



Jane W. Gibson, Sara E. Alexander, eds. *In Defense of Farmers: The Future of Agriculture in the Shadow of Corporate Power*. Our Sustainable Future Series. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2019. Illustrations, tables. 444 pp. \$60.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4962-0673-2.

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Various events from the past year have reminded us of the fragility of the industrial food production system. In June 2021, hackers attacked the world's largest meat processing company, JBS, which led to disruptions in the supply chain. Bill and Melinda Gates's divorce provoked concerns about wider economic reliance on billionaires, including the likely restructuring of Gates's future agricultural funding and aid. And the COVID-19 pandemic, in addition to labeling farm managers and farm workers as essential personnel, reignited localized farm consumerism as housebound people turned to neighborhood gardens and community-supported agriculture (CSAs) for fresh food.

In Defense of Farmers: The Future of Agriculture in the Shadow of Corporate Power helps shed light on these events as they have been building over the past decades. It traces the proliferating consequences of corporatized, chemicalized, industrialized agriculture while speaking to what a more sustainable future (perhaps spurred by crises like the pandemic) could look like. Edited by anthropologists Jane W. Gibson and Sara E. Alexander, the book purports to focus on the place of farm managers and farmworkers in the tangled global industrial food system of today: how they got into it, how they are upholding it, and how it af-

fects their lives. In the execution of this mission, and how it may bring context to our current moment, the editors and the contributing authors do not disappoint.

Each chapter from *In Defense of Farmers* builds on or complicates the chapters before it, creating a cohesive narrative arc about food producers in industrial (also known as "chemical") agriculture. This careful organization sets this edited volume apart from others. After a personable foreword by Nebraska Farmers Union president, John K. Hansen, and an introduction by the aforementioned Gibson, the book moves from a discussion about the global agri-corporate infrastructure in place today to the granular day-to-day work of farmers within it. The chapters address the consequences of corporate consolidation, vertical integration, and the practices and products promoted by agribusinesses through a series of case studies, each focused on the effects these phenomena have on, particularly, farm managers. The stories are nuanced in their take on how farmers participate in industrial agriculture: how they go on to embrace its underlying philosophies, adopt its technologies, resist its economic constraints, and respond to its ecological consequences.

Although listed seamlessly, the ten chapters in this volume can be read as three distinct sections

followed by a conclusion. Chapters 1 and 2 provide meticulous details about the phenomena of global horizontal integration (shown through corporate consolidation) and national vertical integration (seen particularly in the livestock industry). These chapters serve as a springboard for the chapters that follow, which highlight how farm managers and laborers make decisions from the limited choices offered by these predominant seed, feed, and livestock companies. Chapters 3 through 6 consider cases where farmers respond to this seemingly standardizable system that gets tailored to specific governmental projects, environmental constraints, and moral economies. Chapters 7 through 9 illustrate how agribusinesses have built trust over time in agricultural communities, using this trust to circulate scientific knowledge and other data services alongside their products. These chapters illustrate how corporations have tapped into familial networks that go on to inspire attitudes of entrepreneurialism and self-blame when social and ecological consequences come to the fore. Chapter 10 concludes the volume with both caution and optimism: laying out some clear and practical changes for policymakers and consumers to create a more sustainable system that aims to benefit, rather than harm, food producers.

The strengths of this volume come not only from its cohesive narrative arc but also from the incredible quality of the research found in each chapter. The authorship includes sociologists, anthropologists, economists, and farm policy specialists. Many have personal ties to farming communities that go beyond their scholarly fieldwork. These connections inform a methodologically careful compilation of case studies, where authors successfully incorporate sociological theory (for example, Michel Foucault, Bruno Latour, and Tim Ingold) alongside thoughtful analyses of farm manager and farmworker interactions and interviews. As a result, the volume successfully humanizes industrial farm managers and workers without justifying the agro-industrial system in which they participate, a daunting but necessary

task when advocating for real and practical change.

An impressive theme that emerges from the text is the sociocultural oscillation and political distinctions that form between global food *security* and global food *sovereignty*. While food security emphasizes the utilitarian need to “feed more with less,” food sovereignty seeks to radically transform existing agricultural food systems with a focus on agroecology and social justice. Mary K. Hendrickson, Philip H. Howard, and Douglas H. Constance lay the groundwork for this distinction in chapter 1, and it becomes the primary through-thread in the volume as contributing authors point to how Bolivian poultry farmers negotiate their traditional values, California viticulturists navigate groundwater regulations, and Texas wheat farmers experience climate change.

One limitation of the volume lays in the choices for representational case studies. As a volume committed to talking about global industrial agriculture, the chapters are restricted to data, ethnography, and history focused on the United States, Canada, Bolivia, and Brazil. The editors argue that this focus allows the volume to better represent situations where the systems and technology of industrial agriculture have been fully embraced, leaving room for responses in scholarship that focus on countries with hybrid or developing systems within this enormous topic. With this limitation in mind, *In Defense of Farmers* would work well in undergraduate- or graduate-level seminars where it can be assigned alongside other books and volumes that broaden the scope of the discussion about global agriculture, food production, or capitalism. This includes potential seminars focused on American studies or US history, since the volume’s focus on industrial farm managers also limits the scope of the actors highlighted in the US-based case studies.

For instance, the last two chapters of the volume ask two important questions: How do industrial agricultural practices, and the companies

attached to them, perpetuate colonization? And who should policymakers and consumers focus their attention on to reconfigure this broken system? In chapter 9, Gibson and Benjamin J. Gray use the depopulation of Kansas to anchor a discussion about the interconnected processes of colonization and modernization, and although the longer racial history of the region is rich for this discussion, the chapter focuses on the predominately white population of industrial crop farmers. As a result, the chapter presents a great example and discussion that would pair well with more recent scholarship that explores the theoretical power of colonization with indigenous knowledge and experience in mind, such as Max Liboiron's *Pollution Is Colonialism* (2021).

Similarly, economist John Ikerd's final chapter brings attention to the kind of farmer who should be of focus in the quest to create more equitable and sustainable food production networks. He notes the importance of caring for farmers within a community, the diversification of farming practices, and the embrace of an agrarian ethos that may help fuel a reconfiguration of the system at hand. The examples presented imply some attention to farmer representation but without the overt naming of the history of racism that continues to inform the racial distribution of farm managers in the US today. Reading this in the time and policies of the pandemic, it is interesting to consider how the Justice for Black Farmers Act may have started to fulfill some of these philosophical and practical suggestions offered by Ikerd's conclusion.

Although written and published in what many of us may now call the "before times," *In Defense of Farmers* delivers a timely contribution to helping us better understand how we got to the corporate-hijacked food system we have today and how farm managers navigate this framework as they simultaneously promote and resist it. This edited volume is sharp in its critique while careful in its delivery, making it an important book for both

scholars in the humanities and practitioners in the agricultural sciences. Through its successful disciplinary bridging, certainly contributing to its considerate tone, *In Defense of Farmers* will prove a useful foundation for practical conversations about the future of food production.

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