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Careless Commodification & Poor Land Use in The Dust Bowl

In the early 1930's, America was suffering from the effects of the stock market crash of 1929 and the subsequent period of economic turmoil known as the Great Depression. Following World War I, European markets had begun to rely on American grain exports leading to an increase in the price of wheat. The US government, through several homesteading acts, parceled up land lots all over the Great Plains region, an unusually arid landscape which received inconsistent rainfall and was prone to droughts. The high wheat prices prior to the Great Depression encouraged farmers to plant on land which was previously considered unsuitable for farming and when prices dropped drastically, they plowed up more land to make up the losses.¹ New mechanized plows allowed huge tracts of land to be cultivated in a period known as the Great Plow-Up. What neither the farmers nor the US government realized was that the removal of the native grasses that held the region's soil together would have enormous consequences for the Great Plains.

When drought struck the region in the early 1930s, crops began to fail. Without plant roots to hold the soil, the regions persistent winds began to pick up the light, dry topsoil and

¹ Robert A McLeman et al., "What We Learned from the Dust Bowl: Lessons in Science, Policy, and Adaptation," Researchgate, August 28, 2013, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/262342577_What_we_learned_from_the_Dust_Bowl_Lessons_in_science_policy_and_adaptation/fulltext/54929eee0cf225673b3e01e3/What-we-learned-from-the-Dust-Bowl-Lessons-in-science-policy-and-adaptation.pdf, 422.

blow it around. As droughts continued, the dust storms became more intense and soon drew worldwide attention. A government commission was set up to determine the causes of the disaster and propose solutions to end it. The commission released their report in 1936 along with several proposed policy changes they'd concluded would help to reduce the dust storms.² What the commission found generally aligns with what most scholars contend today which was that the causes of the dust storms were complex and multifaceted. The storms were primarily the result of planting in drought-prone areas, necessarily removing the native grasses, poor farming and water conservation practices, as well as US government policies that frequently incentivized such behavior. The position of wheat as a cash crop was the initial driving force behind the so-called "Great Plow-Up" and shows us how the commodification of land can reap devastating consequences.

For decades prior to the settling of the Great Plains, this vast stretch of arid, treeless land was widely considered unsuitable for farming. Huge numbers of American bison roamed the prairies and nomadic Indian tribes followed the herds, setting up temporary camps and packing up again when the bison moved on. Tough grasses with long, hearty root systems had evolved in this environment to tap deep into the earth for water as rain was rare and inconsistent here. Wind was another constant on the plains, and it was said it nearly always blew. Dust storms were not uncommon throughout the region – something that was well known before the area began to be settled by American farmers.³

² Hugh H Bennett et al., "Report of the Great Plains Drought Area Committee. August 1936.," HathiTrust, August 1936, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/coo.31924000933956>.

³ Robert A McLeman et al., "What We Learned from the Dust Bowl: Lessons in Science, Policy, and Adaptation," Researchgate, August 28, 2013, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/262342577_What_we_learned_from_the_Dust_Bowl_Lessons_in_scie

In the first years of settlement on the plains, weather and economics both swayed in the farmers' favor. An unusually wet period with higher than average rainfall accompanied high prices being offered for wheat and other cash crops. This encouraged many landless Americans and immigrants from Europe and elsewhere to stake homesteading claims on the plains. There was a belief common among many of the farmers that the "rain follows the plow", the pseudoscientific belief that the act of farming the land could change the climate in an area. Eventually around one third of the Great Plains was converted to cropland.⁴

After the brief wet period on the prairie ended, a drought that would last several years fell over the entire United States, beginning in the east and spreading throughout the entire nation. The drought would last from 1930 to 1936 and was accompanied by heat waves that killed thousands.⁵ The drought couldn't have come at a worse time, just one year after the stock market crash of 1929 kicked off the Great Depression, a period of economic deprivation that plagued America and much of the world for a decade. When wheat prices plummeted, farmers felt the need to plow up even more land to grow ever-more crops in a desperate attempt to offset their lost profits.

