

*Agrarian Capitalism in Theory and Practice*, by Susan Archer Mann. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990. xiv, 211 pp. Tables, graphs, appendixes, notes, bibliography, index. \$29.95 cloth.

REVIEWED BY RICHARD MAHON, MIDDLEBURY COLLEGE

This small volume (141 pages, excluding notes and appendixes) is a revision of the author's 1982 dissertation on obstacles to capitalist development in American agriculture. It addresses three major questions: What distinguishes farming from other types of capitalist enterprise? Why hasn't wage work replaced family labor on the farm? And how do natural conditions influence the social organization of agrarian life? Susan Archer Mann, a sociologist, has been an influential contributor to recent theoretical debates over the nature of capitalism in the countryside. In her new book, Mann restates and amplifies her earlier positions, responds to critics, and applies her theoretical insights to case studies drawn from the history of agriculture in the United States.

At the heart of *Agrarian Capitalism* is the "Mann-Dickinson thesis," a set of propositions about how nature limits capitalist development in agriculture. Natural hazards—pests and diseases, unpredictable weather, the perishability of agricultural produce—make farming an uncertain endeavor under any circumstances. In capitalist economies, volatile markets compound the risks by translating uncertainty about output into sharp price fluctuations. The farmer's dependence on land imposes high fixed costs and sets physical constraints on how work is organized (crops can't come to the machinery). Mann and Dickinson's most controversial argument concerns the "nonidentity of production time and labor time." In many natural processes, production time (when capital is tied up) and labor time (when human effort is exerted and surplus-value is extracted) do not coincide: crops must grow, paint dries, grapes ferment. While new technologies have helped minimize slack time in industries like brewing and dyeing, farming has proved more resistant to technological speed-ups. Mann suggests that high risk and the slow turnover of capital limit profitability in agriculture, making it an unattractive arena for capitalist enterprise. Family farms persist because they can accept lower-than-average profits. As the natural obstacles to profitability are removed, however, agriculture will presumably become more capitalist in organization.

After a brief introduction, Mann rounds up the usual suspects—Marx, Weber, Lenin, Kautsky, Chayanov, the world-system and dependency theorists—in a literature review devoted to the agrarian question. The Mann-Dickinson thesis and the debates surrounding it

occupy chapter two. The next three sections use aggregate census data and secondary sources to illustrate how that thesis might help explain long-term changes in American agriculture. While these empirical chapters do not uncover any new evidence, they do suggest new ways of looking at familiar issues. In the two chapters on cotton production, for example, Mann argues persuasively that natural obstacles to capitalist development may have contributed to the succession of slavery, sharecropping, and wage labor in the American South. The final chapter and appendixes explore the possibility of extending the Mann-Dickinson thesis to other areas, including housework and biotechnology.

*Agrarian Capitalism* is clearly written and logically organized. It is not always easy reading, but it is remarkably free from the thickets of obscurantist prose that typically flourish in theoretical writing. Nevertheless, the book will appeal chiefly to specialists in agrarian issues, southern history, or Marxist theory. Historians of midwestern agriculture may find the Mann-Dickinson thesis helpful in explaining the persistence of family farming in their region. The concept of natural obstacles may also offer new insights into early industrialization, especially in resource-oriented activities like lumbering. Like the best interdisciplinary works, *Agrarian Capitalism* demonstrates the benefits to be gained from a closer alliance of social theory and historical practice.

*Bull Threshers and Bindlestiffs: Harvesting and Threshing on the North American Plains*, by Thomas D. Isern. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1990. xiii, 248 pp. Illustrations, tables, graphs, notes, index. \$29.95 cloth.

REVIEWED BY JAMES L. FORSYTHE, FORT HAYS STATE UNIVERSITY

Thomas Isern's richly illustrated, well-documented, and well-written book is an excellent scholarly study of harvesting and threshing on the North American plains. He gracefully tells the story of harvesting and threshing from antiquity to the initial settlement of the plains. Then he artfully crafts chapters on the development of harvesting and threshing on the plains. He adds interest to the study by combining folklife with the machine and tells about the bindlestiffs, or the migrant agricultural workers, and the bull threshers. He carefully explains the developing practices of harvesting and threshing from Texas to the Canadian plains and from the Ohio valley to the Palouse valley of Washington. He ties it all together with his discussion of the development of the combine.

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