

Categories of Rural Workers in the Late Nineteenth Century

Abstract

Even in the late nineteenth century, the majority of Germans lived in towns of fewer than 2,000 inhabitants; agriculture continued to be a major employer, especially in the east. This passage, drawn from a reform proposal published in the 1890s, shows that despite growing mechanization, farming involved long working days and depended heavily on the rhythms of the season. Various categories of rural workers received vastly differing terms of employment, wages, and provisions for room and board. This reformer believed that the rural worker's increasingly rare integration into the farmer's household constituted a moral threat—above all in the case of migrant workers drawn seasonally from outside Germany's borders.

Source

Above all, in order to adequately appreciate the employment of farmhands, we deem the size of the agricultural operation to be highly significant. The statistics show the same thing. Southwestern Germany has the greatest number of farmhands; this indicates that today this category of worker fits better into operations in which the farmer himself usually works alongside [the others], where the farm laborers still sit at the dinner table with the employer. In this type of setting, the farmer's son does not consider it beneath him to take a position as a farmhand. The situation is quite different on large estates. Here, the farm laborers are sent off to the servants' room. Preparing the meals is usually left up to a hired hand. There is no doubt that under such circumstances the catering for the farmhands may be—and indeed often is—very poor. The servants' board costs almost 60% of their entire income [Krämer]. Accordingly, farmhands place a very high emphasis precisely on food. [...]

So employers have proceeded, often compelled by the presumptuousness and coarseness of the young people, to offer a fixed compensation, differing according to location and custom, and to have board provided in the home of a working-class family. Apart from that, the farm laborers' board is also provided for on the farm by a “meal master” (dairyman, steward, head farm laborer) in return for a fixed payment in kind.

Through this practice, however, the high social significance attached to the employment of farmhands can become illusory. For, particularly in regions with a greater farming population (where the possibility of recruiting farm laborers is still highest), the farmhands' position is merely a social transitional phase, and is meant to complement and complete the domestic training of the young worker or farmer. Now this has become much more difficult, as the farmhands are fed away from the farm with a working-class family and might not even live on the farm itself except when guarding the stables, a task that is reassigned every week.

But, if the young farmhand is continuously removed from the care of a benevolent employer during his free time, then the class of farm laborers no longer remains what it was and what it ought to be, as the large estates in northern Germany clearly reveal. They degenerate more and more into immorality. Thus, it is not surprising that employers increasingly resort to married farmhands, though they are more costly, or enlist permanent laborers.

Here, it is noteworthy that one cannot apply the yardstick used for the situation in central Germany to

those areas where the workday still extends from 5:00 or 5:30 in the morning until sunset, i.e., to the eastern provinces. There, the farm laborer and the farm girl have the easiest work of all estate dwellers. In fact, the calculation goes as follows: rising at 3 a.m. and feeding the horses, going to the field at 5:30 a.m., ½ hour breakfast, 1½ hour lunch break, whereby ½ hour for harnessing, un-harnessing, and feeding the horses, etc., is quite common, ½ hour supper break, and then wandering home from the field at 9:00 p.m. or later, finally eating until 10 o'clock; that adds up to 18-19 work hours including 2 hours' rest. Accordingly, this amounts to 16-17 hours of work and is still supposed to be the most agreeable job? But working the fields in effect does not place heavy demands on the employees' work capacity, as many of the farm implements are equipped with seats. At harvest time, the farm laborer rides on the saddled horse of his team of four. Given the size and relatively extensive operation of the estates, the distances covered from the fields to the farmhouse are often very large. But, if the farmhand is supposed to help with mowing the grass in the summer, he does not have to look after his horses. Finally, one always hears about the long working hours in the summer, but nobody ever talks about winter work. During this season, work in central Germany begins at 6:00 a.m. and also ends at 6:00 p.m., with 3 hours set aside for mealtimes. On the estates in eastern Germany, even on the shortest days, work is restricted to daylight hours, that is, from 7:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.; all the same, only the supper break is skipped. Having said all that, it is nevertheless desirable that working conditions in the East become easier, if only to deprive Social Democracy of the 17- and 18-hour workday as an effective means of agitation. [...]

The permanent laborer without property indisputably occupies a kind of farm-laborer position vis-à-vis the lord of the manor. The system of permanent laborers first developed after the abolition of hereditary serfdom and is a result of freedom of movement. The station of permanent laborer constitutes a contract with the laborer's entire family. He is not employed as personal servant but is reserved for farm work. The system of permanent laborers still carries, as someone expressed it, the eggshells of estate subservience, as the permanent laborer is more or less isolated from the free competition of the labor market. His entire situation is dependent on personal performance and the mercy of the landowner. The system of hiring permanent laborers entails that the lord still gives orders in everyone's interest without damage to the individual's personal sense of honor and duty. For usually the permanent laborer has the right, to give one example, to keep a cow, two pigs, two mother geese, 5-6 chickens, etc. He enjoys free room and heating and free doctor's services and medicine. Besides a fixed allowance of potatoes and grain, he also receives for his disposal some plot for gardening and growing potatoes on the estate fields. By virtue of the threshing right, the permanent laborer is allowed to thresh the grain produced on the estate in return for a share of the yield. It is not unusual that he undertakes part of the harvesting for a specified amount of the harvest. For these benefits, the permanent laborer and his wife have to participate in the work of farming day in and day out. He also has to provide a third laborer, the so-called *Scharwerker*^[1] or day laborer. Most of the time, the permanent laborer's own children, once they have had confirmation, are used, or a boy or girl aged 14-18 is hired for this purpose. [...]

