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AGRICULTURAL POLICY IN THE UNITED STATES AT THE BEGINNING OF THE 20TH CENTURY

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Abstract: This article provides a detailed discussion of the natural and geographical advantages that enabled American farmers to engage in agriculture, and how the fertility of arable lands contributed to increased productivity. The article also examines the reasons behind the migration of millions of people to regions close to the Pacific Ocean, the purchase of land at low prices, the types of agricultural crops initially cultivated on these lands, and the quantity and quality of the harvested produce. Furthermore, the specialization processes in certain types of farming within different states are also addressed.

Keywords: Mississippi River, engine, telegraph, railroads, ocean liner, telephone, farm, industry, agriculture, wheat, corn, cotton, dairy products.

Introduction

At the beginning of the 20th century, the United States was one of the world’s largest agricultural producers [2,160]. The vast expanses of highly fertile soil and the diversity of climate zones provided American farmers with a significant competitive advantage. Between 1860 and 1910, the number of farmers in the United States tripled.

The land used for agriculture increased from 160 million hectares to 352 million hectares. The rapid development of agriculture in the second half of the 19th century was facilitated by the active colonization of the western regions of the United States. Even before the Civil War, but especially after its end, millions of people migrated to the Great Plains region west of the Mississippi River and to the Pacific coastal areas. The main reason for this migration was the opportunity to legally acquire land at a very low price under the Homestead Act of 1862 [8,84]. At the same time, due to heavy and strenuous labor, nearly two million new farms were established between 1870 and 1900, which doubled the amount of land used in agriculture [10,18]. Beginning in 1897, economic growth started in the United States, and this was immediately reflected in the social mood of the population. Writer Walter Lord describes the atmosphere in American society during that period as follows:

“The New York Times dedicated four editorial issues in 1899 to reviewing the 19th century. The inventions of the era were proudly described - such as the steam engine, telegraph, railroads, ocean liner, telephone, electric power, and even the cash register - emphasizing that these achievements were expected to pave the way for new successes. ‘We are entering the new year 1900, which will lead us into a new centur and in this century, the flourishing of civilization will appear even more radiant,’ the editorial concluded.”

Sunday sermons were delivered in the same spirit. Reverend Newell Dwight Hillis, full of inspiration, stated: “Laws are becoming more just, rulers more humane; music is more pleasant and books are wiser; families are now happier, and hearts have finally become softer and more peaceful.” It is not surprising that expectations were so high. On both coasts of the continent, the country had never experienced such prosperity. The Portland Oregonian described 1899 as “the most successful year in the history of Oregon.” The governor of Wisconsin wrote: “Never has any year passed with such hope.” The Louisville Courier-Journal added: “Even the eternally dissatisfied farmers were happy” [1,9].

Before this period of prosperity, the long-lasting crisis of 1870–1897 had been primarily associated with the rapid growth of productive forces. It was characterized by fluctuations in the prices of America's key agricultural products - wheat, corn, cotton, dairy products, and meat. Another major cause of the crisis was the difficult economic situation in the Northeastern States - traditional agricultural regions - where land resources had long been exhausted. In these areas, farmers found it difficult to compete in pricing with pioneers arriving from the West (pioneers being individuals who first came to and settled in an unexplored area), as the newcomers offered extremely low prices [11, 19]. Because of inexpensive land, the expansion of cultivated territory slowed by 1900: between 1897 and 1920, the growth of new farms and developed areas decreased. From 1900 to 1910, the number of farms increased from 5.737 million to 6.362 million, and by 1920 the United States had 6.448 million farms. Between 1900 and 1910, the land area under farms expanded by only 39 million hectares - from 839 million to 878 million hectares - and by 1920, farmland reached 956 million hectares.

However, when analyzing agriculture and the farming movement in the United States, it would be a mistake to examine the country as a single uniform entity, given its vast size and the differing climatic and natural conditions of its various geographic regions. Russian historiography contains debates concerning the regional classification of America.

