THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SOME RECENT IRISH STATISTICS.

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The Statistics published from time to time by Government Departments are often accepted as indicating, without further interpretation, the prosperity of a nation. It is assumed that when we know the amount of wealth within the borders of a country, and the number of its inhabitants, we know all that is required in order to estimate the prosperity of its people. But this assumption is wholly fallacious. Prosperity is a vague term; it requires accurate definition in order to adapt it to scientific purposes. We will employ it here to signify material well-being. A people is prosperous in the measure in which all, or at least the great majority, are supplied with the necessaries, comforts, and refinements of life. This is the only basis of an estimate which is of any avail. If we were furnished with an accurate statement of the wealth of India, of the treasures of its princes, and the hoards of its usurers, we should not, with this information, be able to gauge the well-being of its people; and, as has been said, it is this which constitutes the prosperity of a nation. Nor does it help us to be told what is the wealth per head of population. This is merely to state the quotient obtained by dividing the whole sum of a country's wealth by the number of its inhabitants. We are informed what would be the wealth of each inhabitant if the total within the country was divided equally, but this statement does not bring us nearer an estimate of the degree in which the actual distribution approximates to equality.

We are dazzled by the figures in which Mr. Chiozza Money computes the wealth of the United Kingdom—£11,400,000,000, but we hesitate to measure the well-being of the people in terms of this aggregate when we learn from Mr. Charles Booth that at the heart of this wealth-producing community, in the centre where its possessions are most largely concentrated, 1,400,000 or 30.7 per cent. of the 4,000,000 inhabitants are, in Mr. Booth's words, "on or below the poverty line." This, as he explains, signifies that they are maintaining a hard fight for the mere necessaries of subsistence, and that hundreds of thousands of them are failing dismally in the struggle.
Returns of national income are equally ineffective as a test of national welfare. Mr. Chiozza Money has estimated the total income of the inhabitants of the United Kingdom as amounting to £1,710,000,000. Mr. Bowley's estimate is £2,000,000,000. But whatever be the estimate most in accord with the facts, it would appear that of the 43,000,000 participants in the national dividend no fewer than 38,000,000 are under the £160 line, and among these are the millions who live on the margin of destitution or fall below it. The annual income of the United States has been calculated at £3,000,000,000. But of the people of this apparently favoured country Mr. Robert Hunter, who has made the subject his own, can write:—"After studying with great care all the statistics and sources of information known to me upon the subject, I have come to the conclusion that there are no fewer than 10,000,000 persons in actual poverty in the United States. This does not mean that there is this number in distress; it does mean that at least this number is, much of the time, underfed, poorly clothed, and improperly housed. The estimate is conservative, and an inquiry properly conducted would very likely show a much larger number of persons in poverty."

Nor are imports and exports an infallible index of the well-being of a nation. The volume of foreign trade in the case of England and the United States is bewildering in its magnitude, but the statistics of poverty in both cases prove that the condition of a nation may not be measured by the extent of its foreign trade. It is the consumption of commodities at home which determines the general standard of living amongst a people, and that consumption bears no necessary relation to the quantities of commodities imported or exported. It is conceivable that a country might increase its foreign trade as a consequence of the extermination of masses of its own people. Assume that an agricultural population has been largely driven off the soil, and that their place has been taken by sheep and cattle. An export trade will immediately spring up, or if it has already existed will promptly expand, and the commercial classes will grow rapidly in numbers. The cattle and sheep will be sent abroad; and in return will be imported the foodstuffs and raw material of manufacture which the dispossessed tillers of the soil previously supplied. To account this growth of external trade an increase of national prosperity would be a sad mistake. No doubt, the few into whose hands the land has passed benefit by the change. But their gain is more than outweighed by the loss to the nation. The net produce per acre from the land occupied by the cattle we may, after allowing for rent, safely value at about £2; the produce of the same land under tillage would probably amount to three or four times as much. It is true the owner
of the cattle who holds, let us say, a thousand acres of the land
in question will secure an income of £2,000 a year; and we
may also admit that the landlord will find it an advantage
to have to deal with one tenant instead of fifty. But the
making of one man of wealth, and the simplifying of the
transactions of a rent office are small compensation to the
country for the shrinkage in its volume of production. And,
besides, the country has more to deplore than mere decrease
in production. Part of a much more valuable asset—its
labour force—has been either lost to it altogether, or so dis-
placed as to throw its economic system out of gear, and to
extend the evil far beyond the centre in which it has originated.
What, in fact, becomes of the labour force which has been
removed from the land? I have in mind a country where
the land is fully occupied; I am keeping in view our own con-
ditions. The dispossessed must either emigrate, in which
case their productive powers are lost to the nation, or, if
the manufacturing industries cannot absorb them, they must
betake themselves to one or other of the non-productive
employments, in which case they become a burden upon the
producers; their maintenance becomes a tax upon the produc-
ing classes which their removal from the soil has diminished.

