

THE STUDY OF THE HISTORY OF SETTLEMENT*

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One of the fundamental practical tasks of geography is the study of world population. Quite a few works of modern geographers deal with population problems; for instance, in France we have studies by Vidal de la Blache,¹ Damangeon,² Sorre,³ Lucien Febvre.⁴ At the seventeenth International Geographical Congress held at Washington, D.C., in 1952, George Cressey, at the time president of the International Geographical Union, took as the topic for his address: "Land for 2.4 Billion Neighbors." For years the International Geographical Union had a commission on Population, later a special commission on a world Population Map. At the eighteenth International Geographical Congress, the special commission presented the new World Population Map on the scale 1:16 million. In addition to geographers, specialists in demography recently have written a large number of studies, the most recent book in French being *Histoire générale de la population mondiale*⁵ which came out in 1961.

The population map and other studies show that the earth is very irregularly peopled. On the one hand, some areas are overpopulated; most of the inhabitants are unable to get an adequate amount of food. On the other hand, regions are sparsely inhabited and would be able to support many more people if they were developed. There are, of course, areas where conditions are not favorable to human life: the tropical rain forest, the dry lands, the polar zones and the mountain regions, but among the areas with the same physical conditions, there are great differences in population density. Nowadays, within the temperate climates there are no longer virgin lands which could be occupied by settlers. Therefore, one of the problems of the geographer is to make a survey of land use throughout the world. The population, however, depends on land use only among people who possess only a primary economy, that of depending on agriculture for their living; as soon as a higher level is reached, *i.e.*, as soon as trade or industry are introduced, a given area is able to support a larger population. Switzerland, for instance, would be very overpopulated if the inhabitants had to rely only on agriculture for their living. On the contrary, the country is now importing a large number of foreign laborers to make up for the scarcity of local labor. This is due to the fact that Switzerland is now depending more on industry, trade and finance, than on agriculture.

* This paper was originally submitted for last year's publication honoring Dr. John E. Kesseli. Space limitations prevented its inclusion in that issue.

¹ F. Vidal de la Blache, "La répartition des hommes sur le globe," in *Principes de géographie humaine*, Paris, 1941, 3rd ed., pp. 19-100.

² Albert Demangeon, "La question du surpeuplement," in *Annales de Géographie*, XLVII, March 15, 1938, pp. 113-127.

³ Max. Sorre, *Les fondements biologiques de la géographie humaine*, Paris, 1943-1952, 3 volumes.

⁴ Lucien Febvre, *La terre et l'évolution humaine, introduction géographique à l'histoire*, "L'Évolution de l'humanité," vol. 4, Paris, 1922.

⁵ Marcel Reinhard and André Armengaud, *Histoire générale de la population mondiale*, Paris, 1961.

AIMS OF THE STUDY OF SETTLEMENTS

The study of the geographer has a twofold aim: first he must analyze the distribution of population, not only the statistics and the density of the settlement in each region, but also the forms, the types, the features of the settlements. His study must further explain the reasons for the present distribution by taking into account all factors that have contributed to it; then the geographer must compare the various regions of the earth and show which regions are able to support more population and which are overpopulated. He should, by comparisons between various regions of the world, further suggest means to improve the situation. In some instances migrations may be necessary, but in others a country which at present is overpopulated might feed the same population adequately by introducing modern methods of farming or by creating industries. In the countries of old civilization, the present patterns of settlement, especially the rural settlements, are the result of secular experiments for obtaining the greatest return under the local conditions. New countries will need centuries to reach such a development, and it is possible that they might never reach it, since conditions are changing. This may be seen in studies which geographers have made on regions that have been recently settled.⁶

