

'ABLE-BODIED OUT OF WORK': THE DECLINE OF THE LANDLESS LABOURER

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The ‘landless’ labourer was a vital figure in Marx and Engel’s writings on the colonial domination of Irish land and the transformation of the Irish economy across the nineteenth century. However, they also reveal much about the development of welfare and relief during this period, predominantly through their exclusion from it. This article will provide a brief overview of some of Marx and Engels’ key commentaries on the issue and its relation to the Irish economy, as well as significant debates surrounding welfare provision. Many important topics such as what the remaining labourers did in the twentieth century or, as Eamonn Slater has recently discussed, the relation between Marxism and Irish ecology have not been taken up in this article but present interesting avenues for further discussion.

Furthermore, studying the treatment of landless labourers allows us to take a more critical stance on the Land League. From the beginning, the Land League very weakly represented the interests of these labourers, which only worsened as their numbers declined. Though many have been enthused by its memorable boycotts and anti-eviction defences, their overall project meant that landless labourers lost out. In their ongoing campaign to win rights and secure tenure to landholding peasants, the Land League did little to address the material concerns of the labourers. The division of the Irish landscape into smaller farms decreased the available work for labourers, and lessened the possibility of conacre for subsistence. Indeed, conflict between landless labourers and the

farmers or landholding peasants was often as intense as between labourers and landlords. This led to many labourers forming their own groups which became more active towards the end of the period, though more so in the twentieth century.

Landless labourers as ‘able-bodied poor’ was an essential categorisation of the Irish agricultural workforce. So important was this categorisation that it was included as a specific section in the nationwide ‘Poor Inquiry’ of 1837.¹ The precarious nature of their work, combined with their extensive exploitation by their employers, including landlords and landholding peasants, meant that labourers were those most needing relief on an annual basis. It was commonly acknowledged that labourers had difficult material circumstances for much of the year, even in times of employment. Despite these factors, landless labourers were often excluded from relief on the grounds that they were ‘capable’ of employment.

‘Landless’ labourers were typically workers employed by farmers to tend to their land or help with the harvest. In 1841, it was recorded that those ‘depending on their own manual labour’ or ‘the direction of labour’ accounted for 62.9 percent of the population.² The descriptor ‘landless’ is of interest as these workers were perhaps the most directly engaged in working the land itself and improving it. They were known as ‘landless’ as their main source of income did not come from land in their own possession, though it was common practice for such labourers to rent a small plot (conacre) to subsist on. ‘Conacre’ was the specific form of tenurial contract between the tenant farmers and their labourers. This created a unique situation in which the very livelihood of the labourer was exploited as they did not earn a money wage.

They were not wage labourers as in the capitalist mode of production, which Marx indicates in some of his writings on Ireland: ‘Before the Famine, the great mass of agricultural wages were paid in kind, only the smallest part in money’.³ This was further established in the Poor Law Inquiry, which stated that

the most prevalent meaning of the term ‘cottier’ is that of a labourer holding a cabin, either with or without land, as it may happen

(but commonly from a quarter to three acres are attached), from a farmer or other occupier, for whom he is bound to work, either constantly at a certain fixed price (usually a very low one), or whenever called upon, or so many days in the week at certain busy seasons, according to the custom of the neighbourhood.⁴

Pre-Famine Ireland was dominated by the distinction between those with land and access to it and those without either; the ability to benefit directly from the soil marked the division between those who could plan for future eventualities (such as a food shortage) and those who could not. The seasonal nature of the labourers' employment created a precarious situation in which it was widely acknowledged that they were not earning for a significant portion of the year. The 'hunger months' during the summer, when the potato crop and labour was scarce, often forced labourers to resort to vagrancy (begging, though this was the preserve of women and children alone unless the labourer found themselves in the direst circumstances) or seasonal labour migration to survive.

