drainage a matter of daily farming routine to such an extent that the farmer is actually not even conscious of it. But all this minor everyday drainage has to be repeated every year; even more permanent drainage, such as the open

ditches, must be kept open, and stone ditches have to be watched lest they fill up with dirt and choke. But what happens when the fields fail to reward labor and are abandoned? If the highlands are not capable of covering themselves readily with vegetation, the top soil is washed away and a desert is left, while the deserted lowlands with clogged-up drainage are bound to turn swampy and unhealthful. That swampy lands breed mosquitoes and that mosquitoes are responsible for malaria the Romans seem to have known quite well. Already Varro had advised against the use of slaves for work in marshy lands, and advocated taking chances with the health of hired freemen;<sup>1</sup> for, as he explains in a previous chapter, certain "animalculae" that breed in swamps cause grave maladies.<sup>2</sup> Columella describes the mosquito in still more unmistakable terms: "infestis aculeis armata animalia."<sup>3</sup>

It is therefore only reasonable to assume, so far as Campania and Latium are concerned, that the population was not driven out by malarial mosquitoes, but that mosquitoes took peaceable possession of the lands already abandoned by their cultivators. Thus in the year 395 the abandoned fields of Campania alone amounted to something over 528,000 jugera.<sup>4</sup>

Much more plausible is the opinion that the depopulation of Italy as well as the devastation of its fields was due to wars and civil strife. This argument is self-evident and can be supported by endless quotations from the great Roman authors. Obvious as the argument is, it does not, however, stand up well under further scrutiny. For the analysis of the actual data at our command is most perplexing. The steady shrinkage of population in the ancient world did not follow, curiously enough, in the wake of its bloodiest wars, but in times of complete peace. The fearful losses of Rome's greatest wars on the other hand, losses for instance occasioned by the Punic Wars, were rapidly made up, and in spite of further wars the population was steadily increasing. The same was true about the temporary decrease of population occasioned by a plague. Different was the situa-

<sup>1</sup> Varro, i, 17.

<sup>2</sup> *Idem*, i, 12.

<sup>3</sup> Columella, i, 5.

<sup>4</sup> Cod. Theodos., xi, 28, 2.

tion in the period under discussion. Losses occasioned by wars and plagues were never made up, and during the longest and profoundest peace that Rome ever enjoyed the Roman population was steadily shrinking and its national strength steadily melting away. Quite similar was the process of depopulation in Greece. There, too, the losses of the bloodiest wars were made up and the country was becoming depopulated under most peaceful auspices. These, I believe, are facts generally acknowledged by historians holding diverse points of view. Professor Eduard Meyer sums up the situation as follows: <sup>1</sup>

There is no doubt that the two hundred years of peace brought about by the Principate at first effected an increase of population in all parts of the Empire, except where, as in Italy, Sicily, Greece, the economic and social conditions interfered or even enforced a backward tendency. In Northern Africa, Spain and Gaul, in the Danube provinces, in Asia Minor, in Syria, we therefore find signs of prosperity everywhere. All the more striking is the inner dissolution of antique life and culture which followed so soon afterward. Thus, after all, during two centuries of peace, under a careful and circumspect government, the wealth and the population and even to a much greater extent, the very capacity of the Empire, were dwindling continuously. The economic decline, that had devastated Greece and Italy, from thence spread to the provinces of Sicily, Spain, Africa, Gaul, one after another. The great civilized state [*Culturstaat*] was hardly capable any longer of raising armies to hold down barbarian tribes like the Marcomanni. The devastation wrought by the plague in the population of the Empire under the Emperor Marcus was never overcome. Our sources, it is true, will not permit us to give this development statistical expression. The terrible struggles of the third century, the continual uprising of the armies and provinces against each other hastened the process and completed the downfall of the State. The new State erected by Diocletian and Constantine saved, it is true, the ruins of ancient civilization and gave new stiffening to the East. It could not maintain, however, the West against the barbarians, who had first been called as soldiers to the empire and then were entering it as uninvited guests. Here, therefore, depopulation progresses with the devastation and the decline of civilization, finding

<sup>1</sup> Ed. Meyer. "Die Bevölkerung des Altertums," *Handwörterbuch der Staatswissenschaften*, 3te Auflage (1909) Bd. iii, pp. 911-912.

its most striking expression in the dwindling and complete disappearance of innumerable prosperous communities.

