

BOOK REVIEWS

The Seeds of the Global Farm Crisis

Ploughing Up the Farm: Neoliberalism, Modern Technology and the State of the World's Farmers by Jerry Buckland, Zed Books, 2004, 224 pages.

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In *Ploughing Up the Farm*, Buckland combines his knowledge of global economics and both community and international development to critique the current farm crisis. He argues that over the past 50 years, macro-level farm policy has had a distinct pattern that has emphasized farm technology as an important means of farm improvement, a pro-urban/anti-farm bias, and the dismantling of state-centered agricultural systems. The result has been a narrowing of farm policy options that has devastated many farmers and farms around the world.

The book is comprised of six chapters that explore Buckland's argument accompanied by highlighted text boxes that provide greater detail on issues raised in the central text, followed by a short glossary of economic terms and a list of web site addresses of organizations concerned with farm and food security issues. The introduction and second chapter provide the context for the book, describing the erosion of farming over the past half century as illustrated by the depopulation of farms and rural communities; growing inequality with respect to land distribution, labor and income; and increasingly degraded land and water resources. The middle three chapters are the meat of the book, outlining in detail the impact markets, international trade and modern technology have had on farms and farming in the North and South. In the last chapter, Buckland recaps his arguments and provides suggestions for revisioning priorities in global farm policy.

Buckland argues that small and medium-sized farmers are not only producers of food and fiber but are also the foundation for a secure food supply and key contributors to rural households, communities and agricultural biodiversity—roles he sees that are effectively undermined by global agricultural policy. During the social economic development period (1950 to 1980), states in the developed world shifted their emphasis from agriculture to industrialization and economic development. This was intensified in the neoliberal globalization period (1980 to the present) as the celebration of markets and technology became driven by the interests of increasingly powerful private actors, particularly transnational corporations (TNCs). Despite promises that enhanced markets would result in increased choice over production and better prices and that modern technology would provide improved and more assured productivity, Buckland points out that many of the world's farmers have experienced a farm market squeeze. While world agricultural output has risen, stagnant or declining commodity prices and increased production costs have increasingly undermined farms and food systems. The internationalization of agricultural trade, as predominantly shaped by TNCs and northern states, has only worsened this by reinforcing the concentration of agriculture in fewer hands, undermining many of the supports for farmers in northern states and contributing to the underdevelopment of rural communities in the Global South.

In many respects Buckland offers a trenchant analysis of the corporatization of agriculture, but the text suffers from a lack of complicating specifics. Inclusion of more case examples would have better served Buckland's argument and allowed his readers to see how the general trends he outlines have taken on slightly different manifestations in different nations and contexts. Moreover, he provides useful economic analysis, but often absent is discussion of the associated complicating political factors at play. For example, in his examination of the Green Revolution, he fails to mention how this technology-driven agricultural transformation was politically motivated to redirect efforts and undermine the "red revolution" that was simmering in nations like India at the time. Similarly, in his analysis of the farm market squeeze, Buckland ignores how the presence and work of NGOs often indirectly assisted the decline of agricultural state services in the South.

A more sustained oversight is Buckland's bifurcation of the world into the neat categories of North and South. His analysis would have been enriched had he engaged with notions of the semi-periphery as a means of understanding both the supports for and effects of agricultural transformation and structural adjustment. Integrated into a discussion of global agricultural policy, inclusion of the semi-periphery would have allowed for a more complex understanding of the role states like Canada, Australia and Norway have had in global agricultural processes. In the case of Canada, in being primarily an exporter of agricultural commodities, it is subject to the pressures and dictates of the American and E.U. core. But Canada is also able to resist exploitation in certain circumstances and manners that are not open to most nations of the South.

Additionally, at times Buckland slides into an overly hopeful, if not naïve reading of traditional agriculture and the role that farmers can play in the transformation of the global agricultural food system. For example, sustainability is an issue of concern to Buckland, and in this context he talks about the importance of protecting the biodiversity of crops and seeds, agricultural land, and water sources. Yet, he fails to acknowledge the ways in which agriculture across the globe (be it organic or not) has reduced ecological biodiversity through the clearing of land/habitat and planting of nonindigenous monoculture crops. As well, in the discussion in the last chapter of the need for universal food security, Buckland identifies the need for improved farmers' rights, rebuilding rural services, and democratizing lending institutions like the WTO as key in this process. Yet, many would argue that the WTO is not the arena where these goals will be attained, because they are contrary to its mission.

Nonetheless, the broad discussion offered in *Ploughing Up the Farm* of recent and current global agricultural policy and its effects on farmers in the North and South would serve well as one of the principal readings for a senior undergraduate, or junior graduate course in rural sociology or global studies. It is a highly accessible text that includes useful explanations of theories and concepts like commodity spread, international economic agreements, such as the Agreement on Agriculture, and organizations like MERCOSUR. In particular, chapters three, four and five provide useful and important discussion about the seeds of the current global farm crisis.