Causes of European Emigration to the United States
— A Humanistic Approach —

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Abstract: During the nineteenth century and the first quarter of the twentieth century around thirty million people emigrated from Europe to the United States. Causes of these vast movements of people are explained in this paper. The three main causes were a rapid increase in population, class rule and economic modernization. Personal reasons are mentioned and discrimination against religious and ethnic minority groups are touched upon. Two inventions, the steamship and the railroad are referred to insofar as they helped the emigrants and were a cause of hardship for the poor people of Europe. Although causes of emigration fall under the heading of historical facts, they are considered in this paper as causes of suffering for the destitute of Europe who made up the largest number of emigrants to the United States.

Key words: emigration, population increase, class rule, economic modernization.

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Introduction

The student of the humanities is concerned with the branches of learning that deal with human thought and relations. Immediately one may wonder how history fits into this definition. Looking at history merely as a compilation of dates, place names and events, it would be difficult to include history under the humanities. However, if we consider history as a record of events brought about by and affecting the thoughts and way of life of the people living at the time of particular historical happenings, I believe there should be no objections to the inclusion of history under the humanities.

In this paper I have tried to look at immigration from the point of view of the immigrants before they left their homelands. I have searched out the causes that brought on sufferings great enough to make people from various countries in Europe abandon familiar surroundings and life styles and venture out on a hazardous journey to an uncertain future.

As the largest movements of immigrants to the United States took place in three distinct periods: from colonial times up to the mid-nineteenth century, the mid-nineteenth century to the latter quarter of the same century, and from the latter part of the nineteenth century up to the 1920’s, I have limited my discussion to this time of European history.
General Remarks

For a better understanding of the causes of European emigration it is necessary to take a brief look at the people these causes affected and the number of emigrants that made up the various emigration movements.

Most of the emigrants were from the rural areas of Europe, small landowners, tenant farmers and farm laborers. There were also many from the urban centers, both skilled and unskilled workers and artisans. Many from religious and ethnic minority groups to escape persecution in their own countries also decided to leave for the United States.

As mentioned in the introduction, immigration to the United States can be divided into three distinct periods. During colonial times the majority of the settlers to the United States were Englishmen who did not think of themselves as aliens entering a new society but as colonists whose duty it was to establish a new England in North America. Although there were other ethnic groups in the colonies when independence was won from Great Britain the population was far from being a heterogeneous society.

Sixty-one percent of the white population of the United States in 1790 were of English descent and 17 percent were Scotch or Irish resulting in over three-quarters of the population having their origin in English-speaking states of the British Isles. The remaining population was made up of 9 percent German, 3 percent Dutch, 2 percent Irish, 1 percent Swedish, and various other nationalities whose numbers were minimal. (The Ethnic Myth, p.7)

Between 1815 and 1890, there were two waves of immigrants, which are known as the “old” immigration. The first wave which lasted from 1815 to 1860 saw about five million people emigrate from their homelands to the United States. The second wave included about ten million immigrants and lasted from 1860 to 1890. The immigrants in these two waves were mostly from the British Isles, Germany, Scandinavia, Switzerland and Holland.

The immigration that took place between 1890 and the 1920’s, known as the “new” immigration, involved about fifteen million people from countries located in southern and eastern Europe, largely from Austria-Hungary, Russia, Greece, Romania and Turkey.

The diagram on the following page gives us an idea of the nationalities and number of immigrants to the United States in three peak years during the time of our study.

Three Main Causes

When considering the causes of European emigration one can ponder over the personal reasons such as the desire to go to the United States after receiving news from relatives or friends already settled there or after hearing the success stories of those who had returned. One could even imagine a person deciding to emigrate because a group of his neighbors are leaving for the United States. One could also spend time reading about
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Fig. 1. American immigration: three peak years (figures within circles in 000's) (The Distant Magnet, p. 63)

the money or prepaid tickets that arrived from relatives in the United States. In 1901, the United States Industrial Commission found that among both the “old” and “new” immigrants, between 40 and 65 percent went to the United States either on prepaid tickets or on fares paid for with money sent to them by relatives residing in the United States. (American Immigration, pp. 186–186) Finally, for all emigrants, the most compelling personal reason was, simply, the desire for a better life.

Besides the many personal reasons that made an individual finally decide to emigrate there were three conditions that affected the life styles of the ordinary people living in the rural and urban areas of Europe and became causes for emigration to the United States. These were: a rapid increase in population, class rule, and economic modernization in both the rural and urban areas.