This is a summary of facts which can hardly be contested. It is therefore evident that the steady shrinkage of population and the crumbling of the empire can not be attributed to wars. It stands to reason that permanent desertion of entire countryside can not be caused by temporary devastations of war, for war can not rob the fields of their fertility. Exhaustion of the soil, on the other hand, will lead to its desertion in time of peace and of course still more so in times of war. The "economic and social conditions," to which Meyer refers—conditions which since the later period of the Republic were increasingly depopulating Italy, Sicily and Greece, conditions that the Principate and its peace could not cure—were plain exhaustion of soil.

The inner decay to which Meyer refers, which in an era of complete peace was depopulating the Empire and its provinces, that "inner decay" which made the mighty Empire fall and crumble, that "inner decay" in all its manifold manifestations was in the last analysis entirely based upon the endless stretches of barren, sterile and abandoned fields of Italy and its provinces.

Roughly speaking, Roman political and economic life found itself involved in a series of vicious circles. It is only too well known that as long as Italian land was productive and of value, the struggle for that land was the keynote if not the very content of Rome's political struggles. The wealthy were either in lawful possession or were unlawfully using the public land, and hence they were opposed to its subdivision among colonists.

Rome was not without patriots and prophets, to whose vision it was revealed what the Fates had in store for it. They were the great land reformers—and according to tradition they all had to die. Thus, Spurius Cassius, a consul and a triumphator, is said to have been executed in 486 B. C. Marcus Manlius, Rome's greatest hero, who saved its capitol in the Gallic siege, was executed in 384 B. C. The Gracchi, though foully murdered, after a fashion succeeded; but it was already too late. As the Roman farmers were vanishing from the countryside and the farm centers, the small municipalities losing

their significance, the population of the city of Rome was increasing.

In proportion as the Roman fields were becoming exhausted, Rome had to rely upon grain from other lands. The conquest of grain-producing countries opened new rich fields of exploitation to the Roman money-men and to its statesmen with an eye on plunder. But to keep the people alive on the bread and to satisfy the appetite of the wealthy with the loot of foreign lands, great armies and a manhood superior to that of the barbarians was required.

As foreign provinces and not Italian lands became the source of Roman wealth, as the population of Rome became too large, too motley, too complex an element to handle, then indeed even the optimates became strong advocates of colonial assignments. Thus we find the versatile Cicero, who once so eloquently opposed colonization, supporting the colonial projects of the tribune Flavius, because by such measure could "et sentinam urbis exhauriri et Italiae solitudinem frequentari"<sup>1</sup>—the city be rid of rabble and deserted Italy repopulated.<sup>2</sup> But the colonies of the later Republic and the Principate could not be successful. It was not a surplus of a farming population that was now being settled in new colonies. Rome permitted its farming population to be wiped out, and then tried to make farmers out of idle city paupers and old army veterans. But army veterans or city rabble will not make successful farmers, even on good soil—and as a rule the land assigned to the new colonies in Italy had already ceased to be paying farming land. The colonies did anything but flourish; the colonists as a rule were quite willing to part with their allotments as soon as they could legally do so. Thus the same Cicero pointed out how some vast colonies of Sulla turned in no time into latifundia owned by a few.<sup>3</sup> Later on, the sources no longer report to us

<sup>1</sup>Cicero, *Ad. Att.*, i, 19.

<sup>2</sup>*Solitudo Italiae*—is not exactly deserted Italy, but it may do as somewhat free translation.