These general principles have an interest for us, beyond
that of mere theoretic generalisations; they help us to
interpret the statistics with which our Government Depart-
ments and the studies of our economists are now supplying us.
With their aid we will examine some of the more recent of
these returns, and endeavour to arrive at some conclusions
as to their real significance.

First in order of importance comes the general statistics
of population. The unvarying record of decline which set
in with the census of 1851 is maintained unbroken. Of the
civilised countries of the Old and the New Worlds, Ireland
and France are the only countries for which a decline of
population is registered. The causes of the decline in France
need not be examined; they are well known, and their peculiar
nature permits us to leave France out of account. Taking the
European countries in which immigration does not add to the
population, and including those from which there is a steady
flow of emigration, such as Italy, Austria-Hungary, and Ger-
many, we find that in all of them the rate of increase in the
number of inhabitants has been that of the normally healthy
nation—something about 1.0 per cent. per annum. In some
it rises considerably above this figure, in others it falls slightly
below it; but nowhere except in Ireland do we find a persistent
decrease. The last Irish census, it is true, shows a percentage
of decrease smaller than any registered for the decades which
have passed since 1851. But the drain could not proceed in-
definitely at the same rate. The fact that the flow is slackening
may be matter for congratulation, but the fact that there is a flow, still leaves sufficient subject for grave concern. It differentiates Ireland from the civilised countries of the world, and points to economic evils such as no country but herself is suffering. It has been written that "in the multitude of people is the king's honour; but in want of people is the destruction of the prince." The maxim has not lost any of its force since the days of King Solomon. It will bear translation into modern terminology, and in this form will be accepted by statesmen and economists. Admitting its truth we must conclude that Ireland, though moving less rapidly on the downgrade, is still moving downwards.

No one will deny that in almost every part of Ireland the conditions of life, especially in the rural districts has signally improved. Wherever inquiry is made it is found that the Land Acts, the Labourers Acts, and the operations of the Congested Districts Board have made salutary changes. But this does not prove that, with these devices of statesmanship, the general wealth-production of the country has increased; all this could follow from the more equitable distribution of the previously existing wealth among a diminishing population. If a farmer's household is reduced by death or emigration to half its number, those who remain may be better fed and better clothed than they were before; but this improvement is quite compatible with an unchanged or even a diminished return from the cultivation of the farm. Of itself it denotes no development of industry in the household; there are fewer mouths to feed and the previous supply without increase will feed them better. From the rise in the standard of living brought about by the legislation already mentioned we cannot argue to an increase of national prosperity, to a genuine growth of the nation in wealth. Such a growth would imply either that the population, without increase of number, increased its output of wealth, or that with increasing numbers it increased proportionately its material resources.