It is evident that statistics alone cannot give all the needed information. To show that a region is thinly settled does not demonstrate that this region is subject to development. Differences in climate, relief, natural resources may account for very different levels of population density. There are, however, many instances where two regions which are almost identical from the physical point of view present considerable differences in regard to population density, and yet the less populated one would not be able to receive any immigration without a deep or even revolutionary change in the present settlement pattern and economic system. Thus, until the end of last century, the Great Valley of California was nothing but a steppe. At the foot of the mountains a few colonists had settled and had planted fruit trees; in the plain the only possible crops were cereals; wide areas were waste land. Population was sparse. Since the beginning of this century irrigation has been developed, and today the Great Valley is covered with orchards, vineyards, vegetable fields, fat pastures.⁷ The number of inhabitants has passed from a few hundred in 1840 to more than one and one-half million in 1950 and cities such as Fresno and Stockton which did not exist one hundred years ago and which have thriven only through the development of the valley have today respectively 133,000 and 86,000 inhabitants. Many industries have been introduced and have developed, and today the Great Valley of California is probably one of the most prosperous regions in the world. It presents much similarity with the Po Valley in Italy.

Not far from it, in the Sierra Nevada, some places resemble valleys and high plateaux in the Jura mountain in Switzerland and in France:

⁶ Isaiah Bowman, *The Pioneer Fringe*, New York, 1931; *Pioneer Settlement*, New York, 1932; *Limits of Land Settlement, Preliminary Report on Present Day Possibilities*, Mémoire Américain No. 2, Conférence permanente des Hautes Etudes internationales, Xe Session, Paris, 1937.

⁷ Henri Baulig, "La Californie," in *Géographie Universelle*, Vidal de la Blache, XIII, Amérique Septentrionale, II Etats Unis, Paris, 1936.

coniferous forest, pastures, rough climate, much snow in winter, relatively hot summers, scanty natural resources, and restricted possibilities for agriculture. But whereas in the Jura region there are everywhere farms, towns, and even a few cities, the greatest part of the Sierra Nevada is a vacant land. The existence of gold, silver, and other sorts of mines has determined the sites of a few towns; others came up along the lines of the transcontinental railroads; a few isolated houses have been built on the side of the highways which cross the mountains; there are occasional farms, especially in the vicinity of the roads, and that is all. In California the counties which are situated entirely in the Sierra Nevada are very thinly populated: there are 0.5 inhabitants per square mile in Alpine County, 2.3 in Sierra County, 3.5 in Mariposa County, 4.1 in Plumas County, 6.3 in Tuolumne County.⁸ Nobody thinks, however, about settling those wide regions (Alpine County covers an area of 723 square miles, Sierra County 958, Mariposa County 1455, Tuolumne County 2275, and Plumas County 2570⁹), and with the present situation settlements which might be started would probably sooner or later be failures since, while it is easy to get colonists to settle in regions with pleasant climates, it is much less simple to colonize less favoured regions.

Everywhere that regions of little attractiveness are populated, their settlement has been very slow and the process has lasted for centuries. It is not merely for pleasure that men have gone to live in the mountains; it is because they found there some advantages. The valleys of the Alps were settled very early because they offered shelters easy to defend against barbarians who might try to attack them. The high valleys and plateaux of the Jura, which were covered with thick forests until the Middle Ages, attracted monks who were looking for solitude; they founded hermitages, convents, abbeys, and, to get food, they cleared the surroundings and cultivated the soil. In order to settle the high regions of the Jura, the lords granted special privileges to men who would come and settle there: special freedoms, exemption from taxes and military service. These were solemnly confirmed in charters. For instance, in 1384, the Bishop of Basel, Imer de Ramstein, granted to the inhabitants of the high plateau which henceforth was called "Franches Montagnes" (Free Mountains) exemption from any tax.¹⁰

Today the inhabitants of the mountains and the inhabitants of the countryside do not enjoy any special privilege; they must pay the same taxes and are subject to the same military obligations as the city dwellers. The latter have an easier life, earn their living with less effort, enjoy more entertainment, and find it easier to give an education to their children. It is therefore no wonder that there is a constant migration from the mountains to the lowlands and from the rural areas to the cities.