<sup>3</sup>"At videmus, ut longinqua mittamus, agrum Praenestinum a paucis possideri." Cicero, *De lege agr.*, ii, 28, 78.

that the colonists were selling their allotments, they do report that they *deserted* them. So for instance Tacitus tells us that "the veteran soldiers entitled to their discharge from service, were settled in Tarentum and Antium so as to increase the population of these deserted localities, but they rambled back to the provinces, in which they served."<sup>1</sup>

On the face of it, it was a hard proposition even for good farmers fresh from the soil; for the fields assigned to them were already abandoned for good and sufficient reasons. To settle there old veterans without families and to expect them to succeed on these abandoned fields, was to expect miracles. As a rule, expected miracles fail to materialize. The countrysides remained abandoned; "*Italiae Vastitas*" stared the contemporaries in the face, and Italy's great historians marvelled how sections of Italy that in their times were almost entirely deserted could in former days send forth legion after legion of invincible warriors. The historians marvelled, and surmised that these country districts were once upon a time thickly settled. Strange, but true! "*Simile veri est—innumerabilem multitudinem liberorum capitum in eis fuisse locis, quae nunc, vix seminario exiguo militum relicto, servitia Romana ab solitudine vindicant.*"<sup>2</sup>

But perhaps no other historical document is so complete as Dio Chrysostom's story of the Eubœan Hunter. The time is the first century A. D. and the place happens to be Eubœa. There too the small farms first became consolidated into latifundia, and then these latifundia were abandoned.

Nearly two-thirds of our land is deserted, for we neither care, nor have the population, to cultivate it. I too possess a vast acreage (many plethra) and not only in the mountains but in the valley. Should anyone care to cultivate them he can not only have them rent-free, but I will gladly pay him money in addition.

The local orator introduced to us by Dio goes on urging the citizens to take up the cultivation of abandoned land, for deserted land is a useless possession. Let anyone cultivate as much as his capital may allow him to do, for it may save the

<sup>1</sup> Tacitus, *Aun.*, xiv, 27.

<sup>2</sup> Livius, vi, 12.

remaining population from its two cardinal ills—idleness and poverty. The orator is suggesting that the land should be given to anyone rent-free for the first ten years, and later on for a moderate tax upon the productivity of the soil, but the tenant should not pay any taxes upon his cattle. Should an alien care to take up land, he should be welcomed to do so and he should remain exempt from taxes for five years but pay for his land later double the rate of a citizen. If, however, an alien bring under cultivation 200 plethra then citizenship should be bestowed upon him as a reward so that many should aim at such an achievement.<sup>1</sup>

The picture of Dio is undoubtedly true to life and we must remember that these conditions were gradually encroaching not only upon Italy and Greece but upon the other provinces with the exception of Egypt. Material which characterizes the later Empire you will find in the Church Fathers, as for instance Salvianus talking about Spain, of which but the name remains, of Africa that was, of Gaul that is devastated.<sup>2</sup> Of course, Salvianus, Theodoretus in his letter to the Augusta Pulcheria,<sup>3</sup> Basilius, Libanius and many others put the blame on the oppressive taxes. In a sense they are right. But two points must be considered. First of all, when the productivity of the soil is very slight, even a light tax is oppressive. Secondly, it must be borne in mind that if economic conditions are preventing a portion of the population from supplying their quota for the needs of the state, the tax quota of those that have not yet been economically wiped out may have to be large. Since we know that a substantial part of the population has become so proletarianized as to be a charge upon the public, some other part of the population had to bear the increased burden. The increasing tax pressure, whether relative or absolute, is in the case of Rome, therefore, obviously largely

<sup>1</sup> Dio Chrisostomos, vii.

<sup>2</sup> “Denique sciunt hoc Hispaniæ, quibus solum nomen relictum est, Sciunt Africae, quae fuerunt, Sciunt Galliae devastatae. . . .” Salvianus, *De Gubernatione Dei*, iv, 4.

<sup>3</sup> Theodoretus, *Epist.*, xliii.

due to agricultural decline. In their turn, disproportionate taxes ruthlessly collected are quite sufficient to compel the farmer to tax the productivity of his land to its uttermost and thus to hasten the process of spoliation.

Let us now see what effect the exhaustion of the soil and the desertion of the fields had upon the body politic. For a farmer, children are a blessing. For, if a laborer is worth his hire, children are certainly worth more than their keep. In fact, lack of children is even now a hardship to a farmer; but in olden days with the much more primitive instruments of production it was a calamity. The less the productivity of labor, the greater is the effort, the greater the mass of human labor, the larger the coöperation required by a farming unit. For such a coöperation, if children were lacking, men had to be bought or hired. Under certain conditions several families had to coöperate and live in a relatively large group to meet the exigencies of farming. You will find it in Greece, in the five generation groups of the Welsh, in Slavonic Zadurgas etc.

