

The process of the modernization of agriculture in Austrian Silesia in 1742–1848

A change in the economic thought was already manifested in Western Europe after the Thirty Years' War. New streams spread over the entire continent. An absolutely fundamental transformation occurred in Western Europe at the beginning of the 18th century. The Wars of Spanish Succession ended then and the individual states began to devote themselves with greater effort to the building of a modern economy influenced by mercantilism and physiocracy. It was precisely under the influence of the second of the mentioned ideas that the process of the modernization of the agricultural sector was released, which was first implemented in Western Europe. From there, it spread to Central Europe, where it gradually emerged from the middle of the 18th century.

The process of modernization naturally did not avoid even the Austrian lands, which wanted to catch up with Western Europe economically. It therefore undertook an overall modernization of the economy from the middle of the 18th century, which began with agriculture. The main bearer of modernization in the Austrian lands was the central government, but the motive was the lost wars, otherwise it would not have bothered the Habsburgs!

The aim was to change the economic thinking of the populace and the owners of the estates in the area of agriculture. The government was fully aware that this change was not possible without effective governmental support. The rural people would never introduce new modernization elements into the agricultural area on their own.

Modernization in Austrian Silesia was a long-term process, started by Maria Theresa, whose aim was a general economic upturn of the primary sector in the entire Austrian union, including Austrian Silesia. The process itself took place in 1742–1848 in two stages. The first and most important was realized from 1742 until the beginning of the 19th century, thus to the end of the Napoleonic wars. It was marked by the introduction of new methodological procedures for both plant and livestock production. By means of regulations and patents, the State sought to force the subjects to introduce modernization and far-reaching changes in agriculture. In this phase, the subjects were directly confronted with dozens of new governmental regulations, which distinctly intervened in agriculture which had until then been perceived by the subjects as very static. For instance, the areas of the planting, harvesting or raising of farm animals were newly modified through the state. The subjects were newly confronted with the fact that agriculture was no longer their private affair but had become a public issue. The application of new, suitable methods influenced the entire

primary sector of production and through it also other developing branches of production. However, agriculture continued to maintain primary economic importance until the end of the 18th century.

The culmination of the above-mentioned efforts can be seen in the establishment of agricultural companies that the state entrusted with the application of government regulations. It was precisely these companies that devoted great attention to general public awareness and the technological advancement of agriculture. This effort, i.a. also the printing of specialized literature on the individual themes, did not, however, find a proper response at first. The societies were also relatively unsuccessful in the motivation of the subjects competing with financial rewards etc. The government then began to assert its aims with directives through patents. It is precisely those that are crucial for knowledge of the fundamental principles of the beginning of agricultural modernization in Austrian Silesia. Based on their analysis, we can observe the individual developmental phases of the process. In them the government focused not only on the new methods of planting, fertilizing, feeding, or breeding and caring for domestic animals, but also strictly fought against agricultural usury. It is precisely thanks to these government interventions that the process of modernization of agriculture progressed rapidly in Austrian Silesia from the mid-18th century. This effort for modernization provided its first successes both from below (the subjects and estates) and above (the government) roughly in the 1770s, thus at the time of the establishment of agricultural societies. The change in the existing method of thought was clear in the improvement of plant breeding or animal husbandry, which had a positive effect on the economic potential of the entire primary sector.

The first sign of modern agriculture was the stabilization of the primary sector, which was no longer so prone to crises and managed to cope with the consequences of natural disasters or war incidents.

The continuation of the rising trend can be seen even after the Napoleonic wars. The culmination of the initial stages of the modernization process was 1848, which brought on the one hand the abolition of serfdom and, on the other hand, created a space for the development of commercially oriented agriculture.

An important role in this period (1815–1848) was also played by the first phase of industrialization, which placed entirely new demands on the agricultural sector in connection with the development of employment in the secondary sector. The first half of the 19th century is also the period, in which agriculture begins to lose its privileged economic position and is pushed into the background by the secondary sector.

It is undeniable that agriculture in Austrian Silesia underwent a dynamic modernization advancement in 1742–1848, in which the sovereign and government initially played a crucial role. In the first phase, approximately to the beginning of the 19th century, the fundamental priorities of the modernization of the agricultural sector were formulated. In the second phase of the modernization both the state or authorities' employees and the subjects themselves became the initiators of the modernization processes. It is possible to speak of a notional takeover of the initiative by the mass of the populace. That was closely connected also with the emergent industrial revolution in the Ostrava District, which offered Austrian Silesian farmers new sales opportunities.

The process of the modernization of agriculture in Austrian Silesia thus cannot be understood as an isolated phenomenon but must be conceived as a component of the complex change of Western Europe from the middle of the 18th century.