Increase of population

In one hundred years, from 1750 to 1850, because of the decline in the mortality rate due to improved medical and sanitary knowledge, the absence of serious plagues, a better food supply caused by the gradual improvement of farming methods and the adoption of
the potato as the stable diet among the European peasants, the population of Europe had doubled. Because of this increase in population, land that was not in the hands of the wealthy in the form of large estates had to be drastically subdivided. Vilhelm Moberg in his novel The Emigrants, describes the condition of many mid-nineteenth century Swedes when he tells how the main character in his novel, Karl Oshar, became heir to the family land which consisted of seven arable acres which was one-sixteenth of the original homestead (p. 20). In northern Europe there were many freeholders (a person who holds land for life with the right to pass it on by inheritance) who had to support their own families and sometimes their parents on plots of land similar or even smaller than that described in Moberg’s book. On top of this, many of these small landowners had to take out mortgages to pay off debts or compensation to their brothers and sisters.

In eastern Europe the situation was the same. Even in 1900 most of the farmers were working small plots of land. In Bulgaria, 4 percent did not exceed 50 acres, 35 percent held 12½ to 50 acres and around 100,000 were working less than 2½ acres. Among the most unfortunate were the small landowners of Galacia. Fifteen hundred did not possess more than 50 acres, half a million had 7½ to 50 acres, 600,000 possessed 2½ to 7½ acres and more than 200,000 had the impossible task of trying to make a living on less than 2½ acres. (The Distant Magnet, p. 53) Because of the difficulty of making a living on these small plots of land, many of these small landowners decided to emigrate.

The above figures do not tell the whole story. There were many people in all the rural areas of Europe who were landless. In Italy some operated their lands on annual tenancies, others were share tenants with landowners, in many cases, taking most of the profit. These share tenants could hand down their plots of land to their children but for each generation there was little or no hope of improving one’s lot. Besides these tenant farmers, there were many who worked for the large estates as simple laborers. In Ireland, where emigration began much before that of Italy, we find similar conditions. People worked their plots of land on the large estates and were at the mercy of the landowners or in many cases, middlemen, who ran the estates for the absentee owners. These middlemen often put profit first and the welfare of the peasant second. Besides Italy and Ireland, Norway, Sweden, Germany, Prussian Poland, Hungary and other countries had many people who were landless during the different emigration periods and it was from among these unfortunates that we can also find many of the emigrants to the United States.

Class rule
In the rural areas of Europe, besides the small landowners, tenant farmers and farm laborers there was another class, namely, the owners of large estates. You will not find many, if any, of these among the emigrants but they were the cause of many deciding to leave their homeland for foreign shores. With the improvement in farming methods and
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machinery and the consolidation of large estates, these wealthy landowners created competition that the smaller independent landowners were unable to cope with. For the tenant farmer who lived on and worked small plots of land on the large estates the consolidation for specialized farming meant eviction for many. In Ireland, eviction was a common occurrence when a landowner wanted to consolidate his estate. In The Distant Magnet we read,

The problem that dominated much of Irish rural life was this: the only way to manage an estate more efficiently was to displace large numbers of people. When one middleman's lease expired, the 240 acres were found to have upon them 39 cabins and 176 tiny fields. The landlord's decision to rationalize involved making five farms, ejecting thirty families, and keeping only a small minority of people as laborers. (p.34)

From the 1850's in the Mecklenburgs and the eastern districts of Prussia as crops became more specialized and machinery more efficient, the large estates evicted tenant farmers and began to hire day laborers on a seasonal basis. Finally in Italy, we see a situation where at least 85 percent of the emigrants to the United States from 1875 to 1920 were from six provinces situated to the east and south of Rome called the Mezzogiorno. After the unification of Italy in 1861, the central government in the north took little notice of the areas in the south and when disputes between the ordinary people and the wealthy landowners took place it tended to listen to the latter.

