



1958

2. An Agricultural Revolution


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Bloom, Robert L. et al. "2. An Agricultural Revolution. Pt XIV: The Industrial Revolution, Classical Economics, and Economic Liberalism." Ideas and Institutions of Western Man (Gettysburg College, 1958), 5-7.

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2. An Agricultural Revolution

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

Disciplines

Agriculture | Environmental Education

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.

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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

forms of business Organization - Corp. form of business. (partnership - more capital, more skills) corp. form - even more capital - expand the firm. limited liability - shareholder can lose no more than put in. A legal person - although stockholder dies, company goes on.

industry, the justification for using the word "revolution" to describe the events of the later eighteenth and nineteenth centuries 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 previously 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 redistributed among its owners. As a result the small yeoman farmer, whose holdings were now too small to be efficient, often 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 agricultural 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 agriculture. Such crops as clover and alfalfa, used in rotation with wheat and other grains, restored to the soil some of the nitrogen 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 productivity, 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 societies, and became known in places as far distant as the United States and Russia.

Nineteenth century English agriculture, like English industry, acted as a model for the rest of the Western World. However, other states copied the English example only incompletely, 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 world-wide -- 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.