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## One Foot on the Soil · II

Louis Bromfield



*The cure of the fundamental sickness of Democracy lies partly in the dispersal of both populations and factories into rural areas and small urban developments*

NO NATION, whether a dictatorship or a democracy, is ever more prosperous or sound than the individual citizens who go to make up the whole. The financial and economic instability of industrial citizens in America is centered, not in the smaller towns or in the agricultural communities, but in our great industrial cities where there is little or no tradition of economic solvency and where high costs of distribution, taxes, overhead, etc., raise living costs to a point where all too often individual wages are unable to cope with them.

Take, on the other hand, the case of millions of industrial workers in such a country as France. I have known many of them and know their cases at first hand. There are in France fewer great industrial cities in proportion to the population than in America. The average Frenchman dislikes life in tenements and overcrowded areas.

He is traditionally thrifty. He is by nature a landholder, an owner of what he and his family possess. Since the cities are smaller, it is possible for him, even in the largest cities, to live with "one foot on the soil" because transportation is easier and quicker into areas where the tax values of land are not prohibitive to his ownership. One paralyzing factor in the concentration of workers—both industrial and white-collar workers—in the crowded areas of our vast cities, lies in the fact that, because real estate values for miles outside the urban core of the city are so high, the worker cannot escape into more decent areas without going so far that transportation and the element of time make an escape from overcrowded areas an impossibility.

Let us call our French workman Jean Bosquet. He owns a house and a few acres of land within reasonable distance of his daily job. He *owns* the house and perhaps an automobile. If

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\* LOUIS BROMFIELD has been named "America's greatest story-teller" by leading literary critics. *Early Autumn*, his sixth book, brought him a Pulitzer Prize in 1926. Since then his reputation has grown with a steady procession of books and short stories. His latest book, *Pleasant Valley*, is reviewed in this month's Book section. When he writes of the soil, Bromfield is at home because of his large fund of practical knowledge gathered on his farm near Lucas, Ohio. (This is Part II of "One Foot on the Soil.")

not, he is one of the countless passengers on those omnibus trains which each evening feed out from a city like Paris thousands of industrial and white-collar workers bound for the remote suburbs or even purely agricultural areas. All of them, like Jean Bosquet, are going to the little pieces of land which they own, and upon which their children are raised. There is fresh air, elbow room, better educational facilities, and security. On each little piece of land there are chickens, ducks, a pig or two, a couple of goats and perhaps even a cow. On it Bosquet produces all the vegetables and fruits, the eggs and milk, and at least some of the meat, that his family consumes. There is a neighborhood cinema and a cafe here and there, but not a pool-room or saloon on every corner.

When Bosquet is laid off at his factory, he can dig in and avoid the humiliation of public relief or "make-work" jobs. There is plenty of food, a roof over his head. He *owns* his home, his land, his automobile. Very likely he has a little cash laid by. He does not become, overnight, a public charge. He does not immediately contribute the weight of his personal disaster to the sum total of the nation's depression. He does not burden the economy of the nation with taxes to provide him and his family, miserably, with food and shelter. Most of all, he does not lose his human dignity and self-respect and independence, and fall into that perilous state of mind where he expects the government or the rest of the community to support him.

Jean Bosquet and his kind are responsible for the fact that France has been able to survive disaster after disaster, of enemy invasion, inflation, deflation, international economic depression, far worse than anything we have ever known in this country. Jean Bosquet is always there waiting, economically secure as a tiny unit. Multiply these Jean Bosquets by hundreds of thousands and it will help our understanding of the toughness and resilience of France as a nation. Multiply the case of our Joe Smith, living in crowded cities in a constantly economically precarious state even in time of prosperity, and it is possible to understand why our depressions grow increasingly sudden and disastrous, and why there are so many demands for guaranteed employment, social security, doles, make-work projects, industrial insurance and other measures, good and bad, which are all too often destructive to democracy and lead further and further into the philosophy of paternalism—of support by government of its citizens.