While the natural climate and ecosystem of the plains certainly had its role in contributing to the dust bowl, the US government's land policies were undoubtedly to blame as

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⁴ Robert A McLeman et al., "What We Learned from the Dust Bowl: Lessons in Science, Policy, and Adaptation," Researchgate, August 28, 2013, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/262342577_What_we_learned_from_the_Dust_Bowl_Lessons_in_science_policy_and_adaptation/fulltext/54929eee0cf225673b3e01e3/What-we-learned-from-the-Dust-Bowl-Lessons-in-science-policy-and-adaptation.pdf, 419.

⁵ Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014), 11.

well. The Homesteading Act of 1862 gave every adult citizen the right to claim 160 acres of land, provided they “improved” the land by cultivating it. Due to the lower fertility of the land in the Great Plains, 160 acres was not enough land to raise cattle, so many farmers felt they had no other choice but to plant wheat, which required much less land.⁶ There was also the problem of so-called “suitcase farmers”, investors from the city who would claim their parcel of land, plant it with wheat, only coming back in the fall to harvest the crop. When wheat prices fell, many of these suitcase farmers simply abandoned their fields. These unkept parcels of land contributed to soil erosion and even effected the neighboring farms which were still occupied.⁷ These mistakes were acknowledged in the report written by the Great Plains Drought Area Committee and suggestions were made that the government should instead determine which land was suitable for farming, which could be used for grazing, and which areas should be converted back into native grassland.⁸

While the drought and the aridity of the region set the stage for the Dust Bowl, and the policies of the US government exacerbated it, many scholars have argued that the main driver of the soil erosion and subsequent dust storms was simply overuse of the land, an attempt to take from the soil more than it could reasonably be expected to produce. Some have attributed this to the lust for profit inherent to capitalism while others place the blame on inexperienced farmers

⁶ Robert A McLeman et al., “What We Learned from the Dust Bowl: Lessons in Science, Policy, and Adaptation,” Researchgate, August 28, 2013, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/262342577_What_we_learned_from_the_Dust_Bowl_Lessons_in_science_policy_and_adaptation/fulltext/54929eee0cf225673b3e01e3/What-we-learned-from-the-Dust-Bowl-Lessons-in-science-policy-and-adaptation.pdf, 426.

⁷ Ibid, 428.

⁸ Hugh H Bennett et al., “Report of the Great Plains Drought Area Committee. August 1936.,” HathiTrust, August 1936, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/coo.31924000933956>, 14.

and the unscrupulous land brokers who sold off unproductive parcels of land to unwitting homesteaders.

The report produced by the Great Plains Drought Area Committee was intended to discover the causes of the dust storms on the plains and offer remedies to tackle the issues. It was delivered to the President in August of 1936 and made numerous detailed recommendations to solve many of the problems, recognizing and noting those problems which were beyond human control. The committee recommended a combination of direct government action, education for farmers, and cooperation with local governments and agencies to implement soil and water preservation measures.⁹ This report is an important primary source which is cited in nearly every scholarly book or paper concerning the dust bowl. Many of the policies were implemented and did help to control the runaway soil erosion that led to the dust storms of the 1930s.

The following month after the committee released its report, President Roosevelt addressed the nation with a plan to combat the dust storms still ravaging the plains. He spoke about what the American government could do to not only save the water and soil in the region, but to help the people affected by the drought. He insisted that many of the issues could be solved by attempting to fit agriculture where it would work within the region rather than fighting nature. The speech gives us a good idea what was concerning citizens at the time and what FDR's government intended to do to address those concerns.¹⁰

⁹ Hugh H Bennett et al., "Report of the Great Plains Drought Area Committee. August 1936.," HathiTrust, August 1936, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/coo.31924000933956>.

¹⁰ Franklin D Roosevelt, "Fireside Chat - On Drought Conditions (Transcript)," Fireside Chats of Franklin D. Roosevelt (Franklin D Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum, September 6, 1936), <http://docs.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/090636.html>.

