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Christopher Isett and Steven Miller, *The Social History of Agriculture: From the Origins to the Current Crisis*. Lanham, Boulder, New York and London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017. xvi + 389 pp. Maps, bibliography, and index. \$00.00 U. S. (pb). ISBN 978-1-4422-0967-1.

Review by Peter M. Jones, University of Birmingham.

This is an unusual book written by two scholars from a broadly Marxist perspective. It puts forward an argument concerning the fundamental character of agrarian change and does so within the wrappers of a textbook global history of agriculture. As a joint enterprise it is also a work of advocacy, for along the way the book makes trenchant points which are not strictly relevant to the case. It terminates with proposals for sustainable rural development and an invitation to consumers to challenge elites and “take agriculture out of the profit-making business cycle” (p. 335).

The key word in an otherwise innocuous title is “social”. The authors really have in their sights the role of “society”; that is to say the complex of class relations expressed in laws, institutions and the political practices of increasingly interventionist early modern states. Readers who remember the debates on “the transition from feudalism to capitalism” which absorbed the energies of agrarian historians in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s will find that some of what Christopher Isett and Steven Miller have to say is familiar. Put briefly, they argue for the primacy of the “socio-political” when seeking an explanation of why and how subsistence-oriented peasant agriculture gave way to the cost-cutting and profit-driven phenomenon of twenty-first century agro-business. “Farming” in their formulation was structured, historically speaking, by “society” – not the other way round.

Peasant societies tended to avoid market participation when left to their own devices. Why? Because *homo economicus*, we are told, barely existed in the past. The acquisitive individual is a product of capitalist civilization and to suppose otherwise is to commit the error of “false analogy” – assuming that “people in the past behaved more or less as we do today” (p. 4). Peasants did not choose to specialize in their production of agricultural foodstuffs; it was forced on them as indeed was a wider participation in the market. The goal of farming was never to make money. Therefore, according to these authors, it follows that there can be no inevitable, pre-structured path leading in the direction of capitalist agriculture. In order to maintain this argument they play down those other drivers of agrarian change that historians have identified: demographic shifts, the expansion and contraction of towns and the “push-pull” effects of the urban marketplace. They are not very keen on natural endowments and the instrumentality of environmental factors in shaping the trajectory of agriculture either.

This highly contextualized approach to the history of agriculture is impressively global and *longue durée* in scope. It is rooted, moreover, in case studies which are worth reading on their own merits irrespective of the argument they serve to underpin.

It is in these case studies, unencumbered with footnotes, that the textbook function of *The Social History of Agriculture* becomes apparent. Chapter one explores the origins of agriculture in Mesopotamia, Ancient Rome and Han dynasty China. It tackles the question: “how did the emergence of dominant

classes capable of enforcing the extraction of surpluses affect the pattern of agricultural development?" Chapter two spans the period from Antiquity to the first manifestations of agrarian capitalism in late-medieval England. Unsurprisingly, it focuses on the conditions that permitted the establishment of feudalism in western Europe, but also on the rural economy of the high Andes prior to the intrusion of the Incas, and on the extensive slash-and-burn agriculture of West Africa before native kings took over control of the land and the peasant labour force. In contrast to much recent writing on the subject the authors emphasise the absence of land and product markets.<sup>[1]</sup> The advent of capitalism in the countryside is covered in chapter three with the aid of case studies of England in the fifteenth century and early modern Japan. A broadly social explanation for this development is found in the forms of political strife in both countries which had the unintended effect of spawning new legal freedoms and property relationships in the countryside.

The collapse of the Tokugawa shogunate would eventually make possible the removal of all traces of Japanese feudalism in the 1860s, a subject to which the authors return in a later chapter. In chapter four, however, the spotlight switches to the variant cases of early modern France and China where significant increases in agricultural output occurred without any major structural transformations of the agricultural sector. They label this phenomenon Malthusian "involutionary" growth; that is to say growth achieved by labour intensification in the interests of mere household subsistence on diminutive holdings. The next chapter moves to the New World and the fashioning of a society and economy rooted in sugar cane cultivation and slavery. Lest we suppose otherwise, the commercial plantation economy, whether in the Caribbean or in Brazil, did not lend itself to agricultural capitalism. North American farming is the topic covered in chapter six. Here the shifts in economic behaviour which would embroil subsistence farmers in commodity production again owed much to political events (war, the abolition of slavery, etc.) which in turn can be linked to the presence of tax collectors, speculators, to the sales of vast tracts of land in the Mid-West and to the scourge of debt. The impact of Belgian, British and French colonialism on agriculture in Africa is paired with the interesting contemporaneous case of Japan's colonisation of Taiwan in chapter seven, whilst chapter eight casts a critical eye over the collectivised agricultural sectors of the Soviet Union and Communist China. The relatively successful experiments in state-led agricultural capitalism conducted in France and Taiwan in the 1950s and 1960s are explained in chapter nine, and in chapter ten the authors return to the thread of developments in Brazil and the United States. Again, the emphasis is placed on the role of domestic government policy in fashioning the different versions of corporate agriculture that we know today.

In some of the later chapters especially the narrative detail tends to obscure the argument and the reader has to work hard to keep it in mind. However, this slight tension between thesis and textbook is largely resolved by a strong concluding chapter. As for the merits of the argument, it is likely, I think, that many scholars will question the basic thesis. Specialists, meanwhile, will inevitably find the case studies wanting in one area or another. The problem with the thesis is that it is too one-sided in its denial of an instrumental role for population change and urbanization: "the dominant view, which we have countered in this book, is that urbanization and population growth beget demand for agricultural supplies, allow the rural population to eye the opportunity for gain and the enjoyment of new commodities manufactured in the towns, and thereby induce the farmers to specialize in those crops and livestock fetching the highest prices on the city markets" (p. 323).

In practice Christopher Isett and Stephen Miller do sometimes allow for demographic impacts and price stimulation in their case studies, not to mention exogenous factors such as water for irrigation. As far as the case studies are concerned, I found the coverage given to agrarian pre-capitalism in England (chapter three) and to the plantation economy of the Caribbean (chapter five) to be the least satisfactory. In the former the authors describe, but they do not explain the rise of commercial farming in England. This is probably because the English peasantry appears to have been uniquely acquisitive and market-responsive, and therefore does not fit the template they have created. In the case of the plantation owners of the New World, the claim that they should not be classified as capitalist farmers because a

slave-based economy does not allow for the stimuli of cost-cutting and improvement is not very convincing. The big sugar-cane planters of the West Indies, whether British, Spanish or French, displayed many attributes of the capitalist mentality. They maximised output and cut costs, switching their mill technology (from animal traction to wind and then to steam power) whenever they learned of opportunities to innovate. To suggest that “they preferred the whip to new tools” (p. 140) is to give only a part of the story.

#### NOTE

[1] G. Béaur, P. R. Schofield, J.-M. Chevet and M. T. Pérez Picazo (eds), *Property Rights, Land Markets and Economic Growth in the European Countryside (Thirteenth – Twentieth Centuries)* (Brepols, Turnhout, 2013).

Peter M. Jones  
University of Birmingham  
[p.m.jones@bham.ac.uk](mailto:p.m.jones@bham.ac.uk)

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