According to a commentator from Headford in the Poor Inquiry, it was also common for labourers to move from town to town seeking out work 'with a hook in their hand, or a spade on their shoulder' on an ad hoc basis in times of need.⁵ The distinction between this type of labourer, whose employment was 'occasional', and the 'permanently employed' labourer becomes apparent when comparing the monetary value of their wages. It is worth noting that the possibility of seasonal workers driving down the wages of permanent workers was often used as a rhetorical device to sow further mistrust between the different groups, such as small tenants, farmers and urban workers. The average full-time labourer earned approximately £6.10d per year, whereas the entire household of the average 'casual' labourer (including the earnings of a wife and children who might beg) was about £7.⁶ A commentator in Thomastown in 1834 remarked on the fact that labourers' wages did not rise, even in times of increased employment, due to the fierce competition for employment: 'All that

the labourers gain by that season is that those who earn nothing at other periods of the year are engaged; but there is no want of extra hands and therefore no extra wages'.⁷

It was also widely acknowledged that the rent which labourers paid was disproportionately greater than that of the farmer to the landlord; such 'rack renting' placed even greater strain upon the finances of the labourers. This is reflected in the Poor Inquiry of 1835 where many individuals (including labourers themselves) described such material poverty: 'I knew many to be eating cabbage and salt, without as much as one potatoe [sic]... There are about nine or ten families in my village whom I know to be without half enough to eat during the summer; I do not mean one summer in particular, but every summer'.⁸ Such sentiments were echoed by Marx and Engels in *The German Ideology*, where they commented that 'as an Irish peasant, for example, he can only choose to eat potatoes or starve, and he is not always free to make even this choice'.⁹

Indeed, Marx wrote extensively on rent relationships in Ireland, which he determined to be pre-capitalistic, and noted the extensive exploitation this subjected Irish labourers to. 'Land became the great object of pursuit. The people had now before them the choice between the occupation of land, at any rent, or starvation'.¹⁰ The ownership of land was not the only monopoly held by the landlord class, they also possessed a monopoly of access to a livelihood for most labourers. As Marx further described: 'On the one side you have a small class of land monopolists, on the other, a very large class of tenants with very petty fortunes, which they have no chance to invest in different ways, no other field of production opening to them, except the soil'.¹¹

The fact that the economy prior to the Famine was almost entirely driven by tillage agriculture made the labourer essential to its function, and the most exploited. Over the course of the period, landlords began to gradually shift their estates from tillage to grazing-based agriculture, which further increased the

precarity of labourers. Whereas tillage could provide work for twenty labourers on one hundred acres, the same amount of land required only one herdsman to maintain the livestock. This increased labourers' need for relief or assistance of some kind. Such need was enhanced by the instability of labourers' tenure. Eviction was commonplace and left labourers with no alternative to 'vagrancy' or, increasingly, the workhouse. Necessary relief was remarkably difficult to access, and over the course of the Famine, the number of labourers in Ireland decreased by over 20 percent, significantly altering the nature of the Irish economy and workforce in the latter part of the nineteenth century and beyond. In the words of William Bence Jones, a traveller to Ireland in 1880: 'When I first began there were at least as many labourers as farmers, but they have nearly all gone away'.

Social discrimination against labourers was rampant. For instance, the Poor Inquiry recorded Sydenham Davis, a landlord of Thomastown in 1834, as saying that 'labourers have no knowledge of spending the time usefully'.¹³ This view posited that it was the character of the labourer which caused their poverty. We can connect these statements, in part, with racialised arguments that 'indigenous' Irish were physically and mentally 'inferior' to their British and British-descended counterparts. This further descended from nineteenth-century beliefs which conflated race with class, by which people can be convinced that their class position is 'natural' and that class conflict is ultimately ineffective or impossible. It was also true that increasing agitation by labourers in response to their poor material conditions was a source of fear for the establishment, which they sought to break through material deprivation.

The origins of these beliefs have been contested and analysed to great extent in modern historiography. Margaret Preston has demonstrated that the categorisation of deserving/undeserving was an intentional effort by the ruling class to divide the poor and create deference among an increasingly agitated population in exchange for aid.¹⁴ This argument is corroborated by Marilyn Silverman, who posited that labourers who attempted to organise themselves and take direct action against exploitation were

framed as 'undeserving of and ungrateful for' any relief and actively denied it.¹⁵ Virginia Crossman has further argued that the existence of an undeserving 'irredeemable' poor implied the existence of individuals 'beyond' the help of charity or relief, thus reducing the scope of responsibility for those providing it.¹⁶

