

Barbed Wire and Industrial Agriculture on the American Plains

Many technologies played a crucial role in the transformation of the American plains from a land populated by Indigenous tribes into a mass of American monocultures. One of these inventions clearly ties together the key themes of this agricultural colonization - barbed wire. As this transition from native hunting to sparse cattle ranging to industrial agriculture unfolded, the role of barbed wire highlights the issues of sovereignty, race, and private property. While this simple invention carries no blame for the despicable state of modern American farming, it enabled the colonial powers, individuals, and ideologies to conquer and enslave the western plains.

In order to understand how barbed wire illustrates these themes, we must first understand its history and influence. The first patent for barbed wire was accredited to Joseph Glidden of Illinois in 1874, though many similar forms of barbed wire were developed around the same time (Hayter, 1939). This invention was so crucial because as the United States moved out of the east and began to colonize the prairies and deserts, settlers lacked the lumber required to build fences as the landscape transitioned away from woodlands. Farmers and cattle ranchers had attempted to use straight wire and wooden fences, but the first of these proved to be too weak to resist livestock and the second too expensive. Thus, barbed wire provided a cheap, light, and easily installed fencing material which would remain unbreachable (Hayter, 1939).

Grasping the impact barbed wire would have on the American plains is contingent on understanding the context of the times. In the post-civil war era of the 1870's the bison of the plains had largely been wiped out and with them the Native peoples who relied on bison for life (Netz, 2004). In the place of the bison the white colonialists brought the cow. The breeds of cattle abundant on the American plains by the 1870s were fundamentally different from their European ancestors. They had escaped captivity and evolved to become semi-feral animals who roamed wild across the landscape, but never strayed too far from key water sources. The cattle industry in the west began as a hodge-podge group of cowpokes driving large herds of these "Texas longhorn" cattle across open land to slaughterhouses in eastern cities such as Chicago (Netz, 2004). This style of cattle "ranging" had many inefficiencies, it was labor intensive, hard to regulate, contingent on

semi lawless groups of “cowboys,” and often led to the destruction of agricultural land as massive herds of cattle passed through (Netz, 2004).

Arriving into this era of cattle ranging, barbed wire offered new options for the beef industry. As this fencing caught on and its price began to drop, it was increasingly adopted across the American west as a key tool for staking claim to a piece of land (Hornbeck, 2010). Before barbed wire settlers easily acquired “legal” rights to a piece of land in the west, but it was difficult for them to physically demarcate this space or to keep livestock, animals, or its rightful inhabitants (Native Americans) off of it (Hornbeck, 2010). These land acquisitions were exacerbated by the homestead act which had allotted 160 acres a piece to settlers in the west and was widely abused by ranchers who used it as an excuse to claim vast quantities of land (Netz, 2004). With easy access to land and a newfound ability to efficiently contain cattle, the beef industry began moving away from reliance on free ranging and shifted to ranches which held stable herds and shipped them to market by rail (Hayter, 1939). This transition allowed the ranchers to focus on breeding specific cattle, cut down on labor costs, and begin relying on hay and other feed over grazing as they worked to pack as many cattle as possible into the confines of their fences (Hayter, 1939).

Cattle operations were not the only party relying on barbed wire as farmers began to use it heavily as a means for keeping animals and people out of their fields (Hornbeck, 2010). Without these fences, white settler farmers in the west had been susceptible to raids by Native Americans and destruction from grazing or driven herds (Hornbeck 2010). Further, barbed wire was quickly adopted by railroad companies to fence off the tracks (Hayter, 1939). Through these user groups, the American plains were quickly becoming a mosaic of fenced plots.

As the land became entirely transformed by this invention and it grew impossible to move freely across the landscape, tensions over the fencing practices began to emerge. For some, opposing barbed wire was an issue of cruelty as it harmed livestock which would run into the sharp fencing without seeing it, often suffering wounds which would become infected and lead to death (Bennett, 2014). For others it was more an issue of access and space as those who chose not to fence in their land still had to deal with neighboring landowners fences limiting their movement and access to resources such as water (Netz, 2004). A rash of “fence cutting” spread across the west in which individuals on horseback would methodically cut miles of fence. The exact reasons for these acts of protest is not clear as it was experience by small and large farms alike, hinting that there were a variety of exact motivations behind this movement. Proposed explanations for fence-cutting stretch from socialist and agrarian movements to out of work cowboys and sheep ranchers (Hayter,

1939). Others attribute the fence cutting “wars” to tensions between “stockmen” (cattle ranchers) and farmers (Hornbeck, 2010). The use of barbed wire by large scale ranchers to cut off access to water, roads, and other sought-after features was unpopular and thus fence cutting was met with approval from many groups (Hayter, 1939).

