2. An Agricultural Revolution

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Abstract
While capitalism was making rapid strides toward dominating English industry, changes were taking place in agriculture which made it more efficient and productive, and which prepared it to be fitted eventually into the industrial capitalistic pattern. Actually, changes in the direction had been occurring in English agriculture since the revival of trade discussed in earlier chapters. [excerpt]

Keywords
Contemporary Civilization, Agriculture, Industry, Seed Drill

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Comments
This is a part of Section XIV: The Industrial Revolution, Classical Economics, and Economic Liberalism. The Contemporary Civilization page lists all additional sections of Ideas and Institutions of Western Man, as well as the Table of Contents for both volumes.

More About Contemporary Civilization:
From 1947 through 1969, all first-year Gettysburg College students took a two-semester course called Contemporary Civilization. The course was developed at President Henry W.A. Hanson’s request with the goal of “introducing the student to the backgrounds of contemporary social problems through the major concepts, ideals, hopes and motivations of western culture since the Middle Ages.”

Gettysburg College professors from the history, philosophy, and religion departments developed a textbook for the course. The first edition, published in 1955, was called An Introduction to Contemporary Civilization and Its Problems. A second edition, retitled Ideas and Institutions of Western Man, was published in 1958 and 1960. It is this second edition that we include here. The copy we digitized is from the Gary T. Hawbaker ’66 Collection and the marginalia are his.

Authors

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2. An Agricultural Revolution

While capitalism was making rapid strides toward dominating English industry, changes were taking place in agriculture which made it more efficient and productive, and which prepared it to be fitted eventually into the industrial capitalistic pattern. Actually, changes in this direction had been occurring in English agriculture since the revival of trade discussed in earlier chapters. As has already been observed in connection with
industry, the justification for using the word "revolution" to
describe the events of the later eighteenth and nineteenth cen-
turies in agriculture lies in the fact that there was now a
faster rate of change which resulted in practices very different
from those of the past.

As early as the times of the Tudors (1485-1603) English
landlords began to fence the open fields and other lands pre-
viously used in common. The main reason was to provide more
pasture for grazing sheep. This enclosure movement was revived
in the eighteenth century when, at the behest of the landlords,
Parliament approved hundreds of acts under which, between 1700
and 1850, about twenty per cent of the area of England was re-
distributed among its owners. As a result the small yeoman
farmer, whose holdings were now too small to be efficient,
only disappeared; and with him went both the crops which he
produced and the manufacturing in which he and his family often
engaged under the domestic system. There were several choices
open to him or to the farmer who had possessed no land before
enclosure. Since there was still a large demand for agricul-
tural labor, he could remain on the land and work for wages.
He could leave the land, and if he was lucky enough find a job
in a factory or mill.

The enclosure movement may have helped eliminate the small
farmer in many areas, but it was a long step in the direction
of making English agriculture more efficient. It was much
easier for the large landlord than for the small farmer to
bring more acres of land under cultivation or turn them into
pasture, pressure the government into a program of road and
canal building, take advantage of the latest farm practices,
and in short to apply the principles of capitalism to agricul-
ture. Such crops as clover and alfalfa, used in rotation with
wheat and other grains, restored to the soil some of the nitro-
gen which tillage removed. The growing of turnips provided a
supply of feed which made unnecessary the regular slaughter of
many farm animals in the fall. More careful breeding practices
resulted in larger and more useful animals. For example, the
average weight of sheep sold at one English market tripled
during the eighteenth century. The seed drill, which replaced
the ancient method of broadcasting seed by row planting, and
the hoe, for cultivating the growing crop, increased productiv-
ity, as did the use of lime and more manure for fertilizer.
Publicists such as Arthur Young (1741-1820) encouraged these
practices by their writings and activities in agricultural so-
cieties, and became known in places as far distant as the United
States and Russia.

Nineteenth century English agriculture, like English in-
dustry, acted as a model for the rest of the Western World.
However, other states copied the English example only incom-
pletely, largely because conditions of soil, climate, and the
general economy differed greatly from place to place. During
much of the nineteenth century central and eastern Europe were
still eliminating the last vestiges of serfdom.

The revolution in agriculture not only made it possible for fewer persons to supply food for an increasing number of urban dwellers who were growing less and less of their own, but it also made available a larger per capita supply of better and more varied food. This was undoubtedly one factor in a rapid lowering of the European death rate. But if the first effects of the Industrial Revolution were stimulative, especially after 1870 European farming was beset by increasingly severe competition from non-European areas. The development of railroads, steamships, and refrigeration, and the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, made it possible to deliver Australian wool, American wheat, and Argentinian meat at prices which undersold similar European commodities. As a result, in some European countries much land was taken out of cultivation. In others, tariffs or greater efficiency restored competition with agricultural imports. Elsewhere, as for example in Denmark, agriculture became even more highly specialized than before, in an area where soil, climate, or location gave it an advantage. The Danes took to providing quality butter, eggs, and bacon for the English breakfast table.

This application of the principles of capitalism to agriculture — rational and scientific methods, widespread use of capital, and production for a large market, perhaps one worldwide — is still in process at the present time. Where it has been pushed the hardest, as for example in the United States, it has made agriculture infinitely more productive than anyone would have dreamed possible two centuries ago.