

The review essays on women and immigrants in agriculture are thoughtful explorations of gender and European ethnicity in the agricultural context. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese ambitiously—perhaps too ambitiously—attempts to assess the experience of rural women in North and South, in slavery and freedom, throughout the century. Kathleen Neils Conzen's splendid essay on immigrants in agriculture concludes the collection. A masterful consolidation of historiographical schools and empirical research, Conzen underscores the "cultural degrees of freedom" (326) possessed by folk in the rural immigrant communities situated mainly in the Middle West. That freedom encouraged the immigrants to become capitalist farmers while they nurtured ethnic traditions. In yet another context, we observe the ambiguities and tensions bestowed by that peculiar mid-western institution that simultaneously encouraged market integration and independence.

This collection, like any anthology, is uneven in quality, and the essays as a group would have been more coherent had the authors engaged one another in interpretation and substance. Alston and Reidy, who fundamentally disagree on the trajectory of economic condition for African-American farmers around the turn of the century, for example, trot out the same numerical evidence and draw differing conclusions from it. Nonetheless, readers of this volume will profit from sampling the exciting recent historical explorations of farmers in North and South who, enmeshed within their "peculiar" conditions, contributed to the making of the United States.

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*The Sociology of U.S. Agriculture: An Ecological Perspective*, by Don E. Albrecht and Steve H. Murdock. Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1990. vii, 249 pp. Graphs, references, index. \$27.95 cloth.

REVIEWED BY JOHN OPIE, NEW JERSEY INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

This book, by rural sociologists from Texas A&M University, offers a comprehensive and up-to-date textbook summary of American agriculture from a sociological viewpoint. I know of nothing comparable in print today. There is a chapter on institutional infrastructure that depends heavily on useful historical statistics. Another chapter covers agriculture's physical environment, including farm size, soil, water, and resource depletion. Separate chapters are also dedicated to traditional sociological topics, such as population and rural communities. Particularly useful today is the authors' solid chapter on nonfarm organizations.

Despite all these good things, I am troubled by the authors' claim that the book offers an ecological perspective. By this they apparently mean the long-standing sociological subdiscipline of human ecology rather than today's more widely known environmental perspective. In a long opening chapter on method, they discuss human ecology primarily from the perspective of Amos Hawley, who is quoted at length (one long quotation on page 15 is repeated on pages 19–20). This chapter is heavy slogging, ridden with long quotations, and largely unconnected with contemporary ecological thought. The authors' viewpoint is surprisingly and uncritically anthropocentric rather than naturalistic, which goes against the grain of the ecological work over more than the past century of Ernest Haeckel, F. E. Clements, H. C. Cowles, A. G. Tansley, Aldo Leopold, P. B. Sears, E. P. Odum, and R. C. Lewontin. Readers can explore the history of modern ecology in the excellent study, *The Background of Ecology: Concept and Theory*, by Robert P. McIntosh (1985); Donald Worster's *Nature's Economy: The Roots of Ecology* (1977); and F. N. Egerton's long 1976 article, "Ecological Studies and Observation before 1900." The authors' failure to take into account this other ecological perspective is particularly disappointing in light of the rapidly growing public debate about the important interactions between traditional agricultural institutions and the environmental perspective reflected in the debates and policies of the farm bills of 1985 and 1990. I repeatedly wanted the authors to drop the other shoe: there are major environmental implications of issues addressed, for example, on pages 58, 81, 83, and 103. But we are left hanging despite the appearance of a very large literature on agricultural ecology over the past thirty years. A major opportunity to clarify and enlighten the agriculture-environment interface has been missed in this otherwise thorough study.

Another problem is the authors' uncritical acceptance of a technology-based "progress"-oriented viewpoint, reflected in their open enthusiasm for the future of biotechnology and similar technological "fixes" from existing agricultural research and development (99, 213–14). The book is positivistic and optimistic. There is no discussion of alternative agriculture and potential changes in the historic infrastructure, not even of the federally supported Low Impact Sustainable Agriculture (LISA), much less organic farming. In other words the book presents an exceedingly traditionalist and uncritical perspective; if it had been written in the 1970s, it would have become a classic.

If readers and teachers can accept these limitations and correct them, this book remains a useful compendium of agricultural sociology. But an ecological approach it is not.

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