While the advantages of barbed wire fencing are largely attributed to the cattle and beef industries, this only tells a part of the story. The initial boom in efficiency for cattle ranches began to teeter off as the debts taken out to purchase the fencing and land came due (Hornbeck, 2010). Additionally, barbed wire and the increased control over cattle made taxation of the cattle industry much easier, and the ranchers were no longer able to jump through loopholes (Hayter, 1939). Despite these financial hits to the beef industry, larger ranches were better suited to absorb these difficulties and beat smaller farmers to water and road access (Hayter, 1939). Furthermore, many large operations had the financial backing of east coast investors who could take the up-front cost of the fences; however, these businessmen were pushing to industrialize the growing of beef move entirely away from free ranging (Netz, 2004). In “Barbed Wire: Property Rights and Agricultural Value,” an economic analysis of the long-term impacts of barbed wire, Richard Hornbeck casts agriculture as the true beneficiary of the fencing boom. He stresses that barbed wire allowed for the development of non-woodland areas into farmland and protected farms from cattle, allowing for the close proximity of agricultural and meat production (2010). While Hornbeck does not investigate why ranches were unable to absorb the debt of fencing and land acquisition while farms could, it seems evident that agriculture proved to be both more lucrative across large tracts of land and more reliant on space for success. Under these pressures it makes sense that cattle operations began to decrease the area per cow and more heavily rely on hay and other feed. On the other hand, agriculture attempted to maximize its profits by moving towards mass industrial monocultures. Both of these industries were under pressure to grow as the late 1800’s saw the United states bouncing back from the population decimation of the civil war to a growth rate of about 30%. Most importantly, the second industrial revolution was quickly driving this population into the urban centers and forcing them to rely on the industrialized food system (Gauthier, 2020). With the history and impacts of barbed wire fencing for both cattle ranchers and farmers in the American west laid out, we can begin to see how barbed wire became another tool of colonization and manifest destiny, pushing America toward a broken food system.

In this course we have seen over and over the connection between food systems and power. As awareness of oppression and injustice have grown in the modern world, our colonial systems

have created more nuanced tactics for keeping power in the hands of the white and wealthy. The key to this tactic is denying sovereignty to the oppressed. From food assistance programs to seed patenting legislation this ideology can be seen seeping through every aspect of American food policy. Barbed wire falls perfectly in line with the rest of these tactics as it was used to transition power into the hands of white settlers and transition the agricultural economy away first from the sustenance hunting of the plains tribes and then from the small-scale homestead and itinerate cattle ranger. Looking at the transformation of the plains region enabled by barbed wire shows a system which originally existed as tribes of indigenous peoples living in harmony with the ecology of the land through bison hunting (Netz, 2004). This state brought no capital to white settlers and gave native Indians sovereignty over their food, livelihoods, lifestyles, and land. The first step taken by white settlers to transform this into a capitalist system was to destroy the bison as a not-so-subtle means of killing off the native populations. After this, cattle were left to take the place of the bison and give white settlers the ability to capitalize on the great plains. Yet this system was far from optimized for profit and the introduction of barbed wire gave big business the chance it was looking for to consolidate power over agriculture in the west. Through barbed wire, these capitalist interests were able to transition from the troublesome days of the cowboys and into the modern era of industrialized agriculture by divvying up land and streamlining cattle operations (Netz, 2004).

Unequivocally tied to this transition from indigenous ecology to capitalist system is the issue of race. Racial oppression is obvious in the removal of native tribes through bison slaughters, but it was also inherent to the use and sale of barbed wire (Bennett, 2014). Barbed wire allowed settlers to block off tracks of indigenous land which they claimed to own and protect against raids from local tribes (Hayter, 1939). As more and more land was claimed, native Indians not only ran out of food to hunt but also space to live and open areas to travel across, aiding in the United States' attempt to decimate their populations and force them onto reservations (Bennett, 2014). Marketing for barbed wire at the time not only played up the threat of native tribes but also cast freed slaves and blacks as thieves who could be fended off through the use of this violent fencing material (Bennett, 2014). It is important to note that this was the very same material what was publicly protested as too cruel to be used on animals, and yet was successfully marketed as a way to keep non-white intruders off white land. In every way barbed wire was an invention created by and for the white colonists to cut off access to food and land from black and indigenous peoples.

As settlers, ranches, and farmers used fencing to claim land they began the process of transforming what had once been a loosely bound landmass existing as a balanced prairie ecology

into individual pieces of property which would efficiently produce commodities for their owners (Netz, 2004). Hornbeck's study stressed the importance of this transformation as barbed wire "increased property values" (2010). A plot of land was no longer just a space, but a set amount of soil and vegetation with certain challenges and assets which could be expected to produce a certain profit (Hornbeck, 2010). This increased value was another step in shifting the control of the west into a capitalistic system which was eagerly waiting to quantify, govern, and profit off of it (Netz, 2004). Capitalistic systems are built on commodities, not crops or livestock, thus to the food industry the west was seen as unworthy of investment until barbed wire came along to commoditize the land. Once the plains had been transformed from a living ecology into private property the guiding principles shifted from the native ideals of respect and sustenance to the capitalistic moral of optimized profit. It was this skewed belief system which would drive the farmers of the west away from sustainable agricultural practices and towards the dustbowl.

Looking at the areas which became exploitable through barbed wire, we now see massive monoculture operations and a beef industry which is contingent on jamming as many cattle into as little space as possible. Understanding the history and context of barbed wire, this ending place seems almost inevitable. The transformation in the American west can be seen as an example of the transformation in human food systems which has occurred globally over the past few hundred years. While this is a saddening story of destruction, it is important to realize that restoration is possible. Studying these details shows this transformation to not be the inevitable happenstance it is often taught as, but rather a deliberate shift centered in white supremacy, colonialism, and capitalism. Coming to acknowledge the subjugation of the plains through barbed wire for what it truly is, I am brought to recall the focus in this class put on the "imagined" nature of systems. The world we live in was constructed of ideas which can and ought to be challenged and rethought. To this effect I see a lot of hope in looking back to the fence-cutting movements of the late 19th century (Hayter, 1939). Whoever these individuals were and whatever their motivation, they had the ability to see the west for what it truly was, a body of land tied together through connected ecology, not a grid of private property. Without the lived experience of this type of land in the modern world, it is crucial to learn histories like the story of barbed wire so that we can understand how to unimagine the destructive food systems we are attempting to amend today.

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