

Books

Malthus, Agribusiness, and the Death of the Peasantry

GLENN DAVIS STONE

Department of Anthropology, Washington University, St. Louis, Mo. 63130-4899, U.S.A. (stone@artsci.wustl.edu). 25 11 01

Hungry for Profit: The Agribusiness Threat to Farmers, Food, and the Environment. Edited by Fred Magdoff, J. B. Foster, and F. H. Buttel. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000.

The Malthus Factor: Population, Poverty, and Politics in Capitalist Development. By Eric B. Ross. London: Zed Books, 1998.

Of all the societal changes of the last half century, the most dramatic and far-reaching, according to Eric Hobsbawm (1994:289), is the death of the peasantry. Between World War II and the 1980s, percentages of populations involved in farming and fishing dropped dramatically worldwide. For instance, in Japan the drop was from 52% to 9%; in the United States, where Nixon's Agriculture Secretary Earl Butz instructed farmers to "get big or get out," less than .5% of the population claimed to run a farm as a principal occupation (NASS 1999: chap. 1, table 16). Yet in less developed countries there remain vast populations still engaged in primary agricultural production and with only partly monetarized economies. Are claims of the peasantry's death exaggerated—or merely premature? Depeasantization is definitely afoot, and the prospect is ominous. Where it is difficult for cities to absorb greatly increased influxes, decimation of agricultural peasantries would be catastrophic.

Depeasantization has been an issue of keen interest among historical materialists. Their analysis begins with the observation that capitalist development "stops at the farm gate" (Mann and Dickinson 1978), barred by the special properties of all of the main productive resources in agriculture: *land* is fixed, *seed* is produced by the farmer, and *labor* must be skilled and seasonally variable (and is therefore hard to commodify completely). Ask how agricultural capital has responded to these obstacles and you will be led to the playbook for depeasantization. Magdoff, Foster, and Buttel's *Hungry for Profit* brings together many of the most important answers to this question. It is complemented by Ross's *The Malthus Factor*, a sharp-edged analysis of the role of Malthusianism

in capitalist development. Together the books offer a synthetic model of the ongoing transformation of agriculture that may be summarized as follows: Agribusiness profits by either driving independent farmers off their land or metabolizing farm operation so that farmers become a proletariat—one different from what Marx described but a proletariat nonetheless. The state subsidizes this transformation and the technologies used to pry peasants from the life of independent production. The transformation is justified by the deceptive trope of population outstripping food supply, a trope designed to naturalize the urban proletariat and instantly popularized into the ultimate antipolitics machine. Dominated by swollen and subsidized transnational corporations, the transformation continues today. It generates food insecurity and hunger as it goes and uses that hunger—perennially interpreted in Malthusian terms—to justify further expansion.

Hungry for Profit is made up of 11 articles originally published in *Monthly Review* in 1998, with additions by Araghi and by Majka and Majka. It begins with two chapters providing historical context to the ongoing transformation in world agriculture. In "Agrarian Origins of Capitalism," Wood argues that, although capitalism was supposedly "born and bred in the city," it actually came into its own in the English countryside. It was here, well before the 18th-century parliamentary enclosures, that market forces were first used to expropriate land rights and force farmers into tenancy. This was paralleled by competition to boost productivity by "improvement," meaning enhancement of the land's productivity for profit. (The history is recorded in the language: *farmer* comes from the term for rent, while *improvement* is from the term for profit.) Foster and Magdoff's "Liebig, Marx, and the Depletion of Soil Fertility" follows the effects of these developments into the 20th century. "Improvement" turned out to be urban robbery of rural endowment, and it prompted a global search for plunderable nutrients. This led, improbably, to guano imperialism and later to heavy reliance on synthetic fertilizers, disintegration of stock-crop ecology, increasing agricultural specialization and geographic concentration, and a host of related environmental problems. This splendid essay, which puts theory and agricultural ecology into a historical context, is marred only by its use of Mao's China as an example of how nutrient cycling and rural self-sufficiency can be achieved (this would be the same Mao whose agrarian policies starved over 30 million peasants).