But that is another story. Certain it is that under wholesome circumstances, in the past as well as in the present, race-suicide is not a farmer's pastime, unless the density of population in its relation to the available land area has reached a saturation point. But what do we see in Rome already in the first century after Christ? The Roman writers marvelled at Egypt and the prodigious fertility of the Egyptian race. Thus so scholarly and enlightened a writer as Columella firmly believed that to Egyptians and Libyans (Northwest Africa was then still a granary) most exceptional capacity for the propagation of their kind was given. Their women, he tells us, are bearing twins every year.<sup>1</sup> The elder Pliny is not satisfied with twins; he insists upon Egyptian triplets, and explains the phenomenon by the woman drinking the fruitful (fetifer) water of the Nile.<sup>2</sup> Many other contemporary writers marvelled at Egypt's great population, yet all that Egypt in matter of population can be credited with is that it held its own—seven millions—or possibly increased half a million in the course of the three centuries that elapsed between

<sup>1</sup> Columella, iii, 8.

<sup>2</sup> Plin. H. N., vii, 33.

the Ptolemys and Vespasian. Egypt was the only province whose soil could not become exhausted because of the overflows of the Nile, and Egypt was the only province which maintained its population. This was regarded as a marvel. From the Roman point of view, a marvel it probably was. For the general depopulation had become in Rome a matter of grave concern.

In Rome birth-control and a disinclination to marriage became widespread. So Ovid tells us: "Raraque in hoc aevo quae velit esse parens." Of course the women were blamed. It is a subject that always invited loquaciousness, but we have any amount of evidence that we are dealing here, not with Rome's particular depravity, but with a phenomenon that hangs closely together with the decay of the farming population. Polybius is one of the many who discussed the subject. First of all we find that the same phenomenon is characteristic of Greek city life. The causal connections, the reasons that Polybius gives, may be of doubtful value to us, but his statements of fact are of importance. Here are two. In one Polybius tells us that in his time Greece was suffering from childlessness and general depopulation, the cities were becoming deserted and the fields were not yielding, though they have known neither war nor plague. The people became greedy idlers. They did not care any longer to marry; if they did marry they did not care to bring up more than one or two children that they might inherit the undivided fortune of their parents.<sup>1</sup> This is one statement; in another Polybius tells us that the farmers constitute the most prolific portion of the population. In a certain portion of the Peloponnesus in Elis, farming was still flourishing, the countryside was thickly populated.<sup>2</sup> These two statements taken together certainly throw light on the situation. But there is another mistake which we must beware of: we must not paint the devil blacker than he is, and we must not regard great wealth as the sole cause of corruption, nor Rome as its seat and abode. Suppose we make a little excursion to the small provincial town of Iliion, and follow Eduard Meyer's calculations on the basis of Schlieman's Trojan excavations. We find a list of 102 citizens,

<sup>1</sup> Polybius, xxxvii, 9.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, iv, 73.

enumerated with their families, 38 of whom are married, 64 not married. Of the 38 married families, 17 are childless, 21 have children. The 21 families having children have, all told, 19 sons and 12 daughters. Seventeen families have no children, 14 have one child, 4 have two children, 3 have three children. There is no family which had more than three children. Several widowed mothers live with their respective sons, eight widows live by themselves. Thirty aliens who have obtained citizenship are also mentioned in the record, none of whom has wife or child; one had his mother living with him.<sup>1</sup> This statistical miniature picture leaves one speechless. We have no statistical data for Rome. The situation in Rome was certainly not worse than in that romantic little town of Troy. Certain, however, it is that the degree of depopulation was such as to compel extraordinary measures. And so it came to pass that morals and children became political issues. Recall the puritanic campaigns of Cæsar's heir, remember the laws against adultery, and laws restricting the property rights of unmarried men and childless couples. Special privileges were granted to parents of moderate-size families—but the “*jus trium liberorum*” was as a matter of fact conferred even on confirmed old bachelors! The gravity of the situation was clear to everyone,<sup>2</sup> and hence Augustus distributed large stipends to parents of sons and daughters—one thousand sesterces for each child.<sup>3</sup> Later the rearing of children was encouraged in a systematic way by large special alimentary foundations, from the interest of which regular stipends were given to a large number of children both in Rome and throughout Italy.<sup>4</sup> The great foundations were first established by the Emperors Nerva and Trajan. Their example was followed not only by the Emperors Hadrian,

<sup>1</sup> Eduard Meyer, *Kleine Schriften*. Halle, 1910, p. 167.