It usually followed from such beliefs that offering relief to these individuals was a waste of resources, so intractable was the nature of their poverty or agitation. Conversely, two large farmers stated to the inquiry that 'if the labourer had employment or any fixed means of obtaining a livelihood, he would not become reckless, as at present'.¹⁷ This view suggested that it was poor living conditions which compelled labourers to be 'reckless'. Furthermore, though it acknowledged the material hardship which many labourers contended with, this view posited that the best 'cure' to labourer poverty was employment as opposed to poor relief. This view was partially echoed, albeit in a much more brutal way, in the 1838 Poor Law, which Engels described as 'the great instrument which is clearing Ireland'.¹⁸

A contemporary commentator stated that 'anything in the shape of work [was] better for them than outdoor relief'.¹⁹ Interestingly, two labourers who were present alongside these other witnesses said little of their situation at the inquiry, though this was not true of all labourers. The attitudes of labourers towards their own circumstances reflected a complex web of shame and stigma. The popular ballad 'An Spailpín Fánach' (The Wandering Labourer) reflected the shame of not owning one's own land and the damage to a labourer's health and self-esteem this also entailed: 'I well remember my people were at one time/ Over at the bridge at Gáil/ With cattle, with sheep, with little white calves/ And plenty of horses/ But it was the will of God that we were evicted/ And we were left with only our health/ And what broke my heart everywhere I went/ "Call here, you wandering labourer"'.²⁰

In the parish of Headford, the labourers who spoke frequently reiterated their own 'good character' and desire to work, only seeking aid or resorting to begging in the most desperate of situations. One described the 'embarrassment' which came with

asking another for relief or 'credit' during times of scarcity, and several other labourers confirmed similar attitudes towards begging, which was only done far from their hometown and in the greatest need. They felt compelled to defend their need of aid and work ethic against frequent suggestions that they were inherently 'idle', ignorant of their own conditions, or seeking to rely solely on the aid of others to support themselves.

In 1837, when a 'Charitable and Benevolent Society' was established in Thomastown, it was established that it would 'refuse any who can, but do not, labour, however small the remuneration'.²¹ This included labourers, who were denied access to the services of the society, which was restricted to the 'deserving' poor, such as the ill or disabled. Beyond Thomastown, one of the first core principles of the new Poor Law was the refusal of relief to the 'able-bodied'. When the Poor Law was established in 1848, it was almost impossible for labourers to access relief outside the workhouse system, as outdoor relief was believed to exacerbate their inherent idleness. This is at least partly explained by the belief that 'anything in the shape of work' was better for labourers than outdoor relief.

This created an 'all or nothing' principle, by which labourers could either receive provision for themselves and their families entirely within the workhouse (which frequently entailed the separation of families) or receive nothing at all. Those who improved their land were charged a higher rent, whilst those who did not were driven into destitution. Again, as Marx noted in his writings: 'If the tenant was industrious and enterprising, he became taxed in consequence of his very industry and enterprise. If, on the contrary, he grew inert and negligent, he was reproached with the "aboriginal faults of the Celtic race". He had, accordingly, no other alternative left but to become a pauper – to pauperise himself by industry, or pauperise by negligence'.²² The principle of 'less eligibility' ensured that conditions within the workhouse were designed to supposedly never surpass those of a labourer supporting himself outside the workhouse. In practice, this allowed for inhuman conditions in the workhouses.

A contemporary commentator, George Cornwall Lewis, remarked to the administration in July 1836 that the removal of labourers from their land by forcing them to enter the workhouse was essential to the socioeconomic 'transition' of Ireland.²³ According to Lewis, smallholding should have been abolished and replaced with an embryonic capitalist system; waged labour, substantial tenant farmers, and 'improving' landlords. This reflected the colonial nature of land development in Ireland, where developments in England were often thrust upon Irish estates despite the incomparable economic development of the country.

