

Farm Work and Fieldwork: American Agriculture in Anthropological Perspective, edited by Michael Chibnik. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987. 296 pp. Maps, tables, charts, reference lists, index. \$49.50 cloth, \$16.95 paper.

In the past several decades historians have enriched their craft by adopting methodologies previously confined to the social sciences. While enthusiastically embracing quantification and statistical analysis, many have remained wary of other standard social science practices, such as the use of oral evidence, case studies, and model building. Historians may profit by considering how the contributors to this volume use ethnographic evidence in both conceptualizing and presenting their analyses.

Farmwork and Fieldwork comprises ten ethnographic studies of cultural reactions to changes in agricultural technology and economy. The book is divided into four sections: strategies for coping with change, changes in sexual division of labor, racial and ethnic differences in rural social groupings, and legal policy issues. All evidence used in compiling this volume was collected during fieldwork completed in the 1970s and early 1980s—an era of prosperity and growing capitalization preceding widespread recognition of the “farm crisis.” Nine of the ten pieces in this volume speak from a local perspective; a majority focus on the Midwest—three concentrate on Iowa, one includes Iowa evidence, and two deal with Illinois communities.

“The unique contribution of these essays rests,” according to the editor, “in the ethnographic detail they provide” (23). As well as analyzing larger economic and political trends, these anthropologists pursue their investigations in a more intimate sphere, looking at how national trends affect individual “household economic strategies, interpersonal relationships, and social institutions” (23).

Historians who employ social science methods might note a simple presentation technique used in several of the essays. Brief narrative composite cases and case studies incorporated with more generalized quantitative data do wonders to illustrate and humanize tables of numbers. Ethnographic evidence does more than simply illustrate findings, however; it also informs analysis by providing depth and texture. Susan Carol Rogers, in her study of persistence in central Illinois farmlands, incorporates a sophisticated econometric analysis with her more typical ethnographic evidence to conclude that a move to specialization may be the norm in modern agriculture, yet social and cultural factors can influence farmers to maintain production diversity. In explaining this conclusion, Rogers asserts that her analysis is more typically anthropological than economic, because “cultural values and

Book Reviews

social constraints are at least as influential on human behavior as factors such as price signals and market conditions" (84).

For the most part the contributions in this volume arrive at few startling conclusions: their contributions rather lie in methodological realms. Several do offer thoughtful and thought-provoking conceptual frameworks. Both Deborah Fink and Tracy Bachrach Ehlers, in their studies of Iowa farm women, point out the oppression inherent in an agricultural system that limits the productive capabilities of half its potential labor force. Sonya Salamon, through her study of farming patterns in two Illinois communities, defines a dichotomy in farming attitudes and goals: "yeoman" farmers are committed to a specific farm and to family continuity on that farm, as well as to the continuity of a local community system—goals they achieve sometimes at the expense of immediate profit; "entrepreneurs" are "more concerned with managing profit-maximizing businesses, [and] have little attachment to family land or community" (185). Miriam J. Wells analyzes American sharecropping systems and demonstrates that the label encompasses a wide range of economic arrangements and power distributions. She suggests three labels that would more accurately group the variety of arrangements between landlords and tenants: sharecropping, the coercive, pervasive social system typical of the South during Reconstruction; share tenancy, the system typical of midwestern cash crop farmers, where the tenant assumes control of production and in essence the landlord receives crops in lieu of cash rent; and share labor, typical of California fruit growing today, where control remains with the landlord and sharecroppers are essentially laborers receiving produce as a portion of their wages.

All of these analyses highlight the most significant potential contribution of such ethnographic studies—illustrating the infinite variation in human behavior that is often obscured by aggregate numerical data. The ethnographers' "thick description," as Clifford Geertz terms it, combines in this volume with a sharp awareness of federal policy and economic trends to provide textured and telling studies of our recent agricultural past.

STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF IOWA

CHRISTIE DAILEY

Copyright of Annals of Iowa is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.