Heffernan's "Concentration of Ownership in Agriculture" covers the advent of vertically and horizontally integrated transnational food megacorporations. These prosper not by producing more efficiently but by destroying smaller competitors (which is why new hog-processing facilities are being built in the United States

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while the market value for hogs is below the cost of production). They further proletarianize farmers through debt traps and extract wealth from local communities, enjoying state protection all the while. These three excellent chapters provide an efficient short course on the political economy of agriculture from the paleotechnic small farmer to the global food corporation.

The book then heads off into multiple directions. Altieri summarizes the key issues in the ecology of industrial agriculture, with special emphasis on the problems of the new genetically modified products. Lewontin analyzes the role of technology in capitalist penetration of the farm sector. Middendorf et al. provide an overview of how biotechnology is changing uses of economic plants and animals, examining how these changes, humanitarian rhetoric notwithstanding, endanger food security.

McMichael's intriguing "Global Food Politics" identifies the politics of subsidy as the driving force behind agricultural systems worldwide. He argues that, in contrast to Britain's colonial economies, the United States had a history of integrated manufacturing and farming that produced an energy- and capital-intensive agriculture early on. U.S. government subsidies for inputs, grain exports, and agribusiness technologies have favored transnational food corporations to the point of virtually eradicating American small farmers and gravely endangering farmers in less developed countries. One direct result, as described in Araghi's following chapter, is depeasantization and the attendant rise in urban hopelessness and environmental deterioration.

The remaining chapters probe concrete effects and case studies. Majka and Majka address Mexican farm immigration and the farm labor contract system. Henderson describes and advocates sustainable agriculture movements. Poppendieck analyzes redistribution programs that provide "moral relief" while obscuring the recurrent patterns of hunger amid food surpluses such as the depression-era "breadlines knee-deep in wheat." Rossett describes the advent of sustainable agriculture in Cuba following the collapse of Soviet subsidies for high external inputs, and Hinton covers land reform in China.

This is a strong and timely collection that distills work on various aspects of the transformation of world food production. Although it is often not made clear, many of these chapters are condensations of (or at least draw heavily on) longer works. Poppendieck draws on her books on depression-era food policies (1986) and current food charities (1998); Wood distills her book on agrarian origins of capitalism (1999); Magdoff and Foster summarize material from Foster (1994) and Rossett summarizes material from Rossett and Benjamin (1994); Lewontin summarizes issues that he has written much on (e.g., Lewontin and Berlan 1986) and that have been treated extensively by Kloppenborg (1988). This condensation of much research is a strength, but the book is a very poor guide to what is being condensed. If not actual citations, at least "Further Reading" lists should have been provided.

There are also a few topics that cry out for more cov-

erage. The book deals little with the patenting of Southern crops and the uncomfortable collusion between universities and corporations in this process. It barely mentions the "deskilling" of farmers that was a crucial element in capital's penetration of agriculture in the North and is well under way in the South. Finally, it falls short with regard to proposals for action. For instance, following Henderson's relatively upbeat survey of sustainable alternatives to corporate farming, an editors' italicized afterword asks if such activities might not be simply a "minor irritant to corporate dominance of the food system," since actual reform requires "complete transformation of society." Good question, that; so where does this leave us?

These weaknesses are minor compared with the collection's strength as a compelling, historically oriented survey of the political economy of the state-supported corporate takeover of world food production. But there is a stark disparity between this view of food production, in which enormous social and environmental costs are exacted for corporate profit, and the deep-seated view in Western public, government, and some scientific circles that technology-driven agricultural "progress" is imperative and ultimately humanitarian. *Hungry for Profit* does little to explain how we wound up with perspectives separated by such a chasm. The answer, in a word, is Malthus, and this is why Eric Ross's history of Malthusianism serves well as a companion volume.

Malthus is here seen as the smokescreen that allows the processes described in *Hungry for Profit* to operate. Malthusianism is a model that perpetually fails to fit world events but every year "arises phoenix-like from the ashes of popular opinion" (Watts 2000). *Essay on the Principle of Population* purported to describe a relationship between agriculture and population growth, two topics about which Malthus knew little. The reasons for the model's warm reception have always been not scientific but political. For Ross (p. 1), Malthus's "most enduring influence has been to shape academic and popular thinking about the origins of poverty, and to defend the interests of capital in the face of the enormous human misery which capitalism causes."