This situation of the large estates resulted in many of the poor people deciding to emigrate. The large landowners not only controlled the future of those working on their estates but their influence was also great within government circles leaving the ordinary people with little or no recourse against them. (The Distant Magnet, p. 40) Also because of this power in government, the heavy taxes had to be borne by the poorer classes. For example, Richard Gambino states in Blood of My Blood,

By 1910, the people of the Mezzogiorno owned only 27 percent of the national wealth, but paid 32 percent of the national taxes. Statistics, however, do not reveal the human suffering behind numbers, for almost all the wealth was owned by a few while the taxes were paid almost entirely by the destitute many. (p. 58)
With these various conditions prevalent in the rural areas of Europe, all that was needed to start an avalanche of emigration was a natural calamity. This came to Ireland in the form of the Potato Famine where between 1846 and 1854 a million and a quarter emigrated. In the southwestern states of Germany the potato failed in 1846 and there were poor harvests in the early 1850's. In Italy the severe agricultural depression of the Mezzogiorno reached calamitous proportions by the 1880's. In 1888 a quintal or about 220 pounds of wheat sold for the low price of 22 lire but by 1894 it had fallen to 13.5 lire. (Blood of My Blood, p. 63) Also the eruptions of Vesuvius in 1906, Etna in 1910 and earthquakes in the provinces of Basilicata and Calabria plus the major disaster in 1908 when a major earthquake and tidal wave struck in the strait of Messina, with their accompanying death and destruction, were the last straws for many Italians, causing them to emigrate.

Economic modernization

In the previous section we saw how economic modernization affected the rural areas and was the cause of many people emigrating. However, its effect was also felt in the developing of industrial nations with the resulting "push and pull" causes that increased in the industrial cities of both the United States and Europe. The industrial revolution changed the industrial economy of Europe. In England, the industrial revolution started earlier than in other countries, around 1760, so that by the middle of the nineteenth century, half of the population was urban and among the declining rural population, instead of peasants there were landlords, farmers, laborers and craftsmen who performed services for the other groups. Even though the farmers did not belong to the peasant class, a fair number of them decided to emigrate. Between 1876 and 1880, there were 15,000 and between 1881 and 1886, 37,000. Also, between 1840 and 1890, there was a great demand for skilled laborers in the United States as its industrial complex developed. This demand ceased after 1890 because of a sufficient number of local skilled workers and the use of unskilled laborers from southeastern Europe in the factories, nevertheless, during these years, many Englishmen, instead of going back and forth across the Atlantic Ocean, decided to make the United States their permanent home.

However, the biggest reason for emigration from England was the combination of population increase and a slowdown in industry as the United States and Germany overcame it in production. Between 1871 and 1911, almost 2 million Englishmen emigrated to various countries. England's overseas investments stimulated economic developments in other countries which in turn attracted many people. Because these developments and also economic conditions in the United States fluctuated, we find an irregularity in the numbers leaving England. There was a high around 1850 and 1870, a very high number in the 1880's and the decade before War I. (For a fuller description of emigration from England, consult The Distant Magnet, pp. 42-47).

In Germany we see a different industrial picture. By the 1850's, Germany had
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developed in the short span of fifty years from a medieval economic system to the second greatest industrial system after England. However, the development was not always smooth. In the 1830's, workers in towns between Saxony and Bohemia became angry with the influx of British cottons and linens. In the 1840's and 1850's as large factories and modern machines were established, skilled workers were gradually replaced by unskilled laborers, who came mostly from the rural areas of Germany and even neighboring countries. As more and more people became dependent on the industrial economy for a living, as in all industrial nations, if there was a depression, as there was due to the importing of better quality British linens and the introduction of both British and German cotton, wages dropped leaving many with insufficient means of support. This problem plus the fact that the rural people were under a strain from living in overcrowded areas and working under unfamiliar conditions made many decide to emigrate.

Because of these conditions, plus the agricultural conditions, from the southwestern districts of Germany there were large emigrations in the 1840's, 1850's and the 1860's. In the 1870's the majority of emigrants were leaving from the purely agricultural districts, especially those with large estates. From the 1880's to World War I, industry was booming and cities doubled in size. Industry was able to absorb more and more people and just before World War I emigration had become just a trickle. (The Distant Magnet, p. 37)

When looking at eastern and southern Europe we find that there was very little industry to absorb people from the rural areas. People tried to supplement their income by cottage industries and part-time work in their own districts or by moving within or outside their countries for seasonal or permanent work. In Carniola, peasants made hats, linens, lace rugs and did wood carvings in their homes. In Italy half a million unskilled workers moved from the southern provinces to the north to find work harvesting or in construction. Bulgarians from mountain districts went to neighboring plains or Turkish Thrace and Galicians to the wheat fields of the Hungarian plains. Skilled workers also moved from one country to another. Bulgarian carpenters and Serbian masons went searching for work in neighboring countries and other skilled workers went to German factories or worked building railroads. However, these jobs became scarce as Europe modernized. Some countries imposed restrictions on the movement of foreign craftsmen; mechanization, as in Hungary, reduced the number of work days for migrant laborers; and industrial cities were absorbing as many workers as possible. (The Distant Magnet, pp. 54–56) With the limited chance of finding work away from home and the conditions being what they were for those who did find work, the shores of North America became more and more inviting. In the late nineteenth century and the early part of the twentieth century we therefore have great numbers of people emigrating from the countries in eastern and southern Europe.