In 1910, the U.S. Census Bureau divided the country into geographical regions, a division still used today. The country was grouped into four macro-regions:

- Northeast (New England and the Middle Atlantic region)
- Midwest (East North Central and West North Central)
- South (South Atlantic, East South Central, and West South Central)
- West (Pacific and Mountain states)

G. S. Gordeev, in his work "The Landless American Farmer," criticizes this division, arguing that it ignores the economic and social ties established among the various regions of the United States [6,198]. Thus, according to the Census, the states of Maryland and Delaware were classified as part of the South Atlantic region, although the developed economic ties in this area were ignored, and the region differed significantly from the rest of the southern coastal area, including in terms of agriculture. At the same time, the Midwest was divided into two regions, even though it functioned as a single economic space. On the one hand, it contained large corn and wheat farming areas and the highly developed industrial centers of the Great Lakes region [210]; on the other hand, it was a unified economic system. As L. V. Smiryagin noted in "Districts of the United States: In the Image of Modern America," American geographers, in analyzing the states, often rely on administrative-geographical divisions (AGD). However, this approach frequently overlooks the socio-economic differences that exist within the states and administrative units themselves. For example, Northern Texans shared more similarities with Oklahomans than with residents of Eastern Texas [9,10]. Such cross-border differences within the United States become particularly evident when discussing agriculture. By 1900, agricultural regions in the United States specializing in specific products - referred to as long sectors or belts - had taken shape. In the South, cotton traditionally dominated in Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and the southern part of Texas. Most tobacco was grown in Tennessee, Kentucky, North Carolina, and Virginia. The Corn Belt encompassed parts of the Midwestern states, including Iowa, Illinois, Indiana, southern Michigan, western Ohio, eastern Nebraska and Kansas, southern Minnesota, and Missouri. Wheat was grown in one form or another in nearly all states, but most production fell within the Wheat Belt: winter wheat was harvested in North Texas, Oklahoma, Nebraska, and Colorado, while spring wheat was produced in Montana, as well as its southern and northern areas. Taking into account these observations on U.S. geographic regionalization, this study applies several methodological approaches. However,

it should be noted that most agricultural statistical data were taken from census results. Therefore, the geographic divisions adopted by the U.S. Census Bureau were used in the quantitative analysis of American agriculture. To gain a comprehensive understanding of the agricultural situation in the United States, it is necessary to examine conditions in each region separately, since agricultural development progressed at different stages across these regions.

The Northeastern United States has traditionally been divided into the following areas:

- New England (Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut)
- Mid-Atlantic (New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania)

This region underwent the most significant changes between 1900 and 1920. Here, we observe a rapid decline in the number of farms. From 1900 to 1910, the number of farms decreased by 3%, and in the following decade it fell by another 12%. At the same time, the total amount of cultivated and productive land was also shrinking - more slowly, but still decreasing by 12% over twenty years.

However, another qualitative change was taking place in the farms of the Northeast. During this period, rising product prices enabled farmers to hire a large amount of labor; as a result, wage expenditures tripled. Researcher E. F. Yazkov explains these changes by the intensification and expansion of farm operations. According to him, during this period small producers were increasingly displaced by large farms [5, 24]. Nevertheless, it would be inaccurate to say with certainty that small farms in the northeastern United States were consistently declining in number (from 1 to 99 units of area) across all types. In the North, the average farm size had already begun decreasing in the mid-19th century - from 113 hectares of cropland in 1850 to 97 hectares in 1900. However, over the next 20 years, the average farm size increased by 2 hectares, and by 1930 it had grown by an additional 3 hectares [3, 54]. It is important to note that the situation varied significantly across regions. In the rapidly industrializing and urbanizing Mid-Atlantic region, the size of farmlands did not change or decrease. In New England - except for Massachusetts - the size of farms actually increased [4, 54].

Conclusion

According to E. F. Yazkov, the expansion of farm size and the hiring of additional labor enabled large farmers to intensify production. The main indicator of increasing agricultural productivity was not the growth of a particular crop in any specific region, but rather the expansion of cultivated land, which became the principal factor driving overall production growth.

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