I RETURN to the point that the security, economic or otherwise, of any nation is only as great as that of its individual citizens. I make the further point that, as individual security declines, and national economic stability decreases, there is only one solution, and that is the gradual decline into complete paternalism and a condition in which all property and enterprise are owned by the State and administered by it. We have already reached the point of diminishing re-

turns in taxation and as a nation live in a psychopathic terror of unemployment. We are already well along a path where more and more of our economic substance, much of the capital which should be employed to provide new enterprises and support established ones, is being absorbed into the process of feeding, clothing and sheltering large segments of our population which are without individual security.

The great bulk of this economic insecurity is to be found in our great industrial cities, the greater, the more the insecurity. The proportion is much less in rural and small town areas. The only way out, the only solution under existing conditions, and the one popularly accepted, is that we must have guaranteed yearly wages (which solve nothing of the fundamental problem of insecurity in congested areas), more social security, a "cradle to the grave" security plan, make-work projects, food tickets, worker's transportation pay from city to city, and countless other plans and nostrums. All of these lead deeper and deeper into bureaucratic and paternalistic government, and the gradual and consequent loss of the most precious of all human commodities, the freedom of the individual to work where and when he pleases, at what job he likes, and the right to build his own life as he sees fit.

Much bitter controversy has arisen over economic conditions of the nation during the past few years and much bitter controversy over the economic and social measures taken to

correct or ameliorate these conditions. But too much of it has been on a political level, ascribing an impetus to the political motives of individuals, groups and political parties which are, in fact, merely the symptoms or manifestations of a situation which is fundamentally economic and partly social in its origin, arising out of the increasing economic instability of our industrial and, consequently, our urban population. The fundamental condition, out of which arises our psychopathic fear as a nation of insecurity and unemployment, gives rise to all the controversial measures, good and bad, which have been undertaken to meet and correct it. We should have had the same or similar measures under any political party or administration because the necessity for such measures was imperative.

The late Franklin D. Roosevelt did not bring about the New Deal, in either its good or bad manifestations; the New Deal was born of conditions which already existed and was the inevitable result of the economic, and consequently the social abuses, of the fifty years or more which preceded his administration. These were very often closely enmeshed with the problem of unplanned and overgrown industrial and metropolitan areas and the moral and economic insecurity bred of them. The error of the New Deal and the cause of its failures, where it has failed, arose from the superficiality and the improvised quality of the measures it took to meet and ameliorate a fundamental illness. Its policy and practice all too often have been to convert into

a permanent plan emergency and temporary measures, undoubtedly necessary at the time, which were not conceived to correct the fundamental ills and never touched them. These fundamental ills were largely the growing insecurity of individuals and the consequent economic insecurity of the nation itself.

There were two ways of meeting and solving these two insecurities—one by providing greater security for the individual through his own efforts and initiative (the democratic fashion); the other by providing security for the individual through a government planned and executed security (the socialist-communist-totalitarian method). Of the two, the second was by far the easier, the quicker and, politically, the more flashy and profitable. It was that course which was followed by many of the New Deal "thinkers" and which aroused resentment and rebellion among a large segment of our population accustomed to the blessings of free enterprise and liberty associated with happier days when the whole country, incredibly rich in natural resources and industrially underdeveloped, was not yet face to face with the problem of a growing individual and national insecurity.

I RETURN to the point that our national insecurity is largely to be identified with our great cities and the industrial population which inhabits them, and that the cure of the fundamental sickness, in terms of democracy, lies partly at least in the decentralization of

these great industrial concentrations of population and human enterprise and the dispersal of both populations and factories into rural areas and small urban developments, if we are not to go all the way along the road to paternalism and complete government ownership and control.

Many influences are working spontaneously and without much human guidance or purpose toward this decentralization and dispersal. As has been pointed out, both industry and organized labor are becoming aware of the evils of great industrial concentrations as regards income, living costs, efficiency, health, labor unrest and individual and collective economic security. The Ford-Ferguson agricultural machinery corporation in Detroit, which has plans for a great expansion after the war, will manufacture only its tractor at the Dearborn-Detroit plant. All the 150 agricultural implements which are a part of "the Ferguson System" will be manufactured in 150 small towns scattered over the United States. The rubber industry, crowded senselessly into a single city, has long had under consideration plans for decentralization.

Outside the high-value areas of our middle-sized and small industrial cities there is a rapidly growing band of small houses and small landholdings, like those bands which surround Paris and other French cities. These represent the spontaneous search of individual workers, both industrial and white-collar, for a security which they found tragically absent in the great Depression of the Thirties.