Let us now examine the detailed figures of the census and other returns, and inquire whether they indicate a growing prosperity in the sense defined. An increase of wealth and consequent well-being must depend primarily on the numbers of those who are engaged in the processes of production. Now for the decades ending 1901 and 1911, the percentages of decrease in the general population of the country were 5·2, and 1·7 respectively. But in the same decades the percentages of decrease in the producing classes—the agricultural and the industrial—were 5·4 and 7·6. From this it would appear that our producers of wealth are diminishing in number much more rapidly than the consumers whom their industry maintains. How under these conditions one can congratulate us on the growing prosperity of our people, it is
not easy to understand. But there is yet more in those tables of the Census Commissioners which deal with the occupations of the people to moderate tendencies to optimism. Side by side with this absolute and relative decrease of the producing classes there has been a striking increase in the Commercial Class—in the numbers who are engaged in the conveyance and distribution of goods. In 1881 this class was returned as numbering 72,245; in 1891 as 83,173; in 1901 as 97,889; and in 1911 as 111,143; that is to say, an increase of 15·13 per cent. in 1891, of 16·48 per cent. in 1901; and of 13·54 per cent. in 1911. A commercial class has its uses; it serves a necessary purpose in the national economy. But it is to be remembered that this class is paid for its services out of the wealth created by the producing portion of the community, and that by an undue multiplication of its numbers, it may become a serious burden on those who support it. Now, it can hardly be contended that if 72,245 distributors sufficed for the requirements of a population of 5,174,000 in 1881, there can be any rational need of 111,143 distributors for the services of distribution to a population of 4,381,000 in 1911. We are thus forced to the conclusion that in this respect our economic system has lost, and is still further losing, its balance; that the maintenance of an ever-growing commercial class by an ever-declining producing class is an alarming feature of our economic condition. From the growth of commercialism we should be led to infer a priori a growing disproportion between the population of the country and the population of the towns. The figures of the census tables amply bear out the inference. Not only is the ratio of the town population to that of the rural areas changing in favour of the towns, but there is an absolute increase in the town dwellers coincident with the decline in the rural population. It has been said that in Ireland there is no movement from the country to the town such as is registered in the great manufacturing nations; that when Irishmen leave the land they migrate to American cities, not to the towns of Ireland. The statement is only a half truth put in picturesque form. In reality the movement from country to town is as well marked in Ireland as elsewhere. Let us examine the figures. In the census returns towns of 2,000 inhabitants and upwards are described as "Civic Areas"; the surrounding country districts as "Rural Areas." In 1881 the population of the Civic Areas stood at 1,224,919; in 1891 at 1,244,113; in 1901 at 1,425,818; and in 1911 at 1,507,570. In these thirty years, while the population of the whole country fell by 792,879, the population of the towns increased by nearly one-third of that number. From these figures it would appear, not only that the loss in the general population fell wholly upon the rural areas, but that they suffered a further
loss in the transfer of a portion of their population to the towns.

It might perhaps be suggested that the migration which these figures reveal was directed mainly towards the manufacturing centres, that the workers had merely changed their occupation, and that the nation suffered nothing by the change. Even if this were so, many of us would regard the loss to the fields as not quite compensated by the gain to the factories. But the suggestion finds no confirmation in the Registrar-General's tables. In every province of Ireland the Civic Areas have gained and the Rural Areas have lost. The following are the percentages of increase and decrease in each of the four provinces for the period 1901-1911:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Province</th>
<th>Increase per cent.</th>
<th>Decrease per cent.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ulster</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leinster</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connaught</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>6.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Munster</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>5.3</td>
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No doubt the larger manufacturing centres, as might have been expected, show notable gains in this shifting of population—Belfast 10.4 per cent., Portadown 16.2, Lisburn 6.2; but no one of them exhibits the percentage of increase attained by Rathmines and Rathgar—17.1, and the percentage registered for Pembroke—13.4—is much in excess of that registered for Belfast. It will be readily conceded that the attractions of Rathmines and Pembroke do not lie in their manufacturing industries.

It may, of course, be argued that the Civic Areas owe their growing numbers to the circumstance that within them the natural rate of increase in population is not affected by emigration to the same extent as in the rural districts. We have not the data sufficient to test the validity of this suggestion, but for the purpose of my main argument the point is immaterial. Whatever be the explanation, the fact stands that the towns as a whole show an increase in population, while the rural areas are being steadily depleted. It is to the significance of this fact that I desire to direct attention. In the manufacturing towns the larger numbers may possibly be able to maintain themselves and the towns by their labour. Whether they do so or not we have not the means of determining. The total value of our manufactured
products has not, so far, been estimated officially. We know
the value of the manufactures exported, but these form only
a part of the whole produce of industrial labour, and we must
know the value of the whole before we can determine whether
it is sufficient to maintain the centres in which the value is
created. But in regard to the agricultural districts we are
in a better position. The returns of the Department of
Agriculture inform us of the total value of the products of
our agriculture; and it is by these products that the farmers
must maintain themselves, their families, and their labourers.
It is by these products also that the people of the towns in the
non-manufacturing districts are supported. They are themselves
non-producers, they subsist on the profits of retail trade, by
the charges upon the farmer for the distribution of shop goods.
Every increase in their number in any district, beyond what is
required for the supply of the farmer's requirements, is an
added burden on the agricultural industry of the locality.
That twenty dealers should be maintained by a country trade
for which two would be adequate implies that eighteen and
their families are supported by a wholly unnecessary charge
upon the farming community. The superfluous eighteen
might as well live upon incomes directly subscribed by the
farmers around them. Indeed, in the interests of agriculture, it
would be better they should do so. For, to make a trade which
is just sufficient to support two families bear the support of
twenty, prices must be raised, inferior goods must be palmed
off on purchasers, and the devices of gombeening must be
called into play. Especially hurtful is the sale to the farmer
of inferior farm supplies, such as seeds and manures. Not
only does he lose the money he paid for these articles, but he
loses as well the crop for which he purchased them. That this
evil is rife in the retail trade of the rural districts is proved
abundantly by recent investigations made by the Department
of Agriculture. If the inquisition could be carried further
it would doubtless show that the farmer suffers equally in
his purchase of household goods. It could not be otherwise;
a larger volume of profit than a trade can bear can be secured
only by raising the price or depressing the quality of the goods
distributed.