In 2013, an article published in the scholarly journal *Population and Environment* conducted a review and synthesis of all scholarly knowledge related to the Dust Bowl. The article, entitled *What We Learned From The Dust Bowl: Lessons in Science, Policy, and Adaptation*, not only addresses the causes of the Dust Bowl but also looks back and reflects on the successes and failures of the measures enacted to combat the disaster. The study concludes that most of the policies enacted to combat the soil erosion and water waste were effective and many are still in use to this day. The article makes sure to note that dust storms, soil erosion, and water conservation are still issues faced by people living on the plains today.¹¹

In his book *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s*, renowned environmental historian Donald Worster places much of the blame for the dust bowl on the excesses of unfettered capitalism and details the myriad ways commodification of the land contributes to its destruction. Worster argues in favor of re-establishing the natural ecosystem on the plains by replanting native grasses, replenishing the wilderness with the bison and other plants and animals which evolved together, bringing balance back to the environment.¹² This book is also one which is frequently cited in papers and articles on the Dust Bowl.

While many books and scholarly articles have been written on the topic of the dust storms of the 1930s, most tend to focus on the direct causes and immediate solutions. Living now as we do, in a period of rapidly escalating climate change, I would like to see a greater focus of research into applying what we learned from the dust bowl to the droughts, desertification, and

¹¹ Robert A McLeman et al., "What We Learned from the Dust Bowl: Lessons in Science, Policy, and Adaptation," Researchgate, August 28, 2013, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/262342577_What_we_learned_from_the_Dust_Bowl_Lessons_in_science_policy_and_adaptation/fulltext/54929eee0cf225673b3e01e3/What-we-learned-from-the-Dust-Bowl-Lessons-in-science-policy-and-adaptation.pdf.

¹² Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014).

other crises we are seeing more and more in the present day. The dust bowl could be emphasized more, along with other man-made natural disasters, to bring awareness to the devastating effects of thoughtless and careless commodification. Are the people living on the Great Plains today as susceptible to dust storms as they were in the 1930s? What resources, technology, and knowledge do we have today that those living in the area almost 100 years ago lacked? Even with our advancements in science, engineering, and ecology, will the devastating effects of man-made climate change include increases in dust storms, or even the possibility of prolonged dust storms as in the so-called ‘dirty thirties’?

It is undoubtedly true that there was no single cause to the Dust Bowl but rather a confluence of factors that came together to produce the massive dust storms that raged on the plains for nearly a decade. The US government wanted the plains to be settled and they gave little thought to the actual ability of the land to be productive for farming, a major problem considering the relatively small acreage granted to homesteaders under the Homesteading acts. Many of the farmers who came to homestead and farm the land were not used to farming in an arid region, and some weren't even familiar with farming in general. The enormously profitable sale of wheat to the European market following the first world war incentivized farmers to till up as much soil as they could to plant as much grain as they could harvest. The new mechanized farm equipment available at the time made the process simpler and more destructive than ever. The droughts that led into the period of the dust bowl were the initial catalyst for the dust storms but it was also known by that time that the region was arid and not conducive to farming. Before the settlement of the plains, it was referred to by many as the “great western desert”. The prospect of cheap land ownership and high wheat prices, however, encouraged prospective homesteaders to take a leap and wish for the best, likely engaging in some self-deception

regarding the value of the land they hoped to acquire a title to. The idea promoted by some that farming the soil could increase rainfall is absurd on its face, but for people who were desperate to own land, especially profitable land, it was just what they would have wanted to believe.

Local and federal government regulators, driven by data from ecologists, stepped in toward the end of the 1930s to offer aid to the struggling farmers and to implement new farming methods, programs, and regulations to address the causes of the dust storms. Better water conservation measures were implemented, less destructive farming techniques were taught to the farmers, and the least productive land was taken out of use and allowed to revert back to grassland. Perhaps had these issues been thought out in advance, the decade of dust storms could have been avoided, or at least severely curtailed.

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