Ross traces the history of the doctrine and its deep effects on both popular thinking and public policies ranging from eugenics to the Green Revolution. The opening chapters place Malthusianism (and Malthus himself) in British history. Fifty years after its publication, his *Essay* enjoyed apparent confirmation by Ireland's potato famine. Irish peasants had been relegated to poor soils and a potato diet while landlords maximized production of export foods, and exports of wheat and beef continued—in fact, *increased*—throughout the famine. Such tragedies make a niche for ideas that forestall guilt or, as Poppendieck puts it in *Hungry for Profit*, provide moral relief. For Britain, moral relief came in the form of Malthus's model of the intrinsic relationship between population and food production. To ice the cake, Reverend Malthus blamed the high population on the poor's lack of moral restraint. Thus Ireland, a food-exporting country that had experienced no population buildup, be-

came, as Marx wrote disdainfully (quoted by Ross, pp. 31–32), the “promised land of the principle of population.”

That famine also provided an early example of the theory’s concrete effects on policy. The director of the relief program (a former student of Malthus’s named Trevelyan) set the tone when he described the famine as “a direct stroke of an all-wise and all-merciful Providence.” Aid was kept down, heeding Malthus’s injunction that feeding the suffering would only produce more sufferers; the famine became the excuse for further concentration of land, squeezing out small farmers and eventually turning Ireland into a pasture for Britain.

Malthusianism became increasingly entrenched in popular conceptions in the United States with the aid of organizations such as the Malthusian League, founded in 1877 to promote Malthus’s unsupported claims, now described as “laws of population.”

The 20th century brought new outgrowths of Malthusianism. One was eugenics. Malthus’s demographic determinism rationalized poverty as the result of overproduction promoted by the poor’s moral failings; eugenics took the next step in concluding that these moral deficiencies were innate. The poor threatened social order not simply by their numbers but by eroding the nation’s “racial stock.” Ross traces this variant of Malthusianism through the Western intellectual establishment (including the Harvard faculty, which gave us Stoddard’s *The Rising Tide of Color Against White World Supremacy* [1920]) and on to the Nuremberg Laws and radical environmentalism (the introduction to *Rising Tide* was penned by a leading environmentalist). By the mid-20th century “environmental catastrophism” had become the principal vehicle for Malthusian fears, from Osborn’s *Our Plundered Planet* (1948) to Ehrlich’s *Population Bomb* (1968) and Hardin’s “Tragedy of the Commons” (1968). Ross points out that Garrett Hardin was a eugenicist long before he became a darling of the environmental movement; in 1949, when “the ovens at Auschwitz and Dachau were barely cool,” he wrote that the real problem with population was that those with low IQs were overproducing. To Ross, Hardin’s famous “Tragedy of the Commons” is a masterpiece of cold war Malthusianism, a “clever defense of private property and an argument against ‘the welfare state,’ phrased in terms of the environmental and demographic concerns of the world in which it was published” (p. 76). The parties that would engage in Hardin’s solution of “mutual coercion mutually agreed on” were always unequal in power, and the results would invariably be appropriation of resources. His “Tragedy” stimulated research on common property (e.g., McCay and Acheson 1987) that showed how little his hypothetical unmanaged commons had to do with reality, but there had been plenty of information on this before. The warm reception of his essay merely reveals how deeply Malthusianism had penetrated scientific thought.

If the poster child for Malthus’s theory in the 19th century was Ireland, in the 20th it was India. India had long been fertile ground for Malthusianism. Although

writers would now attribute famines to colonial taxation and land policies (e.g., Ludden 1999), 19th-century British officials (including Trevelyan of the potato-famine relief program, who served in India between 1859 and 1865) stressed that Indian populations were reproducing faster than food supplies. Malthusianism offered humanitarian justification of high taxes, as lowering the tax burden could be expected to encourage fertility. The signal event for 20th-century Malthusianism, however, was India’s Green Revolution. The reasons behind India’s dependence on grain imports have been described elsewhere (e.g., Perkins 1997): much of the country’s breadbasket was lost in partition, and the United States was dumping wheat both to protect prices and to combat communism. But Ross delineates the vital role of Malthusianism in the interpretation of the situation and the shaping of policy. Led by the Ford Foundation, a major effort was mounted to reapply Malthus to India, and the doctrine of population growth as cause of political instability came to be a prime instrument of U.S. policy. By the 1960s the world believed that India was approaching a “demographic point of no return,” but Ross sees the evidence for this prediction as “the sort of jugglery which gives statistics a bad name.” The post-Nehru government favored the interests of the industrial elite in seeking to provide a cheap urban workforce. Thus, when the Rockefeller Foundation (another “mouthpiece for U.S. interests”) helped India buy 18,000 tons of Green Revolution seed in 1966, it served U.S. cold war interests and the interests of Indian capital while reinforcing the perception that India’s problems were Malthusian rather than political. Moreover, as several contributors to *Hungry for Profit* would be quick to point out, the new agricultural technology, heralded as beneficial to Indian peasants, actually contributed greatly to the state-supported industrialization of agriculture that threatens smallholder livelihoods.

