

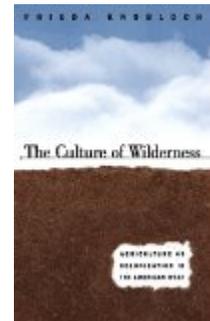
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Frieda Knobloch. *The Culture of Wilderness: Agriculture as Colonization in the American West*. Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1996. xi + 204 pp. \$23.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-4585-1; \$59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2280-7.

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*The Culture of Wilderness*, a volume in the Studies in Rural Culture Series edited by Jack Temple Kirby, is a complex book with a deceptively simple organizational strategy. After a long introduction in which Knobloch introduces the reader to the “Poetics of Agricultural History,” she organizes her argument into four topical chapters: Trees, Plows, Grass, and Weeds. A brief epilogue discusses Frederick Jackson Turner and the USDA documents which form the major part of her sources for this challenging book.

In the Preface, Knobloch describes her book as dealing with the relationship between cultivation and subjection, offering “a critique of the naturalized story of nature as becoming-culture,” that is, one in which a wild nature in the West is discovered, domesticated, and “improved.” She looks at how “western agriculture and its sciences have described and transformed western people, animals, and landscapes and what has been lost or endangered in that process.” Her purpose is to draw attention to the material as well as ideological power of this “naturalized history” so that it can be challenged by remedial and oppositional histories. While the focus is western agriculture, she poses a number of questions: how to reexamine the history of agriculture by “uncoupling state formation from food production, the technologies of war from life-sustaining practices of farming, the work of farmers from the drudgery of commodity production”; how to “take back agricultural expertise from agricultural science”; and how to “democratize the knowledge as well as the practice of food production.” She hopes that the answers to these questions will “honor indigenous land tenure and self-determination as well as social, economic, and environmental democracy all around.” These are large and important questions that she poses. The

book opens a dialogue about these questions by bringing together agricultural and western history in what she hopes is a new way.

“Introduction Abduction: Capturing the Poetics of Agricultural History” is key to understanding what Knobloch is attempting to do here. In this chapter Knobloch explains her own intellectual lineage in discussing western agriculture and western history. She uses poetics in the sense of Fernand Halryn as meaning “a tropological study of scientific theories.” In other words, the language of science, in this case agricultural science. The assumption here is that agricultural science is similar to other forms of literature which organize the world with certain assumptions and for certain purposes. She traces her scholarly antecedents in this endeavor to “materialists,” such as John Wesley Powell, Walter Prescott Webb, and Donald Worster, as well as to historians of ideas, such as Henry Nash Smith, Annette Kolodney, Richard Drinnon, Richard Slotkin, and Carolyn Merchant. Knobloch sees herself most directly indebted to historians of ideas, and most comfortably in the camp of Murray Bookchin’s “libertarian anarchist technics.” For Bookchin (and apparently for Knobloch), human society perfected a “technics of administration and control that made the domination and exploitation of nonhuman nature possible and likely.” Technics, in this case, are ideological structures rather than mechanical or technological ones. She defines agriculture as “the culture of food production that gave rise to this word and not a generic designator for how any society produces food.” Colonization, she defines as being “about enforcing landownership through a new, agricultural occupation of lands once used differently” (p. 5). Colonization brings agri/culture to wilderness.

For Knobloch, the four agricultural objects—trees, plows, grass (including livestock), and weeds—which appear in the West from 1862 to 1945 have inherent in them a “colonial technics” that make their “aggregate agriculture a thoroughly colonial operation.” Patterns of domination between classes, genders, and races circulate in the literatures of agricultural science and imply a “progressive history from the wild to the domesticated, the natural to the cultural.” In the West, the categories of nature and culture and the history they imply, Knobloch argues, are particularly legible because of the West’s identification with wilderness and the significance of the frontier in American historiography. She then traces the relationship between agricultural ideas and material agriculture practices and their effects. The four seemingly different topics of trees, plows, grass, and weeds then become consistent ways to examine agriculture in the West.

Trees, Knobloch argues, were colonized in two stages: liquidation and cultivation. Trees had to be cut down and then managed to impose state order on the continent (p. 18). The state claimed power to “unleash private deforestation” and the power “to replant forests by design, schedule their harvest, set them aside” (p. 19). Forestry, she says, developed as an alternative control to wholesale liquidation around the turn of the century, when experts began to see trees as agricultural objects, as a “crop” whose production was to be managed. Fire fighting became a part of extending federal control as the state assumed authority over access to forests and to the conditions of their use. Agricultural authority was predicated on securing the territory against invasion, conflagration, labor activism, indigenous land claims, and guaranteed territorial stability for the state and profit for its agents (p. 46).

Plows, on the other hand, were an instrument of colonization. “An entire colonial technics is embodied in the plow,” says Knobloch (p. 50), who sees plows as implying a system of domestication of animals and people with an emphasis on commodity rather than food production. Plows are historically linked to cereal-grain production and to social hierarchy, subordination of women and peasants. In the West, as elsewhere, “gardens” provide staple foods, plowed fields commodities. To encourage this type of agriculture in the West, the government developed dry farming and irrigation and thereby a hierarchy where women, Native Americans, and farm laborers were put in their respective places in the social hierarchy. Agriculture, she concludes, “is the permanent transformation of a set of subordinate beings forever after identified with ‘nature’—plants, animals, laborers, soil,

water—into something domesticated and the relentless search for means to expedite this transformation (p. 74). Plows enabled this transformation.