Disadvantageous for the permanent laborer is his great dependence. The permanent laborer has no future; he cannot become anything other than what he is, no matter how loyally he has worked on the estate year after year. If he quits his position on one farm, he has to sign on for work at the next one under similar conditions. We see how reluctantly the young worker^[2] serves as a farm laborer. The accommodation provided for him by the permanent laborer, however, affords him the opportunity to marry early. The day laborer always constitutes an ever-increasing expense for the permanent laborer and is often difficult to find.

After confirmation, the son of a rural worker prefers to get hired as a young farmhand or stable boy over living as a hard laborer in the decrepit permanent laborers' quarters and working on the estate fields together with the women for low wages and often poor board. Thus, things have gone so far that agents in Berlin are busy sending proletarian characters, failed young merchants and artisans from the city, to the permanent laborers in the countryside. It is needless to elaborate any further on how worthless these

labor forces are, how easily they transplant false Social Democratic doctrines to the country.

Therefore, it is in the interest of the permanent laborers to produce as many children as possible in order to have continuous replacements for hard labor from their own family. But this entails at the same time creating a great number of persons with only questionable prospects for a solid livelihood. [...]

Finally, the migrant workers or *Sachsengänger*^[3] are one of the most recent institutions of the rural labor system. Their existence is founded in the peculiarity of the agricultural operation. With the boom in the growing of sugar beets, the demand for labor is disproportionately high in the summer as opposed to the winter. [...] As a result, quite early on laborers were brought in from Eichsfelde, from the Neumark, and from Silesia for summer work. But the more the sugar beet industry expanded, the greater was the demand for labor, so that nowadays every spring droves of workers migrate to the sugar beet growing regions, only to return to their homes after the harvest. [...]

The processions of migrant workers usually consist of 50–100 men who converge in the recruitment areas, for instance, in the Warthebruch, under the leadership of a so-called *Vorschnitter*.^[4] Their object is to carry out the work and harvest operations on the sugar beet fields, usually from early April to late November, according to a contract concluded between the foreman and the sugar beet farmer. Once they are away from home, these foremen normally take on the role of supervisor over the teams of laborers they have recruited. They wield a lot of power over their people, especially if the distribution of work details and the payment of wages is left exclusively to them. [...]

Migrant workers usually get, apart from wage payments, an advance, free travel and room, heating, and 25 pounds of potatoes per person delivered on a weekly basis. Most of the time, the lords hire a female cook. Usually, she is the wife of the foreman, unless the people's mistrust renders impossible this kind—or any similar form—of economically suitable arrangement to satisfy their needs. Wages differ from one region to the next and according to local circumstances. [...] It would be a reasonable reflection of actual conditions if we [...] estimated the income of girls and women at 370–420 marks and that of the men at 495–580 marks. Of that, each migrant worker manages to save at least 150 marks per summer, but there are also some people who, at a wage of only 1 mark, put away 210 marks or more for the winter. [...]

Despite the regulations passed in Prussia, we still frequently find single persons living together in communal quarters and bedrooms at the foreman's house, and in many German states this is virtually a universal phenomenon. [...]

In every place where large masses of migrant workers are gathered, one can observe how low these people rank in terms of their moral conceptions. Quite often the *Sachsengänger* deceive themselves about the lowering of their living conditions over the course of the summer. For in order to put away a hefty sum of money, their nutrition is often utterly inadequate, especially when they prepare meals themselves. Due to their irregular way of life, the temptation to drink is never far away. Just how easily not only the Polish and Russian migrant workers succumb to this temptation can be observed in both sexes on their days off. But nothing destroys the moral strength of a person more than concubinage and excessive consumption of alcohol.

NOTES

[1] *Scharwerker*: hard laborer—trans.

[2] i.e., the *Scharwerker*—trans.

[3] *Sachsengänger*: people living in Bohemia who went to Saxony for seasonal farm work—trans.

[4] Foreman for harvest workers—trans.

Source: Ernst Fiedler, *Die Arbeiterfrage auf dem Lande und Vorschläge zur Reform des ländlichen Arbeiterwesens*. Leipzig, 1898, pp. 19–25, 37–41; reprinted in Gerhard A. Ritter and Jürgen Kocka, eds., *Deutsche Sozialgeschichte 1870–1914. Dokumente und Skizzen*, 3rd ed. Munich: C. H. Beck, 1982, pp. 192–95.

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