It is the study of settlement in regions of old civilization, the analysis of the facts that led to the full development of the areas, that will provide the geographer with the means to advise what should be done to help in

⁸ Figures taken from *U. S. Census of Population, 1960*. Also *World Almanac, 1962*, New York, p. 281

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ P. O. Bessire, *Histoire du Jura bernois et de l'ancien évêché de Bâle*, Porrentruy, 1935.

eliminating overpopulation either by favoring emigration or by improving the living conditions of the residents, to discover regions which would be able to support a large number of inhabitants, and to help settling them.

SOURCES AND METHODS OF STUDY

There are many types of settlements which can be classified according to the occupations of their inhabitants: hunting, fishing, agriculture, trade, industry, mining, administration, etc. At present most settlements have diversified functions, but since agriculture is at the base of all civilizations the study of rural settlements is the most significant and the most useful. It is now easy to make a distinction between rural and urban settlements, but it is quite difficult to make it for the past. In countries of old civilization, however, except for a few cities the settlements were agricultural; therefore, by studying the history of rural settlement in ancient times we study at the same time the history of settlements as a whole.

Four sciences contribute to the study of the history of settlement of a region in a country of old civilization such as Switzerland: history, archaeology, toponomastics, and geography. There are other sciences, more or less connected with one or the other of the four mentioned ones, which may also give some information or confirm hypotheses; they include, among others, anthropology, ethnology, philology, ethnography, jurisprudence, and soil science. Let us see what each of the four main sciences may contribute.

a. History

History, taken in its restricted sense, *i. e.*, the branch of knowledge dealing with events that have taken place in the world's existence as described in written papers, is generally the most accredited source and even it gives only scanty indications. First the historical times start rather late in Switzerland. The earliest mention of Geneva, for instance, is found in Caesar's "De Bello Gallico," Caesar having come to that city in 58 B. C. At that time it was already a fairly important locality, and it had not reached that development in a few years only.

Furthermore the historians are chiefly interested in striking events, conquests, battles, or notable men, and much less in civilization; in regard to religion, they will deal with the lives of saints rather than with the establishment of churches and parishes. Only a few of the historians of antiquity are of any use for the history of settlement: solely Caesar Tacitus, Orosius, Dion Cassius, Ammianus Marcellinus give information about settlements in Gaul. For the early Middle Ages, Gregory of Tours and Fredegarius offer some useful material. From the XIth century onward, sources are more numerous. The archives contain chartularies, registers of benefices, and chronicles which include names of many settlements; but the origin of the places is not indicated and often can only be arrived at by deduction. For many settlements the first written mentions are only found centuries after the foundation. This situation remains the same in modern times; many place names were first written down officially when detailed official surveys were published. Historical studies and documents should not be neglected, but they are not sufficient to supply all information for the history of settlement.

b. Archaeology

This is a very useful source of information for the early periods of settlement; prehistorical and the beginnings of the historical times. Archaeologists are, like geographers, men who make field studies, and often geographical factors have led them to important discoveries. The work of the archaeologist has only recently become systematic; the archaeological maps give useful indications, but they show scattered finds, and the settlements that archaeologists have surveyed are very few in comparison with the settlements that must have existed. Nevertheless archaeology may add accurate data.

c. Toponomastics

This is a rather recent science, though the explanation of the meaning of place names is very old. Many examples may be found in the Bible. In the Genesis, for instance, we read: "And the herdsmen of Gerar did strive with Isaac's herdsmen, saying The water *is* ours: and he called the name of the well Esek; because they strove with him. . . . And he removed from thence, and digged another well; and for that they strove not: and he called the name of it Rehoboth; and he said, For now the LORD hath made room for us, and we shall be fruitful in the land."¹¹ And in the New Testament: "And they bring him unto the place Golgotha, which is, being interpreted, The place of a skull."¹² Virgil tells us that Aeneas founded a city in the Latium and named it Lavinium after his wife's name.