That the number of dealers has increased unduly in our
rural districts is demonstrated by the figures already quoted.
The increase of the commercial classes from 72,000 in 1881
to 111,000 in 1911, corresponding to a decrease of 722,000
in the general population, was not confined to the large
cities. The great bulk of the trade of the country is carried on outside
their confines. Our experience will satisfy us that in the period
under review there has not been any notable multiplication
of large trading firms in the City of Dublin; the same may
be said with confidence of most of our important towns.
Furthermore, there are some returns which enable us to prove more directly the growth of the trading class among the diminishing population of the country districts. The general shopkeeper is essentially a country trader; in the cities and larger towns specifically different goods are dealt with in different establishments. In the census returns, class V. Sect. 22, we have an enumeration of the general shopkeepers for successive decades since 1841. Beginning at 1871 we find the following numbers set down for the whole country: 1871, 24,925; 1881, 28,060; 1891, 27,691; 1901, 30,572; 1911, 24,017. The drop in 1911 was due, as the more detailed returns show, to the retirement from this class of business of over 5,000 ladies. If the figures of the Registrar-General accurately represent the facts, and are not due to some change in the method of enumeration, they indicate in the ladies a happy economic sense, which the men might share with advantage to the country. For the moment, we may indulge the hope that the very undesirable growth of a non-producing class has been stayed. But remembering that, checked in 1891, it showed a more vigorous development than ever in the decade ending in 1901, we must be prepared for disappointment. The steady increase in the shopkeeping class up to the last decade implies, as I have pointed out, an ever-growing burden on the producers of the country—on the agriculturists more especially. This burden agriculture is peculiarly unfitted to bear. Mr. George Russell, one of the keenest of our economic thinkers, has been at the pains to analyse the estimates made by the Department of Agriculture as to the total value of the yearly output of agricultural industry in Ireland. The estimated net output was valued by the Department at £45,574,000. But Mr. Russell shows that many elements of the cost of production had been omitted from the calculation. Fertilisers, seeds, feeding stuffs, implements—and not less important—rent and annuities to the Land Commission (the rates were passed over, the data for calculating these not being available), were severally items of cost which, when taken into account, sadly reduced the sum available for distribution among farmers and labourers. The necessary deductions made, the net return to the farmers' industry stood at the estimated figure of £32,267,000. The number of persons engaged in agriculture is, according to the official statistics, 984,358. If the net return were divided equally among them they would receive, as the average reward of their labour and capital invested, about twelve shillings and sixpence a week. It is not, however, equally divided. The 184,084 labourers in regular employment are paid, according to the estimate of the Board of Trade an average of 11s 3d. per week. What are the average earnings of the 109,987 casual labourers and 112,995 women who have an occasional
share in the work of the farm cannot be accurately reckoned. Mr. Russell fixes it at 6s. per week. Deducting the total paid in wages from the net yearly value of the agricultural output of Ireland, there remains a sum of £21,700,000 available for distribution among the farmers and their sons. These number 577,292; the available sum, distributed equally among them, would give to each about fourteen shillings per week. Evidently the Irish farmer is not in a condition to shoulder a heavier load, to burden him further, whether by the support of unnecessary traders, or by increased taxation, would be pitiless as it would be impolitic.