The eviction of cottiers and landless labourers in the service of this goal was often brutal; 'Eviction of farmers partly by friendly agreement terminating tenure. But much more eviction en masse (forcibly by crowbar brigades, beginning with the destruction of roofs), forcible ejection. (Also used as political retribution). This has continued since 1847 to this day'.²⁴ Marx quoted a Galway newspaper of the day to further establish the far-reaching social effects of these evictions; 'Land agents direct the operation. The work is done by a large force of police and soldiery. Under the protection of the latter, the "crowbar brigade" advances to the devoted township, takes possession of the houses.... The sun that rose on a village sets on a desert'.²⁵ Furthermore, Marx acknowledged that the process was not a steady one: 'But the difference is that in England, an industrial country, the industrial reserve is recruited from the countryside, whereas in Ireland, an agricultural country, the agricultural reserve is recruited itself from the towns, the places of refuge of the agricultural labourers, who have been driven from the land... those forced into the towns remaining agricultural labourers even while they exert a downward pressure on urban wages and are constantly sent back to the countryside in search of work'.²⁶

Though Marx and Engels wrote extensively on the plight of the landless labourers in Ireland, a full appraisal of their economic and social function remains to be had. Despite being essential for the yearly rotation of the crops and the improvement of land, they were one of the most exploited and persecuted classes in the country. Furthermore, in the

space of a few short years, they all but disappeared from the landscape. The combination of forced entry into the workhouse, emigration, and high mortality during the Famine all changed the labour demographics of the country for good. The clearance of labourers from the land marks the intersection between colonial control of the land and the massive economic shifts which marked the latter part of the nineteenth century. Though landless labourers went on to be involved in politics of the twentieth century, and even partook in some collective actions, they never returned to the numbers they had been before the Famine.

NOTES

¹Whatley, R. (1836) 'House of Commons, "Poor inquiry", Appendix (C.)--Parts I. and II. Part I. Reports on the state of the poor, and on the charitable institutions in some of the principal towns; with supplement containing answers to queries. Part II. Report on the city of Dublin, and supplement containing answers to queries; with addenda to appendix (A.), and communications', (35 36 37 38 39 40 41 42), (1836), p.355

² Mokyr, J. and Ó Gráda, C. (1985) 'From Poor to Poorer? Living Standards in Ireland Before the Famine: a new look', *The Economic History Review*, 41(2): 209-235.

³ Marx, K. and Engels, F. (1971) *Ireland and the Irish Question*, E. O'Callaghan and A. Blunden, (eds.) International Publishers, p.109.

⁴ Whatley, 'Poor inquiry', p.660.

⁵ Ibid, p.355

⁶ Silverman, M. (2001) *An Irish Working Class: Explorations in Political Economy and Hegemony, 1800-1950*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, p.45.

⁷ Ibid, p.48.

⁸ Whatley, 'Poor inquiry', p.355.

⁹ Marx, K and Engels, F. (1932) 'Peculiarity', in *The German Ideology (1845-1846)*, *Marxists.org*, available from: <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/ch03h.htm>>

¹⁰ Marx and Engels, *Ireland and the Irish Question*, p.132.

¹¹ Ibid, pp.59-60.

¹² Fitzpatrick, D. (1980) 'The Disappearance of the Irish Agricultural Labourer, 1841-1912',

in *Irish Economic and Social History*, Vol 7 California: SAGE, p.66.

¹³ Whatley, 'Poor inquiry', pp.591-92.

¹⁴ Preston, M. (1998) 'Discourse and Hegemony: Race and Class in the Language of Charity in Nineteenth-Century Dublin', in *Ideology and Ireland in the Nineteenth Century*, T. Foley and S. Ryder (eds.), Dublin: Four Courts Press, pp.101-11.

¹⁵ Silverman, *An Irish Working Class*, p.45.

¹⁶ Crossman, V. (2013) *Poverty and the Poor Law in Ireland 1850-1914*, Liverpool: Oxford University Press, p.19.

¹⁷ Whatley, 'Poor inquiry', pp.591-92.

¹⁸ Marx and Engels, *Ireland and the Irish Question*, p.297.

¹⁹ Whatley, 'Poor inquiry', pp.110-12.

²⁰ 'Án Spailpín Fánach', in T.F. Walsh (ed.), *Favourite Poems as Gaelige*, Cork: Mercier, p.24.

²¹ Silverman, *An Irish Working Class*, p.108.

²² Marx and Engels, *Ireland and the Irish Question*, p.60.

²³ Gray, P. (2006) 'The Irish Poor Law and the Great Famine', conference paper, International Economic History Congress, University of Helsinki, 25 August 2006, p.8.

²⁴ Marx and Engels, *Ireland and the Irish Question*, p.135.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Marx, K. and Engels, F. (1976) *On Colonialism*, Moscow, International Publishers, p.866.