Much agricultural land has changed hands during the present war, but the basis of purchase and sale has not been either speculative or expansive, as in the last war, but represents the search for the security to be found by the "one foot on the soil" philosophy. Many family trust funds and some corporations have placed a part of their liquid capital in agricultural land in the knowledge that in time of extreme inflation, agricultural land represents almost the only stable investment and security for capital.

The figures of the latest census show a decline in population of many middle-sized industrial towns and even some large cities. Very often these figures were misleading in that they did not represent an actual loss through migration of population into another metropolitan-urban area but only a shift of a part of the existing population into the areas *outside* the existing city limits, into that growing band of small semi-agricultural holdings which surrounds more and more of our large cities.

The growth and development of modern farm machinery has made it more and more possible for industrial and white-collar people to operate profitably, under a five-day, forty-hour-a-week work schedule, five to ten acre tracts and even fair-sized farms. With such projects go not only material security but better diet, health, morality, and very often better educational facilities.

The development of the Tennessee Valley Authority has shown the way toward one important kind of decen-

tralization, by taking over an area larger than the British Isles and developing it along *both* agricultural and industrial lines, under a plan by which enterprises in both fields exist side by side without the disadvantages that exist in our crowded industrial areas. The plan has taken into consideration the fact that an industrial wage income can *guarantee* a small agricultural project and that a small agricultural project can *guarantee* security for a man and his family even under the most severe of economic depressions, and that the two enterprises go hand in hand and together spell individual liberty, security and independence.

Anyone in contact with the Armed Forces is aware of the great impulse among the men toward setting up a small business of their own or acquiring a small farm after the war. The impulse of countless soldiers is to reestablish themselves, after the war, not in the great industrial cities but in smaller towns and in agricultural areas. At the same time, some careless thinkers have seen the wholesale reestablishment of returning veterans on the land as at least a partial solution to the problems of readjustment. This is a dangerous theory and if translated into a policy can only bring about great confusion, a growing bureaucracy and countless personal tragedies and failures and much bitter disillusionment.

Agriculture is a difficult art and profession and business. A successful farmer must combat the economic vagaries of the market and the natural

vagaries of the weather. He must know more about more things than any other member of society. He must be a mechanic, a botanist, a horticulturist, a veterinarian, a chemist and many other things, and, most of all, he must have a natural inclination toward his occupation. The idea of placing great numbers of our returning soldiers or transferring elements of our urban population wholesale on to the land is both impractical and filled with ominous possibilities. However, the idea of helping the returned soldier or the dissatisfied city dweller to establish himself and his family upon a small holding which can be worked in conjunction with a small business or an industrial job is a sound one. The one activity coordinates and guarantees the security of the other. It is, however, a plan which is impractical for those who work in great industrial areas which involve transportation and time to go great distances to and from work.

A Missouri Valley Authority is now in the process of formation on a scale even larger than that of the Tennessee Valley. It opens up the prospect of a whole new decentralized industrial-agricultural area, with towns established where there is abundant hydro-electric power with available agricultural land and the possibility of small holdings near at hand, of a whole region in which a new America can be developed to the mutual advantage of

industry, labor and agriculture, free from the evils which are inevitably concentrated in vast industrial cities. It is possible and, indeed, probable that the TVA and the proposed MVA are showing the way toward a New America in which individual security will be a fact based upon economic and social common sense rather than upon hasty emergency measures which in the end do not cure but only aggravate, through taxes, doles and relief, an unsound economic situation.

The whole impulse toward "one foot on the soil," toward decentralization of vast industrial cities, is a spontaneous one. It may well point the way toward a *sound* solution of many of our social and economic problems—a solution not founded upon makeshift or improvised measures which lead us nearer and nearer toward a state of economy in which liberty and the fundamental satisfactions of life are sharply curtailed. It is not the whole solution to our problems, but it contributes much toward the individual security upon which the stability of any nation and, indeed, of democracy itself is dependent. Great cities inevitably produce populations which in the end can only be appeased by the "bread and circuses" which are perilous to the security and welfare of any nation. It is, I think, time to consider doing away with them, simply on a basis of common sense and social and economic security.

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*The mind's the standard of the man—WATTS*