In her chapter “Grass,” Knobloch follows a relatively similar argument. She finds stockraising a primitive form of agriculture that soon becomes the locale for efforts to improve longhorns and sheep, to tame animals through breeding, and to tame grasslands by developing fodder crops which then leads to the management of rangelands. She defines two types of sustainable stockraising, one “progressive” that seeks to cultivate and transform nature, the other “regionalist” that adapts to nature. Here she finds pastoral expertise in the Navajo people. The authoritarian control of Navajo people through stock reduction of the 1930s destroyed this expertise and imposed a complex system of agricultural management.

In “Weeds,” Knobloch first discusses what is a weed. She cites a definition of weeds by botanist Sara Stein: a plant in the wrong place that intends to stay. Some plants ended up in the wrong place in the West—plantain, Canadian thistle, downy brome, Johnsongrass. Weedkillers or herbicides are then developed to rout them. Weeds are a kind of heroes for Knobloch because they escape or defy imposition of rules by the agrarian state (p. 144). Some weeds and some people offer the possibility of an existence outside agri/culture.

The Epilogue discusses Turner and the response to his ideas. She places him among popular colonial writers who, at the end of the century, wrote narratives concerned with the crisis in imperialism. She identifies USDA archives as an “imperial archive,” as “fantasy of empire.” She wants to reclaim knowledge from this archive, to interrupt the manufacture of “progress,” to address issues of land tenure, labor, and the patricarchal family.

I think the importance of these arguments is self evident. They encourage scholars to take a more careful look at the ideas on which federal policy was created and then implemented and to distance themselves from that policy. It provides another place from which to view food production and agriculture. As such, Knobloch’s book should encourage both discussion and new questions about the creation and application of federal policy. The following are some of the issues that I think might be fruitfully discussed.

Knobloch is much more familiar with western historiography than the historiography of agriculture. Western historians themselves have gone farther in analysing

their own historiography than have rural and agricultural historians. Knobloch has benefited from that analysis. Has the omission of a rural/agricultural critique weakened the application of her thesis? Does she miss the important ways in which rural/agricultural historians have begun that review of their own scholarly traditions?

Historians of western rural women and Native Americans have addressed these issues in fairly complex ways but Knobloch does not cite much of that literature. Studies have been done on United States agricultural policy on reservations other than the Navajo stock reduction of the 1930s. Some of these studies may strengthen her argument, but they show a great diversity in application of policy and its ramifications. Both Native history and women's history give much more emphasis on agency as well as victimization. These studies show both escape from the policy and collaboration or passive acceptance of it. While Knobloch mentions subordinate people occasionally, because they are mostly absent from her narrative, the important relationship between policy formation and implementation and response to it is lost. Not only government officials, but the people with whom they interact become relatively unimportant in this narrative. What are the consequences of this?

What are the limitations of a study so dependent upon "ideas"? Language is a crucial part in policy making but ideas are tested and revised with experience. Agricultural extension archives, for example, show real limits of influence of government in some regions of the West. Mormons, some ethnic groups, indigenous peoples, small landowners, women, and different types of rural workers, often developed their own methods of dealing with "wilderness."

Is the USDA archive too limited a source upon which to draw for an analysis? These are formal versions of policy and do not always tell us about what is going on or the lessons people derive outside of or after creating these documents. Rural history is messy and complicated. Is this paradigm complex enough to explain that history in essential ways? Rural historians do pay attention to language, though perhaps not enough, but they handle documents and archives in more complex ways than do some of the writers who emphasize the importance of the "word."

I think it is important to join regional history, the examples of wild escapes from agricultural history or the failure to do so, to a larger narrative. But, of course, this is part of the problem. A larger narrative, even in the cause

of reducing one narrative, imposes a view that may oversimplify what historians see as well as give them enlightenment about the past. Narratives do colonize in history as elsewhere. Perhaps Knobloch refrains from spelling out the oppositional story to keep it decentralized and unauthoritative. I like her careful interrogation of the narrative of agriculture, but it is not the only narrative and has not been uncontested in the past. New western historians do not always recognize the "weeds" in their paths either. There is a kind of arrogance implied in their attacks (and the counterattack, of course). Differences existed within the government as well as outside. Authority can come from local folk as well and often subordinate folk did appeal to the federal government because of local oppression. Smaller is not always more beautiful, although sometimes it is. Authority and domination can be equally oppressive when locally controlled. It is a good idea to be clear about the past and present bedfellows when one espouses a culture of wilderness or anarchistic technics.

Two presidential addresses given last year, one by Agricultural History Society president Jack Temple Kirby and the other by Western History Association president Richard White, seem relevant to this discussion. Both discussed interpretations about rural life. In "Rural Culture in the American Middle West: Jefferson to Jane Smiley," Kirby talked about Jeffersonian agrarianism being replaced by authors, such as Jane Smiley in *A Thousand Acres*, with a devastating view of the older patriarchal agricultural ideals. Somehow this fading of a belief in agrarian morality seems to go hand in hand with the hatred of the federal government that Knobloch's history also reveals. Richard White talked about this hatred of the federal government in his address, "The Current Weirdness in the West." Admittedly, he noted, there are many targets for hatred of the federal government in the West. Federal aid and federal control came together in the West. White reminded his listeners that the federal government provided the growth that westerners once wanted but that now they have to manage on their own to a much greater extent. White identified an environmentalist imagined history where a self-regulating nature, independent of humans, was shielded from use. Knobloch is clearly neither a right winger or an environmentalist fundamentalist, but there is a claim to speak for the culture of nature, i.e. wilderness, that she describes as colonized. The West, as White says, has a complicated history and a rapidly changing present in which the central role of the federal government persists. Historians, like other writers, struggle to link past, present, and future through

their ideas. Wilderness deserves a more valued place in the future, but the story of its containment in the past is certainly not clear as yet.

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