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The Eleventh Census Conspiracy

By DANIEL DE LEON

The Federal Census Act for 1880 provided for a report upon the condition of each person enumerated, *and whether employed or unemployed, and if unemployed, during what portion of the year.* In the Federal Census Act for 1890 this clause is conspicuous by its absence. Whether or not the omission is of significance, and if so, to what extent, a historic review of our recent census and labor statistics may help to determine.

Honestly collated and judiciously applied, statistics may, due allowance being made for their serious and unavoidable defects, point approximately to the truth. Our labor organizations shrewdly surmised that were publicity given to the actual facts concerning child and woman labor, hours of work, wages, enforced idleness, and kindred matters, much of the optimism that blocked the way to social reforms would vanish. Accordingly, at an early day they demanded official investigations of the condition of the people. The demand was apparently granted. In a number of states bureaus of labor statistics were actually established. But the reports that issued from these bureaus were inane and confused; with regard to some of the subjects on which light was especially desired, they were mostly silent; and, despite criticism, this course was adhered to with suspicious tenacity. Foremost among these suspicious omissions was that of all information touching the average enforced idleness among the wage receivers. A notable exception herein was made by the Massachusetts decennial census for 1875, issued by the Massachusetts bureau of labor statistics, of which Mr. Carroll D. Wright then was, and till recently continued to be, the chief. In it was found a table exhibiting the average number of days in which the wage receivers were employed in 260 of the principal industries of the state;¹ and although the report neglected to point out the important conclusions to which the table led, it enabled a careful computation to bring out the fact that the average idleness among those wage receivers amounted to almost exactly one fourth of their time—and equivalent

¹ [Compendium of the Census of Massachusetts for 1875, pp. 270–276.](#)

(584,690 being the number of skilled and unskilled laborers in Massachusetts) of 146,172 persons unemployed for an entire year.

This revelation brought on unlooked-for results. Misgivings had for some time been rife as to the rise and spread among us of a class of wholly unemployed. The amount of idleness shown to prevail in Massachusetts alone confirmed the popular apprehension, and spurred investigation. But the inquiry on this head was met at the threshold by the very Massachusetts decennial census for 1875 with what looked like a flat denial of the existence of such a class in any appreciable numbers. It declared:

“The tabulation of occupations should mathematically account for every man, woman and child in the State; practically, had it come within five thousand, it would have been considered accurate for census purposes; in reality, we had over twenty different clerks engaged upon the same tabulation, and the footings of the several parts of the whole showed a number in all occupations, considering conditions, as paupers, convicts, students, etc., for the time as people engaged in occupations only forty-three out of the way.”²

Here was a paradox. The hours of work in Massachusetts being on an average rather above than below ten a day, and the average idleness of the wage receivers being equivalent to an army of 146,172 persons unemployed for an entire year, a maximum possible of only 43 persons wholly unemployed was justly deemed preposterous. Somewhere there was error. An angry discussion arose on the subject, and extended beyond the State of Massachusetts; epithets were bandied; the Massachusetts bureau of labor statistics instituted a hurried re-investigation, and issued in 1878 an advance sheet of its tenth annual report in support of its position; a variety of reasons, not without weight, were adduced against the reliableness of this last investigation; the public mind was aroused and anxious to arrive at the facts; and the Tenth Federal Census Bill coming up for consideration at the approaching session of Congress, the disputants, it seems, decided by mutual consent to appeal to that body. This appeal took the shape of a memorial; it was signed by over 3,000 citizens; and bore date of January 28, 1879. It prayed, among other things, that, “in taking the census of 1880 report be made of every person, whether employed or idle, and, as near as might be, of the number of days in the next preceding year, in which such person was employed.”³ The joint congressional committee on the census adopted at once the gist of the memorial by incorporating the words, “and whether employed or unemployed, and if unemployed during what portion of the year” into the body of the 17th section of the census bill; and in that form the bill became a part of the law of the land.

² *Ib.* pp. 10–11.

³ Sen. mis. doc. No. 19, 50th Congress, 2d session.

