

The History of Urbanization and Transportation in Relation to the Food System

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Introduction

Studying the history of agriculture in the United States unveils lessons, and acting upon these revelations can create a sustainable food system. Reflection of this history reveals the definitive decisions of the past, their outcomes, and opportunities to forge a reformed path in the present to influence more regenerative food production. One of the most significant lessons from the past to incorporate into present day is understanding the role of urbanization and transportation in shaping the food system.

“A growing urban population and improved transportation in the form of canals, steamboats, and railroads expanded market opportunities for commercial production” (Hurt, 2002). Though this quote is simple, it illustrates a couple of the main contributors that sparked the shift from subsistence farming to commercialization, and eventually the current state of agriculture. Other factors encouraged this as well, such as machinery improvements, capitalist culture, and more, though increased urban population and advanced transportation were two defining forces.

The Role of Urbanization

Urbanization and improved transportation enhanced and broadened market opportunities for farmers that changed the agriculture industry into what it has become today, which is a system built on industrialization. History reveals the connection between these major factors and

the outcome of the current food system. The growth of urban population created a departure from the majority of people being involved with food production to the present state of less than two percent (Neff, 2015).

The population in the United States more than doubled from 40 million in 1870 to 92 million in 1910 (Hagenstein, Gregg & Donahue, 2011). Along with this, manufacturing, insurance, banking, transportation, and other commercial advancements generated four million new nonfarm positions (Hurt, 2002). A main reason for this shift was that these opportunities emerged from 1945 to 1955 in cities in the old Confederate states (Hurt, 2002). Many people in those regions were employed by agriculture, and these opportunities, along with other factors, led them to let go of land and migrate to urban areas (Hurt, 2002).

The massive transformation that left less than two percent of the population involved in farming had occurred by the late twentieth century (Hurt, 2002). Urbanization was one of the elements that advanced commercialization and to some degree is responsible for the disconnection of people from the source of their food. It is important to recognize this particular contributing spark of the disconnection in order to rebuild weakened relationships with food production.

The Role of Transportation

Before transportation, many farmers had issues with delivering and exposing

their products to the market. Improved methods of transportation, such as canals, steamboats, developed roadways, and especially railroads were integral in creating a single nationwide market with mass produced goods.

As transportation modes spread throughout the country, settlement was encouraged in new areas. The influx of settlers, which resulted from increased transportation and access to land, were unfamiliar with how to work the land, which led to its degradation. Through land sales to settlers, the Homestead Act, and other acts, the acreage of cultivated land doubled between 1870 and 1900, which allowed for market saturation of agricultural commodities (Hagenstein, Gregg & Donahue, 2011).

Transportation not only partially administered commercialization, it also contributed to the development of specialization on a larger scale than previously seen. This led to a division as regions practiced specialization to grow the products that thrived in their respective areas. For example, the Northeast focused on dairy, Ohio through Nebraska on corn, the South remained on cotton and tobacco, Northern and Southern plains' specialty was wheat, and the Great Plains became a cattle and sheep industry (Strange, 2018). Through these events, people can learn that commercialization and regional specialization are products of transportation to an extent, along with other factors.

Learning from the Past

The potential for profit stimulated

unsustainable methods that were embraced on a large scale without much concern for, or knowledge of, the long-term effects. Understanding the correlation of factors including urbanization, transportation, and the current food system reveals the unsustainability of commercialization.

Additionally, history makes evident the importance of diversification, regenerative practices, and maintaining a relationship with the food system for the future of the land, people and the collective environment. Hurt's (2002) quote presents two of the driving forces behind the development of commercialization and present-day agriculture. Knowledge of this history, as well as a comprehensive grasp of the elements that influenced the current food system, allow for a better idea of how to address the persisting issues with adequate changes.

Conclusion

The current food system is flawed and has established unsustainable food production on a mass scale. It is vital to learn from the past in order to address these flaws and form a lasting system. Learning from history is an opportunity to appreciate the power of each decision moving forward that has the potential to forge a regenerative food system. Though history and the sequential lessons learned will not solve all of the issues, they are able to provide guidance. After all, what better way to learn about how to create a more sustainable food system for the future than from the past?

References

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