<sup>2</sup> Speaking of the Censor Metellus's famous remarks about matrimony, Gellius points out: “*Quod fuit rerum omnium validissimum et verissimum, persuasit, civitatem salvam esse sine matrimoniorum frequentia non posse.*” Gellius, i, 6.

<sup>3</sup> “*iis, qui e plebe regionis sibi revisenti filios filiasque approbarent, singula numerorum millia pro singulis dividebat.*” Svetonius Augustus, xlvi.

<sup>4</sup> For sources see Marquandt, *Römische Staatsverwaltung*, Bd., ii, (2d ed.), pp. 141-147.

Antonius Pius, Marcus Aurelius, Alexander Severus and others, but also by private philanthropists. It became a type of philanthropy that particularly commended itself not only in Italy but also in the provinces. These foundations provided not only for boys, but for girls as well; and special foundations were also established for girls alone. So Antonius Pius, in honor of his wife Faustina, established a large foundation to provide exclusively for young girls—the *puellae Faustinianae*.

In the beginning of the fourth century we find still more far-reaching alimentary attempts. To put an end to infanticide Emperor Constantine in 315 orders his fiscal administration to provide for the children of all poor parents residing in Italy, who have not the means to provide for and educate their children.<sup>1</sup>

The same Emperor Constantine issues a similar law for Africa in 322, ordering the treasury to provide for the children of poor parents, so as to put an end to their selling or pledging their own children, or, even worse, having them starve to death. For, adds Constantine: “*Abhorret enim nostris moribus, ut quemquam fame confici vel ad indignum facinus prorumpere concedamus.*”<sup>2</sup> The sentiment is a noble one, but back of all these measures is the more and more pressing necessity of maintaining the Roman population if the Roman state is to be maintained.

The alimentary provisions could obviously be of value only as measures of relief. They were trying to affect the results of a certain given situation, without in the least affecting that situation itself. This probably was clear to the Roman administration. Thus we witness under the Principate almost frantic attempts to create a farmer class and to repopulate the country

<sup>1</sup> Cod. Theod., xi, 27, 1. “*Aereis tabulis vel cerussatis aut linteis mappis scribta per omnes civitates Italiae proponatur lex, quae parentum manus a parricidio arceat votumque vertat in mellius. Officiumque tuum haec cura perstringat, ut, si quis parens adferat subolem, quam pro paupertate educare non possit, nec in alimentis nec in veste inperienda tardetur, cum educatio nascentis infantiae moras ferre non possit. Ad quam rem et fiscum nostrum et rem privatam indiscreta iussimus praebere obsequia.*”

<sup>2</sup> Cod. Theod., xi, 27, 2.

districts. Cæsar and Augustus made the greatest efforts in that direction. Augustus established not less than twenty-eight colonies. His successors followed in his footsteps. Nerva went so far as to spend the vast sum of 60 million sesterces in purchasing private latifundia in Italy and dividing them among colonists.

Soon we see the government attempting much more drastic measures; we are confronted by legislation as unprecedented as it was amazing from the legal point of view. But these measures had become matters of course and of necessity probably long before Pertinax. For Pertinax's short reign they happen to be recorded. So Herodian tells us that throughout Italy and in the provinces everyone was permitted to take possession of waste land and abandoned fields, even if they were the Emperor's own property, and whosoever was tilling those fields was to become the rightful owner and proprietor of the soil.<sup>1</sup>

Dio Chrysostom's flights of oratory have actually become stern realities. There can be little doubt that the agrarian situation throughout the Empire was very much like the one in Eubœa described by Dio. Nor can there be doubt as to the cause for the desertion of the fields.