Under this law the census of 1880 was taken. Its ponderous tomes fill up shelves. Yet search as one may, they vouchsafe not the slightest information directly on the burning question of idleness. Read by the light of the preceding events, the language of the memorialists of 1879 bore a specific meaning; and both the memorial itself and the discussion from which it issued pointedly indicated to the census officials not only the intent of the amendment to section 17 of the census act, but also the importance attached to execution. Nevertheless, the mandate of the people of the United States, in Congress assembled, was left to lie a dead-letter upon the statute book.

The absence of all information on the unemployed in the census of 1880, so far from allaying the popular misgivings on this head, or hushing the discussion which the so-called pessimists had started upon the publication of the Massachusetts decennial census for 1875, confirmed the one, and stimulated the other. Aggravatingly silent as were the pages of the federal census directly upon the subject of the unemployed, a careful investigation of their contents showed, nevertheless, that, whilst 3,837,112⁴ persons were given as engaged in manufactures and mining,⁵ the whole number reported as actually employed at those industries was only 2,732,595,⁶ and that, consequently, there were 1,104,517, or nearly one third of the whole number, entirely unaccounted for, i.e. idle. Again, the Tenth Federal Census reported 17,392,099 persons as belonging to the industrial classes.⁷ Deducting from this number the 3,837,112 engaged in manufacturers {manufacturing?} and mining there remain 14,554,987 to be heard from. Upon this mass of humanity the census shed not a ray of light. But the condition of the manufacturing and mining employees supplied the deficiency by affording a starting point, and the idleness among the industrial classes in the country was accordingly computed justly as equivalent to the full time of at least 5,000,000 persons.

Other sources furnished confirmatory data—all the more suggestive because on their faces far short of the truth—and added fuel to the discussion. In 1879, 1884, and 1887 the Massachusetts bureau of labor statistics issued its 10th, 15th, and 18th reports. The paradox presented by the Massachusetts decennial census for 1875 was, in each instance, essentially repeated. The lowering of wages,⁸ extreme penury,⁹ hunger,¹⁰

⁴ Tenth Federal Census, vol. I, p. 703.

⁵ *Ib.* vol. II, p. 3.

⁶ *Ib.* vol. I, p. 703.

⁷ Footnote entry omitted by error in original.—*R.B.*

⁸ Fifteenth Annual Report, p. 139.

⁹ *Ib.* pp. 65-92.

¹⁰ *Ib.* 117.

suffering through overwork,¹¹ pinching economy,¹² patient submission to unjust treatment,¹³ 28,508 skilled and unskilled persons unemployed in 1878 at a season when hands are usually in greatest demand,¹⁴ and an average loss if 4.11 months each during one year by not less than 241,589 wage receivers,¹⁵—sure symptoms of an overstocked labor market—were all candidly admitted and recorded, while, at the same time, only 822 persons were reported idle in the State during the whole of 1885.¹⁶

Data like these, gleaned from the Tenth Federal Census itself, as well as from other statistical compilations could not but throw into a suspicious light the work of the Census Office of 1880. They confirmed the evidences of men's senses everywhere that pointed not only to a distressing amount of idleness among the wage receivers, but also to the actual existence in our midst of a vast class of persons wholly unemployed—without taking into account the swarms of our homeless and houseless, of whose proportions the enormous number of 4,800,472 cheap lodgings, and of lodgings furnished in the station houses of the city of New York alone, during one single year,¹⁷ gives a hint. Broad statements about the average earnings of the wage receivers were, in themselves, an information sufficiently imperfect. Such statements, however, made without an accompanying and truthful exhibit of the number of those who received nothing, or next to nothing, were clearly understood to be needless, nay, misleading, in so far as they were meant to throw light upon the condition of the people. Accordingly, to ascertain, as accurately as might be, the extent of idleness among the wage receivers, the existence or non-existence of a class of wholly unemployed persons in the country, and, if such there was found to be, as nearly as possible its actual dimensions, became a popular wish that grew and gathered volume. To this end, recourse was once more had to a memorial to Congress. The memorial of January 28, 1879, was therein incorporated in full; the former reasons for an inquiry into the amount of idleness among the people were re-affirmed; and complaint was made of the neglect with which the Census Office of 1880 had treated the provision of the census act upon that subject. The memorial was signed by the Hon. William D. Kelley, a member of the House of Representatives from Pennsylvania, and the Hon. Eugene Hale, United States Senator from Maine, among others; and was, by the latter, presented to Congress on December 17, 1888.¹⁸ Early this year the act for the

¹¹ *Ib.* pp. 70–90.

