

Refuted by himself

By Bracke

We have an erudite Minister of Agriculture. If you doubt it spend a half-penny on the *Journal Official* of 16th of March last. You will find therein, spread over thirty-nine columns, a speech delivered by M. Ruau, on the 14th of March 1909, at the *Musée Social* under the auspices of the French National Federation of Friendly Societies (Fédération Nationale de la Mutualité Française). You will not repent of your extravagance because there is something in the speech that will amuse you. In the first place notice at the foot of each page, the reference to the numerous books the author has made use of. There Marx's *Capital* is quoted a dozen times, Kautsky's *Agrarian Question* is also referred to; as is Frederick Engels, Vandervelde and David. It is quite a Socialist Library. In the text of the speech you will at each step come across the same names, and also those of Gatti, Jaurès, and others, including even our Limoges Congress, not to speak of the Congresses of the French *Parti Ouvrier*.

What an honour!

The fact is that the speech is entirely designed to "demonstrate" (against the Socialists) that capitalist concentration does not operate at all in agricultural property, and that "the present state of small property is flourishing", and that even "with regard to the future growth there is reason to believe in an increase in its vitality".

I do not know to which of his subordinates M. Ruau (having to deliver a speech) gave the order to make the discourse he read. But I know that he must be a good practical joker. He took it for granted that his chief, happy to find himself at the head of all those quotations from books which he had never read, and perhaps never opened, would not notice anything wrong. And he has amused himself by causing his chief to give in support of his statements, arguments which prove exactly the opposite of his assertions. His joke has succeeded, and doubtless he laughed up his sleeve to know that his minister, with all the "side" and self-sufficiency of a man sure of his facts, had "found" that the number of small proprietors does not diminish, by reading to his astounded hearers the following statistics:

"An enquiry in July 1908, made by the Ministry of Finances, gave as 5,505,464 the total number of agricultural proprietors, which is thus split up according to the area exploited:

	1908
Very small property (less than one hectare)	2,087,851
Small property (1 to 10 hectares)	2,523,713
Medium property (10 to 40 hectares)	745,862
Great property (40 to 100 hectares)	118,497
Very great property (100 hectares upwards)	29,541

The corresponding figures for 1892 are

Very small property	2,235,405
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Small property	2,617,557
Medium property	711,118
Great property	105,391
Very great property	32,280

This comparison appears to show that small property has increased sensibly by 2,845 exploitations, as much to the detriment of 'very small' property as to that of the 'medium' and 'great', and that the 'very great' property has slightly increased by 2,739 exploitations, to the detriment of 'great' and perhaps a little, very little, at the expense of the 'medium'. The development of 'very great' property noticeable from 1882 to 1892 has stopped in order to give place to that of 'small' property: the slight increase in 'very great' property will have continued, but this time it clearly appears that the movement does not touch 'small' property at all.

The most reliable statistics tend therefore to prove that there exists no movement toward the absorption of small rural property."

All this beautiful reasoning had but one misfortune, for without taking the trouble to find a pencil and work it out, it is seen at a glance that the 2,523,713 of 1908 are *less* (and not *more*) than the 2,617,558 of 1892. Consequently instead of "increasing" from 1892 to 1908, "small" property has "diminished sensibly by 93,245 exploitations".

That is what the Minister of Agriculture has been pompously giving forth at the *Musée Social*.

It is true that a friend, a little better at arithmetic, has apparently warned him that he was giving arms against himself. A week after he sought to retrace his steps by giving (*Journal Officiel* of 22nd of March) a so-called *erratum* of his speech, which, so far from confirming, still refutes his thesis.

M. Ruau, in that *erratum*, recognises that 93,000 exploitations less is a decrease. But, says he, there is only question here of the element "number"; if we consider the superficial area "the facts change entirely".

Let us see, then. The minister gives us now, as the figures of "very small" property (sterile and uncultivated land not included) super,

for 1892	1,243,200 hectares
for 1908	1,228,597 hectares

As figures regarding the superficial area of "small" property

for 1892	10,383,300 hectares
for 1908	11,559,342 hectares

And he cries triumphantly:

"Thus 'very small' property has diminished by 14,603 hectares, apparently to the profit of 'small' property; 'small' property has increased by 1,176,042 hectares."

But, excuse me! In the first place and in passing, if the “small” property increases to the detriment of “very small”, it will be because, always weak, the plots of land nevertheless are being concentrated. This would already be the contrary of what M. Ruau affirms.

And as for the principal point of his argument it hasn't a leg to stand on. If there are 93,000 *less* proprietors in possession of one million hectares more land, it is therefore (just the contrary of his assertions) that the “small” exploitations increase in area, and that consequently there is still concentration.

Each “small” proprietor instead of possessing an average of 3.9 hectares as in 1892, owns 4.5 in 1908.

Fewer proprietors to more land owned, that is what is put forward as proof that agricultural concentration is a Socialist fiction.

And that's what comes of accepting the role of simpler reader of a lucubration that one doesn't understand.

(Translated from *Le Socialisme*)

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