If this actual situation is kept in mind, the agrarian legislation as embodied in the Theodosian and Justinian codes begins to have a stern meaning. Decrees of that type must have been issued by both Hadrian and Trajan, judging from the inscriptions of *Ara legis Hadrianae* and Henschir Mettich.<sup>2</sup> It goes without saying that the situation did not improve in the following period. Whosoever wants land, waste deserted land, is cordially welcome to it. "Quicumque possidere loca et desertis voluerint, triennii immunitate potiantur."<sup>3</sup> Still more explicit is the law of Valentinian, Arcadius and Theodosius<sup>4</sup> which first

<sup>1</sup> Herodian, ii, 4, 6.

<sup>2</sup> Ludwig Mitteis, *Zur Geschichte der Erbpacht im Altertum*. *Abhandlungen der Königl. Sächsischen Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften Philologisch Historische Classe*, Bd. xx, pp. 28-33.

<sup>3</sup> Cod. Theod. v, ii, 8.

<sup>4</sup> C. J., xi, 59, 8; Cod. Theod., v, 11, 12. "Qui agros domino cessante desertos vel longe positos vel in finitimis ad privatum pariter publicumque compendium excolere

of all encourages everyone to cultivate abandoned fields or fields that have been without cultivation for a long time. The original rightful owner of such fields is to have but two years in which he may claim back his property, fully compensating the new occupier for all his outlays. After a period of two years all the property rights of the former owner are to be extinguished in favor of the new occupier.

Such legislation is conceivable only with a background of endless stretches of abandoned and untilled land. But the law was not successful, since the encouragement was not sufficient to induce voluntary reclamation of abandoned farm-land. The reclamation of barren land is thereupon ordered as an obligation upon every possessor of estates under cultivation. He is to cultivate the barren and waste land within his estate. Nor can the possessors of estates sell their land under cultivation without at the same time disposing of the barren and unprofitable parts of their estate which the purchaser is to cultivate. The legislation was known as the *'επιβολή* or "*iunctio*," the "imposition of desert to fertile land."

Let us face now the problem of the so-called origin of the colonate in Europe. The problem has been much discussed, for it is of vital importance, not merely as a detail in Roman history but as a tableau that introduces us into the Middle Ages. It is the problem of the origin of medieval serfdom. Instead of arguing with the many different conceptions of the origin of the colonate, let us conceive its origin as intimately correlated with the land legislation and with the legislation regarding slaves. If so, all these correlated problems are state problems relating to the unprofitableness of farming as a universal social phenomenon. And if so conceived the very text of the law suggests the answer and leaves no problem to be solved.

In the introduction to the 80th novella of Justinian, we are told that provinces are gradually becoming depopulated and that our

*festinat, voluntate suae nostrum noverit adesse responsum: ita tamen, ut si vacanti ac destituto solo novus cultor insederit ac vetus dominus intra biennium eadem ad suum ius voluerit revocare, restitutis primitus quae expensa constiterit facultatem loci proprii consequatur, nam si biennii fuerit tempus emensum, omni possessionis et domini carebit iure qui siluit."*

great city is burdened by all sorts of people, especially farmers, who have abandoned their homes and deserted their fields. Why they were deserting their fields was obvious. What kind of people were living and working on the fields? They had all kinds of names, but there were but two different varieties: slaves and freemen. The slaves were trained agricultural slaves; the freemen were tenant farmers. When agriculture became very unproductive and the owner of the estate got no profit from his slaves and his estate, his natural tendency was to dispose of his slaves otherwise. The interests of the state were opposed to such tendency. The remnant of the agricultural population had to be saved. Hence the law prohibits the removal of the agricultural slave from the soil. It improves his condition. He is decreed to be attached to the soil; he may not be sold without the soil; he may marry; he may not be separated from his family. The purpose in this can not be doubted; but such enactment does not yet keep the entire agricultural population on the soil. There is another large category—the free tenant. His freedom was never before questioned, but the legislator is not in a mood to bother about niceties of the law. The free tenant is deserting the fields rapidly. To prevent this he too is being bound to the soil, he becomes a serf. The date of the enactment is lacking, as is the original decree, but there are numerous decrees against fugitive slaves and coloni,<sup>2</sup> and special drastic legislation against tricky evasions of the law. Notice especially the following decree, though relating primarily to slaves:

