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Agrarian Capitalism: Does Nature Matter?

Agrarian Capitalism in Theory and Practice. By Susan Archer Mann. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1990, 221 pages, \$29.95 (hardback)

Reviewed by Ann Marie Vandeman

In the intensively cultivated agricultural valleys of California, Lenin would have found confirmation of his view that the capitalist form of production was developing in agriculture much the same as in industry. But, from the Midwest, one could support the opposite conclusion and argue for the inherent superiority of family-based agricultural production. Agriculture has been organized in many different forms in many regions and time periods in the United States, from the cash grain farms of the Midwest that fit the "traditional" view of the family farm, to the wage labor-dependent factories-in-the-field of central Washington, Oregon, and California, to the sharecropping system so central to post-emancipation agriculture in the Southeast. These widely varying forms of agricultural production exist under different crops, technologies, markets, and social conditions. How do we sort out the influences of each of these factors in determining the form of production, and how do these forms change over time? Mann answers these questions in her particularly creative and intelligent new book.

Sociologists will be familiar with Mann's earlier work on this subject, well known as the Mann-Dickinson thesis. Grounded in classical Marxist theory, it attributes the central role in setting the limits of capitalist development in agriculture to nature. *Agrarian Capitalism* is an extension and further application of this earlier work.

Mann uses U.S. Census of Agriculture data to measure the degree of capitalist development, by type of crop, and the impact of natural obstacles on this development. Her main criticism of her predecessors in the debate on the agrarian question is that they have ignored the unique features of agricultural production as centered in and dependent on natural processes. She avoids reliance on the functionally determinist argument that family farms exist because capitalists prefer them to, and on the Weberian view that family farms survive because of farmers' strong drive for independence. Neither approach explains why agriculture should be organized any differently than industrial production. It is precisely the role of nature that distinguishes agriculture and industry, and that distinguishes Mann's contribution to the debate.

One reason Mann's analysis is particularly appealing is that the point is so obvious. It is "natural" that nature play a part in determining the social organization of agriculture. Wheat cannot be produced in a factory. Mann also explicitly recognizes that natural obstacles to capitalist development are influenced by social conditions and that they change over time. Thus, rather than replacing functional with biological determinism, her analysis is interdisciplinary. If you believe that the social structure of agriculture cannot be understood solely from the viewpoint of economics—or sociology, anthropology, or history for that matter—then you will like the book. I recommend it especially for those of us who tire of the one-dimensional approach that places the market always at the center of the universe.

The trouble with examining reality is that nothing stays constant, as we are so fond of assuming, and this makes her historical analysis of cotton production in the South difficult. At times, this section of the book seems confused, in part because there are so many factors to sort out which influence the social organization of cotton production. Curiously, she chose to focus on a crop that does not confirm her theory in all respects.

Natural obstacles (the length of production time) and market constraints (lack of credit for wage payments), according to Mann, helped prevent adoption of a wage labor system in cotton prior to mechanization. But, for planters, the problem of how to organize production came down to access to and control over labor power. In this context, Mann argues that sharecropping allowed planters to take advantage of unequal power relations within the family. Other writers have overlooked the role of patriarchy in disciplining family labor, including, as she points out, both Chayanov and Weber, whose concept of self-exploitation ignores the significant role of patriarchal relations in family-based production. The book is worth reading for this discussion alone and for her treatment of the role of the State and world market in the eventual replacement of sharecropping by wage labor in cotton.

The analysis is not without problems, however. For example, in attempting to explain the current use of sharecropping in strawberries, she ignores the fact that sharecroppers themselves must hire labor for the harvest. To call this a nonwage form of production is inaccurate. This is true of contract farming as well. And, although she is able to show that the use of wage labor in cotton increased when changes in technology resulted in a more even seasonal distribution of labor requirements, large seasonal peaks in labor demand in the production of many fruits and vegetables do not appear to have obstructed capitalist development in those crops. In some ways, Mann's thesis raises as many questions as it answers.

Vandeman is an agricultural economist with the Resources and Technology Division, ERS.

The book includes an extensive bibliography covering works on the sociology of agriculture, agrarian capitalism, women in agriculture, sharecropping, and the economic and social history of the South that should

not be overlooked *Agrarian Capitalism* is a refreshing and welcome addition to the literature in all of these areas

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