

THE INTERNAL CAUSES

The harshness of the conditions of life that prevailed in the Valais in the first half of the 19th century has to be seen in the light of the major political, economic, demographic and ideological transformations that were underway at the same time.

And so the increase in birth rates?in comparison to the rest of Switzerland?probably went hand in hand with the parcelling out of land, a phenomenon that was particularly widespread in the Valais and that was exacerbated with each new generation. The canton had not yet recovered from a period of war which, in the Valais and elsewhere, had the effect of weakening the more vulnerable classes and redistributing the cards for the benefit of a new dominant class. The result was a lack of resources, high food prices and a great concentration of wealth. The growth of international trade led to a collapse in the domestic price of grain because of the imports. In addition to this taxes were raised, especially on salt. Not surprisingly indebtedness was chronic, and there were many expropriations in the Valais at the time of the first stirrings of emigration. But emigration was not the only escape valve for this pressure: there was a great deal of anger among the peasants and the business owners in the Lower Valais, such that in the beginning of the 1830s the canton was on the verge of political division and popular revolt.

The emigration from the Valais may also have found a favourable context in transformations of an ideological and institutional nature, as in other cantons and countries. The revolution of 1798 initiated in the Valais a shift in the social fault lines and the emergence of new forms of inequality. In particular the rise of individualism and the imperative of profitability fostered an erosion of traditional community solidarity. Emigration might also have served as a convenient solution to certain situations of precariousness and exclusion. Those left out, the young delinquents, ex-convicts, unwed mothers, or persons considered by their entourage to be of dubious morality would be encouraged to leave the country and settle abroad in the hopes that they would stay there and not come back. This practice, which has been called an "emigration of riddance," was in many cases a form of forced emigration. For reasons that are easy to understand, it is impossible to determine with any precision the number of people who were involved. Not only families resorted to this measure, but also many municipalities preferred to finance the emigration of individuals considered undesirable rather than to provide them with the social assistance required by cantonal legislation since 1827. This strategy was implemented in particular during the emigration to Algeria in 1851 and continued until the beginning of the 20th century, often arousing protest from the countries of immigration that took measures to hinder it. On their end, cantonal authorities of the Valais refrained from publicly approving such methods, but had recourse to them all the same. The canton found itself in the position of processing requests by convicts who, preferring to be expelled abroad rather than being kept in gaol, asked for their sentences to be commuted to emigration. The authorities sometimes responded favourably, yet added financial requirements that obliged the petitioners to have sufficient funds at their disposal to emigrate. This meant that those individuals who were willing to be banished, but lacked the necessary means, were forced to serve their jail sentences.

The constitutions of 1839 and 1848 did not change matters. The economic and social organization of the Valais, combined with unfavourable demographic and natural conditions, made it a land of emigration for another half century. The plain of the Rhone River, the course of which was regularized starting in 1863, was still largely unfertile and regularly devastated by floods. Another thirty years would pass before this zone became favourable to sustained agriculture. As for industrialization, it did not spread generally until the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, bringing with it its precarious work force. It was at this time that the balance of migration in the Valais was reversed: from 1888 to 1910, the canton experienced for the first time an immigration that exceeded the international emigration, which kept up, however, until the First World War. During the same period, the balance of trade in the Valais was reversed, with exports exceeding imports. This coincided with the rise of domestic emigration in Switzerland, as the development of cities like Lausanne and Geneva exerted a considerable appeal on workers from the Valais.

The inversion of the balance of migration at the turn of the century was also accompanied by an adjustment in the motivations that launched the international emigration. This led to the development of what has been called an "emigration of better-being," whereby families from the Valais left overseas to try their luck, not so much to flee from endemic poverty than to gain access to more desirable material conditions and a better social status. This reason for

emigration was probably involved from the very first departures, but probably underestimated because of the negative image that was associated with it and that made it difficult to admit. This is confirmed by how it was treated by the press in the Valais, since it was particularly critical of what it presented as a desertion by Valaisan families of land and a country that they would do better to render more productive and profitable. This led to the figure of the "good emigrant," who was also the "good pauper "; this was a very contradictory figure when one thinks that the poorest of the Valais population probably did not have the funds or property to sell in order to finance their emigration.

At the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century, the emigration of "better-being" seems to have been more widely accepted and corresponded?in a canton in which people had an almost sacred relationship to the land?to an ideal of access to land ownership and economic success that went hand in hand with the prospect of upward social mobility. These individual aspirations were made possible by two phenomena of international scope that left an enduring mark on migratory relationships and mentalities:

First of all: from the moment on that the importation of foreign labour exceeded the exportation of labour from the Valais supplied by overseas emigration, local jobs that had a low social value, or were even considered degrading for native workers, were left to immigrant labour. For example, this was the case for Italian workers who worked in factories in the Valais starting in the late 19th century and who formed the basis for the industrial development of the canton. This economic privilege had the effect of fostering an emigration that was based more on choice than on necessity.

Secondly: the domestic policies of the overseas countries to which Valaisans and Europeans emigrated conferred white people with a privilege over the local native populations, whether Arab or Berber, as in the case of Algeria, or Amerindian, as in the case of Argentina and Chile. However miserable the conditions of life?and death?may have been for many emigrants from the Valais abroad, it should not blind us to the fate reserved for the populations subjected to colonial rule. The Valaisan settlers, especially those who managed to create a comfortable situation for themselves, were able to hire Mapuche servants in Argentina and Chile; and, in the case of Brazil in 1819, they even had the right to own Afro-American slaves. Historical sources are rather wanting in details on the relations with native populations, but we may suppose that these relations constituted for some colonists the outward signs of an enhanced social status in comparison to their situation in the Valais.

In a Switzerland that seems to have been a "colonial country without colonies" (Le Temps, 7/25/2015), the Valais was far from constituting a "world apart" and found itself caught up in its own way in international issues, especially in the recomposition of the relations between European countries and their former American colonies or their new colonies, principally in Africa. What was true for the 20th century was also true for the previous century. Two words aptly illustrate the position of the Valais in the world, at the juncture of the two migratory phenomena?interior and exterior?that are being described here: "Negro village". This is how the barracks for Italian workers at Naters were called at the beginning of the 20th century. This characterization was a reference to the name given to the human zoos that were exhibited at amusement parks in Europe and Switzerland at the time. It may be useful to keep in mind the fact that, during this period, the times were not so far off when the inhabitants of the rural regions of the Valais were depicted as savages by foreign travellers and physicians who passed through the canton.

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