Persecution of religious and ethnic minority groups

Besides the economic hardships that many Europeans had to bear, ethnic origins or
religious affiliation put an extra burden on many people. Throughout the nineteenth century ethnic differences were important and with the gradual pride in one's nationality that began to emerge in the latter part of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century in countries of eastern Europe, open discrimination was seen. In Slovakia, Croatia and Transylvania, Magyar rule was discriminatory with local languages not being recognized, and higher education being, for the most part, the prerogative of the ruling class. In Romania and Russia the Jews suffered the greatest discrimination. In both countries their economic life was greatly restricted, higher education hampered and on many occasions acts of violence were performed on the Jews by ordinary people with the approval of the officials. In Russia after 1881, the Jews suffered restriction of landownership, liquor-selling, quotas in the universities and expulsion from Moscow. Between 1882 and 1906, the violence of several pogroms brought injury and death to many. *(The Distant Magnet, pp. 57–58)*

Two inventions

Two inventions of the nineteenth century were both a plus and a minus for the poorer classes of Europe. The steamship made the crossing of the Atlantic more pleasant. The sailing ships that transported the immigrants to North America were mostly freighters which brought raw materials such as timber, cotton and tobacco to Europe and returned with manufactured goods. These sailing ships had room in the holds for passengers because the manufactured goods took up less space than the bulky raw materials. However, the living conditions were primitive and because it took anywhere from one to three months to make the crossing, the immigrants suffered much.

In the 1860's, steamers replaced sailing ships on the Atlantic crossings. The business of transporting emigrants soon was dominated by a few large shipping companies. The competition between these companies helped to improve the conditions of traveling across the Atlantic and brought down the fares making it less of a financial burden to emigrate.

The development of the railroad gave many unskilled and skilled workers short-time work and eliminated the dangers and physical sufferings of the emigrants who had to make their way to the ports of departure, usually on foot. However, the railroad and the steamship were also the cause of suffering for many. Because of both the cargo steamers and the locomotive, foreign countries like the United States, Russia and India could compete on the European markets. Their importing of cheap grain brought disaster to the agricultural economies of England, Sweden and Germany east of the Elbe River in the 1860's and 1870's. Also, on the national scene, isolated areas became exposed to the merchandise from the industrial cities which because of lower prices, caused havoc among the small local producers and through the introduction of factory produced machinery, put the work of many artisans in jeopardy. Finally, the railroads brought to an end the carting business on which many people such as those in Carniola and Croatia and the
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Jews of Western Russia, depended for a living. (*The Distant Magnet*, pp. 55—56)

**Conclusion**

In this paper I have attempted to set down what I feel were the main causes of suffering and the resulting emigration of many Europeans to the United States during the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century. I have devoted most of this report to the increase in population, the agricultural conditions, and economic modernization in Europe for I feel that these were the main causes for the vast numbers of Europeans leaving their homelands. However, to end my paper here would be a mistake. I believe that each emigrant was affected by one or a combination of many of the causes mentioned in this paper but his real reason was that he wanted to improve his standard of living. He came to see his life as hopeless in his home country. The next step was to decide on emigration by which he believed he would obtain in his adopted country the freedom and chances to lead a fuller and more satisfying life.

**References**

ヨーロッパ人のアメリカ移住の原因
—人文学的考察—

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要 旨：1810年代から1920年代にかけて、約三千万のヨーロッパ人がアメリカへ移住した。この多大な移動の最大原因是、急激な人口の増加、封建的土地制度による圧迫、経済の近代化の3つが挙げられる。ここでは、これらの三大原因を考察し、さらに、さまざまな個人的および切実な理由や宗教的、人種的差別、さらに少数派に対する差別をも論じた。また、当時の二大発明であった汽船と鉄道について、その移民に及ぼした効果を考察した。移民は本来、歴史的事象であるが、この小論では、むしろヨーロッパの貧しい人々、如何ににして移住せざるを得なかったか、その原因について人文学的に考察した。