This book is important, troubling, and fascinating. Ross’s writing runs a bit to scorn, but it is clear and mostly devoid of Marxist jargon (for a less penetrable recent critique of Malthus’s effect on policy, see Greene 1999). It is a more academically oriented book than *Hungry for Profit*, with better references, although there are still numerous works discussed in the text that are missing from the bibliography. One wishes that there were a lighter version of it that might make a dent in public discourse on the ongoing transformation of food production. Given the pivotal role of “the Malthus factor” in shaping and rationalizing policies promoting the agribusiness threat to peasantries and the environment, this perspective is of vital importance.

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What Remains of Modernity: Ferguson on 20th-Century Zambia

JON ABBINK

African Studies Centre, Leiden, The Netherlands
(abbink@fsw.leidenuniv.nl). 3 III 01

Expectations of Modernity: Myths and Meanings of Urban Life on the Zambian Copperbelt. By James G. Ferguson. Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1999. 326 pp. \$45 cloth, \$17.95 paper

Expectations of Modernity is a gripping narrative of the other side of the "globalization process" that calls into question many of its assumptions. James Ferguson's study of declining urban Zambia presents a sensitive and informed critique of modernization theory and of the widespread myth of access to the blessings of industrial

consumer society for all if only the "market" can reach them. (Even UN Secretary Kofi Annan has recently joined the chorus of uncritical "globalists.") It is a pity that it is unlikely to be read by those who need it most—those working in the World Bank, the World Trade Organization, and the development aid ministries of the "donor" countries.

In this fascinating study, Ferguson reveals the painful "win-lose" situation that globalization is for many, especially in Africa. Using the Zambian example, he questions the teleological models of modernization and industrial development that have long dominated economic and social science debates and led to so many misguided conclusions. He underlines that phases of material development and boom are not a linear move toward affluence but often temporary and, to the dismay of those caught up in them, apt to end in decline and deep crisis. The social and cultural effects of dramatic downturns are conveniently ignored by economists and advocates of unfettered globalization.

When modernity, in its material shapes of industrialization, urbanization, economic growth, and rising consumption levels, collapses, personal disarray, loss of meaning, and despair can be the result (p. 14) as the ideological superstructure of values, aspirations, and expectations dissolves. Ferguson presents an interesting and acute analysis of such a process in Copperbelt Zambia. Zambia had a promising future at the time of its independence in 1964 because of its seemingly successful trajectory of industrialization and modernization since the 1920s, but it was all built on sand. The Arab oil policy of the 1970s and the declining buying power of Zambian copper on the world market did their work, and as a result not only did the urban working people's material conditions of life melt away but their ambitions and their belief in the future and in personal improvement and dignity eroded dramatically.

The book contains six chapters, most of them theoretical-interpretive and two of them more empirical, based on observations, case studies, and interviews with former miners and urban people in the late 1980s. Many of these people were forced by the economic misery in the cities to "go back" to the rural areas, often to relatives whose lifestyles they did not understand or felt uncomfortable with. Ferguson convincingly describes the differences in style and in outlook and records the miners' expressions of their failed expectations and struggles.

The first chapter ("The Copperbelt in Theory") is an account of the changes in Zambia in the period of economic growth (with the Zambian GDP per capita in 1969 higher than in Brazil, Malaysia, Turkey, or South Korea) and of the way an earlier generation of social scientists (e.g., those of the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute) interpreted the industrial and urban developments there. While there were already some critical voices at the time (e.g., G. Wilson), most saw the changes as an irreversible upward trend establishing a new urban culture and society. In his reanalysis, Ferguson ably dissects what he calls the myth of modernity/modernization that has cap-