Just as in the case of persons bound to the soil by birth (*originarii*), so in that of slaves settled on agricultural land and listed as liable to the poll-tax, it is absolutely forbidden that they be sold off the land. Nor by tricky misconstruction shall the law be so evaded, as has repeatedly been done in the case of *originarii*, that an *entire estate shall be deprived of tillage* by transferring a small portion thereof to the purchaser of the slaves. On the contrary, whenever an entire estate or a definite portion thereof comes into anyone's hands, there shall go with it just so many slaves and *originarii* as were settled on such entire

<sup>1</sup> C. J., xi, 48, 6; *ibid.*, xi, 48, 11.

estate or portion thereof in the time of its former owners and possessors ; and the purchaser may regard the price paid as money lost, since in spite of the sale, action will lie on the part of the vendor to recover the slaves and also their children born after the sale. And if for any reason the vendor shall have neglected to enforce his legal right and shall have died without bringing suit, we give the action for recovery both in favor of his heirs and against the heirs of the purchaser, depriving the latter of the plea of prescription by lapse of time ; for no one is to doubt that he who buys anything against express statutory prohibitions is a dishonest possessor.<sup>1</sup>

This decree is important not alone because it recognizes no time limitation and gives action of recovery even to the heirs of the seller against the heirs of the purchaser—an unusually drastic measure. It is important also because it tells the story: it explains its reason why.

Here is obviously a common evasion. Why a common evasion? Because the evasion is lucrative. What is the policy of the state? It is to maintain agriculture even against the interest of the owner of the slaves.

Here you have the *raison d'être* and origin of the Roman colonate. It is fundamentally the very same reason that led to the emphateusis, the ἐπιβολή—the same reason that inspired the entire agrarian legislation of the doomed empire.

There are endless details relating to this as to any other subject; they are outside of our scope. For our set task was not to write about Rome's life, but about Rome's end. There is, of course, endless material that we cannot touch upon here.

For instance, the material relating to early Christianity in its popular acceptance, through its spiritual reflections of existing conditions, furthers understanding. For the road that started at Golgotha led to Rome and through the Roman Empire. What were the aspirations of those who travelled it? Did they in no way reflect the conditions of the time? What do theologians tell us about the apostolic age? What is its peculiar characteristic? It is recognized and unquestioned that early Christianity was an end-of-the-world religion.

<sup>1</sup> C. J., xi, 48, 7.

So writes Cyprian to Demetrianus :

You have said that all these things are caused by us, and that to us ought to be attributed the misfortunes wherewith the world is now shaken and distressed, because your gods are not worshipped by us. And in this behalf, since you are ignorant of divine knowledge, and a stranger to the truth, you must in the first place know this, that the world has now grown old, and does not abide in that strength in which it formerly stood ; nor has it that vigor and force which it formerly possessed. This, even were we silent, and if we alleged no proofs from the sacred Scriptures and from the divine declarations, the world itself is now announcing, and bearing witness to its decline by the testimony of its failing estate.<sup>1</sup>

That much we have perhaps heard before, but here is a new note : "Although the vine should fail and the olive deceive and the field, parched, with grass drying with drought, should wither, what is this to Christians?"<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps even more expressive is somewhere in Lactantius this sentence : "There will be a dreadful and detestable time in which no one would choose to live. In fine, such will be the condition of things that lamentations will follow the living and congratulations the dead."

Quite adequate illustrations to this text you may find in the pictures of misery and desolation in Salvian's "De gubernatione Dei." Is not in such conditions to be found the material basis for celibacy, asceticism, monasticism? And were not the same conditions after all responsible for Roman childlessness, though quite unaccompanied by mortification of the flesh? It may be difficult for us to understand an atmosphere of social and political doom. Let us go back then to another people, to another city, that were about to be destroyed by Rome. Jesus was carrying the cross, followed by lamenting men and women :

But Jesus turning unto them said : Daughters of Jerusalem, weep not for me, but weep for yourselves and your children. For behold, the

<sup>1</sup> Cyprianus, to Demetrianus, iii.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, xx.

days are coming, in which they shall say, Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bare, and the breasts that never gave suck. Then shall they begin to say to the mountains, Fall on us; and to the hills, Cover us.<sup>1</sup>

Here, however, we are touching upon a subject which should be treated by itself.