¹² *Ib.* p. 72.

¹³ *Ib.* p. 93.

¹⁴ Tenth Annual Report, p. 6.

¹⁵ Eighteenth Annual Report, p. 266.

¹⁶ *Ib.* p. 156.

¹⁷ Report of the Police Department of the city of New York, December 31, 1888, p. 76.

¹⁸ Sen. Mis. doc. No. 19, 50th Congress, 2d Session.

census of 1890 was passed and approved; the memorial presented by Senator Hale was in its vital respects disregarded; and the important clause requiring a report upon the condition of each person enumerated, *and whether employed or unemployed, and if unemployed, during what portion of the year*, which had found its way into the act for the Tenth Federal Census, vanished from the act for the Eleventh Federal Census “leaving not a wreck behind.”

In the interpretation of amended documents it is a fundamental principle that the insertion of new or the elimination of old matter is of prime importance to their understanding. What, until the passage of the act for the census of 1890, might have seemed unexplainable in some instances, paradoxical in others, and vaguely suspicious in all, now acquires unmistakable meaning. The utter silence on the subject of the unemployed by the State bureaus with the exception of that of Massachusetts in the decennial census for 1875; the latter's change of front, as shown by its persistent effort to minimize in its subsequent reports the fact of which it had unwittingly, it would seem, allowed a glimpse in that year; the disregard paid by the federal census officials to the mandate in the act for the census of 1880, were but successive manifestations of a deliberate plan to misrepresent, and if need be, to wholly suppress, the truth on the actual condition of the people. The agencies that inspired the wording of the act for the census of 1890 had learned from experience the difficulty of systematic falsification. Conceal as they might the facts in 1880, the curtain could not be drawn so close but that it allowed an impertinent ray of light to wink through the folds; and, moreover, a second violation of the law, in the face of the indignation aroused by the first offense, might not fare so well. The elimination from the census act for 1890 of the clause requiring an investigation of the idleness among the people was a shrewd move, and is but the culmination of a long planned conspiracy.

With the collapse of the Malthusian doctrine as a divine justification for the wretchedness of the many and the dazzling wealth of the few, the need of some other breastwork against progress was promptly felt by the plutocratic interests of Europe. As a defensive barrier, the Malthusian doctrine had revealed inherent weakness. It was raised upon the admission of wide-spread want among the people; and from that point of vantage the social reformers could, and did, play their artillery with destructive effect upon the enemy. That grave defect was to be avoided. It was urgent that new defences should be thrown up upon lines which denied the prevalence of involuntary poverty, and asserted a state of increasing popular well-being. The complete change of base involved in such tactics did not hinder their adoption. The new breastworks were raised upon the new plan; and, manning them, there arose a novel Paladin—the *statistician*, armed cap-a-pie with manufactured figures and diagrams to do battle for plutocracy. Such was the experience of Europe, and such were

the implements of warfare put in the hands of the Mulhalls, the Giffens, the Levis, and minor mannikins. But capital is international; of recent years, moreover, its exodus to the United States has been prodigious. Accordingly, here also, where the counterparts of the Mulhalls, the Giffens, and the Levis have begun to be needed and to show their heads, the improved and tempered instruments of plutocratic warfare against progress are likewise forging and to be forged. For this purpose the people's money is to be taken, and the people's will to be thwarted. Will the conspiracy succeed?

New York.

Transcribed and edited by Robert Bills for the official Web site of the Socialist Labor Party of America.

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