Throughout the Middle Ages and until now, many writers have looked for the significance of place names, and sometimes they altered the spelling of some names that they did not understand in order to be able to explain their meaning. Legends have been created to support theories, and when cities or states have chosen coats of arms they have often based them on doubtful hypotheses of origin. It is only since the middle of last century that toponomastics has become a science and has started to work methodically and systematically. It has already developed some general principles. In 1938, the first international congress of toponomastics was held at Paris. It focused the eye of the world on that science. Toponomastics is now a great help in the study of the history of settlement.

d. Geography

Geographers have studied the forms of the rural settlements and noticed two different groups: the isolated farmsteads and the clusters or villages. In France, at the beginning of the century, when French geography started to flourish with such men as Vidal de la Blache, Demangeon, Arbos, Sorre, Musset, and Blanchard, studies were made in the different fields of the science. Demangeon undertook the study of rural settlement forms and defined the principles of his study: a classification based neither on the material used in the building, nor on the external aspect, but on the function, the relation between men, animals, and things, and he gave a first synthesis for France. In 1925 he presented at the International Geographical Congress at Cairo a paper on the influence of agrarian forms on the

¹¹ Genesis, 26:20, 22.

¹² Mark, 15:22.

types of settlement in Western Europe.¹³ A Commission on Rural Settlement was then constituted; it held meetings at the next congresses. In 1927 Demangeon himself published his geography of rural settlement.¹⁴ In local studies geographers generally deal with the history of settlement based on geographical factors, but geography by itself is not able to supply all data.

As already stated other sciences should be able to give useful data for the history of settlement; anthropology, philology, and jurisprudence, for instance, should, it seems, be able to learn the origin of the peoples who settled first and cleared the land, but so far they have done very little work on historical problems. Soil science has furnished some information on the age of land clearing in some areas, but this can be done only for isolated spots as the process is rather complicated. As a whole, those sciences may only be used to support and to confirm hypotheses formulated by the other disciplines.

As we see, no science is able by itself to establish the history of settlement but all of them can give useful data. It is the task of the geographer to utilize those data, to combine them, to confirm them by taking into account geographical factors such as relief, hydrography, climate, vegetation.

Taking a region, the geographer will gather all data that he may find. Then, for each period, he will put them down on a map. Let us take an example: the period of Roman occupation in Switzerland. History tells us that in 58 B. C. the Helvetic people, after having burnt their towns, villages, and farms, left their country in order to settle in Gaul, but, beaten by Caesars's army, they had to return and rebuild their homes; they were then under subjection by the Romans. Only a few cities are mentioned. Toponomastics shows some place names of Roman origin or of earlier origin. It informs us further about the naming process of the villas in Helvetia; as in Gaul, the name of the founder or the family of the founder received the suffix -acum; thus Martigny comes from Martinius + acum, *i. e.*, Martin's villa. Most names ending in y have such an origin. Archaeology comes in to support the thesis; if any object or ruin of Roman origin has been found on the spot, a place with a name ending in y is confirmed as being of Roman origin. There will remain a number of places, the names of which appear to be of Roman origin, but where no archaeological finds have been made. The geographer studies the local environmental conditions and is able to decide whether or not the places are of Roman origin. He then may be able to draw a map showing approximately what was the extent of the land settled in Roman times.

CONCLUSION

The study of the history of settlement has not only a value for History as a whole, but it may explain the present distribution of popula-

¹³ Albert Demangeon, "De l'influence des régimes agraires sur les modes d'habitat dans l'Europe occidentale," in *Compte rendu du Congrès international de Géographie du Caire*, Le Caire, 1925.

¹⁴ Albert Demangeon, "La géographie de l'habitat rural," in *Annales de Géographie*, XXXVI, 1827, pp. 1-23.

tion on earth. It is therefore of great interest for specialists concerned with colonization problems.

The history of settlement in countries of old civilization, such as Switzerland, has to be made by geographers; they will make the synthesis of the data furnished by history, archaeology and toponomastics. The first step is the local studies; when enough local studies will have been made, it will be possible to produce a complete history of settlement in a given country.¹⁵

¹⁵ (Editor's Note) M. Perret has published two papers utilizing the method he outlines: "Le peuplement du Pays d'Erguel." *Regio Basiliensis*, Vol. I, No. 2 (1960), pp. 153-161, and "Localités suisses tirant leur origine de domaines gallo-romains," *Geographica Helvetica*, Vol. 15 (1960), pp. 248-251.