It is claimed that there is but one understanding; the misunderstandings are legion. To guard against misunderstandings is impossible. Yet I know that many a charitable reader will sympathetically suggest that while the exhaustion of Roman soil was an important factor I can hardly mean to insist that it was *the* sole factor responsible for Roman decline and fall. For it is not credible that so rich and so complex a texture of life should depend upon one single and solitary factor.

Such would not be my assertion, nor is it my attempt. I have not undertaken to explain the complex fabric of Roman life; we are dealing here with the relatively simple problem of its disintegration. All that this study shows is that the progressive exhaustion of the soil was quite sufficient to doom Rome, as lack of oxygen in the air would doom the strongest living being. His moral or immoral character, his strength or his weakness, his genius or his mental defects, would not affect the circumstances of his death: he would have lived had he had oxygen; he died because he had none. But it must be remembered that while the presence of oxygen *does not explain his life*, the absence of it is sufficient to explain his death.

There is one other misunderstanding which I should like to guard against. So far as argumentation is concerned, this essay might be considered a continuation to the study published some time ago, dealing with the medieval village community.<sup>2</sup> The reader will find there this statement:

Go to the ruins of ancient and rich civilizations in Asia Minor, Northern Africa or elsewhere. Look at the unpeopled valleys, at the dead

<sup>1</sup> Luke 23, 28-30.

<sup>2</sup> Simkhovitch; "Hay and History." *POLITICAL SCIENCE QUARTERLY*, vol. xxviii, pp. 385-403, September, 1913.

and buried cities, and you can decipher there the promise and the prophecy that the law of soil exhaustion held in store for all of us. It is but the story of an abandoned farm on a gigantic scale. Depleted of humus by constant cropping, land could no longer reward labor and support life; so the people abandoned it. Deserted, it became a desert; the light soil was washed by the rain and blown around by shifting winds.<sup>1</sup>

I should hate to be responsible for a new fetish, an interpretation of historical life through exhaustion of soil. It is silly.

First of all deeply and gratefully is it felt that life with all its pain and its glory can be lived; word or brush may aspire its all too inadequate expression, but never will the scholar methodically and mechanically figure it out and interpret it.

But it is a mistake to think that social science is dealing with life. It is not. It deals with the *background* of life. It deals with common things, with what lives had in common, common conditions of existence, common purposes that these conditions suggest. *They* can and must be scientifically explained and determined, if social science is to be taken seriously. Scientific determination is accurate determination. What forces that circumscribe and govern our life must we unquestionably accept? Obviously, the physical forces. Under certain conditions we are born, we live and die. The limits of our mortal existence we cannot transgress. Nor can we change the heavenly course of suns and planets; we do not govern the seasons of the year; they regulate our life.

Within the laws of nature our lives begin and end. They limit and compass our existence. But the laws of nature without our active participation do neither feed nor clothe us. This active participation we call our work, our labor. Social labor varies in its productivity. At all times this productivity had and has its limits. *These limits of the productivity of our labor become, for society, physical conditions of existence.* Within these limits our entire social life must move. These limits life must accept as mandatory and implacable; to them it must adjust itself.

<sup>1</sup> Simkhovitch, *op. cit.*, p. 400.

The history of the productivity of our labor is the foundation of a scientific economic history, and the backbone of any and all history. Every law, every statute, every institution has obviously some purpose. But how are we to understand the purposes of the past if we know not the conditions which those purposes were to meet? The accurate knowledge of the productivity of our labor can explain to us why things were as they were, why they became what they are and what one may expect from the future.

In this study, however, which is not concerned with the details of Rome's life, one single, major and strikingly variable productivity factor suffices to solve the problem. That factor—the exhaustion of Roman soil and the devastation of Roman provinces—sheds enough light for us to behold the dread outlines of its doom.

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