

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

JERRY BUCKLAND, *Ploughing Up The Farm: Neoliberalism, Modern Technology and the State of the World's Farmers*. Winnipeg: Fernwood Publishing, 2004, xix + 235 p.

In this text, Buckland brings together a wide range of information drawn from numerous sources which, when taken as a whole, provides convincing evidence that the ongoing plight of farmers around the world is not simply a result of the natural spread of labour-reducing technology and knowledge between regions. Rather, Buckland argues that the imposition of technology, extra-cultural farming practices, genetic uniformity, and an international trade regime that undervalues the production of food are promoted by those who seek to impose the neoliberal ideology of the market as final arbiter of social value on the planet. Relying on statistics developed by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, reports of the World Bank respecting development issues, and studies by researchers and organizations examining topics ranging from market monopolization to soil erosion in the world's least developed countries, Buckland shows that the current trend toward a homogeneous, international agricultural market free of governmental intervention carries a number of negative consequences that must be addressed.

Of particular interest are Buckland's conclusions regarding the impact of key features of the neoliberal program. Initially, market principles that purportedly offer farmers access to fair prices and fair costs are found to be traps that lock small farmers in a vise between low commodity receipts and high input prices. This is reinforced by exposing uncompetitive farmers to "free-trade" markets that will supposedly expand their sale options in new markets but which, in reality, are subject to massive support programs that cannot be matched by impoverished nations struggling to compete. To better participate, these farmers must join in the race for modern technologies that will give them a competitive advantage over others – only to find that choices as to crop varieties, input requirements, and markets are illusory in a one world marketplace. Buckland concludes that farmers are driven off the land as labour becomes redundant, genetic variety suffers as the use of chemicals and patented seed spreads across boundaries, and "food security" disappears.

The author poses a solution based on the linked concepts of "food security" (a policy founded on the rights of individuals to food and the rights of farmer to the genetic stock they have created over time despite patent laws) and "food sovereignty" (which posits that individuals and communities

have the right to develop their own food policies and farming practices by restricting market access to locally grown items). State subsidies, price controls, traditional farming techniques and crops, land redistribution, transportation subsidies for food distribution, restrictions on foreign access to food markets, and the preservation of environmental diversity may all have a role to play. However, such policies may not be utilized if market forces and trade legislation are imposed on the least developed countries as these typically cannot compete in the market or influence the policies that are set. The playing field is far from level given the starting point from which non-developed nations must begin. Buckland thus contends that support must be given to farmer-driven policies that encourage food security and environmental health rather than neoliberal policies devoid of cultural references and that lead to degradation of both people and their environments. This would require increases in social supports for farmers if food costs are to remain low to ensure food security for urban dwellers unable to provide for their own subsistence. Current policies tend to impose the cost of maintaining low food prices on farmers, while such a policy change would shift the cost to society as a whole.

Buckland provides an interesting, readable, and informative glimpse into the sphere of food economics and politics from the perspective of the producer. While a market-driven, high-technology system can produce vast amounts of food, it comes at a cost to farmers everywhere and particularly to those being drawn into the market system by forces beyond their control. If the book has a weakness, it lies in the attempt to argue that neoliberalism has contributed strongly to changes in farm practices in developed countries. The argument loses force when applied to societies in which the market system, technological innovation, and free trade already existed. Reductions in rural populations have been ongoing since the first mechanization of operations began, the search for improved methods, seed and inputs began before mechanization, and ongoing exposure to competition for markets in which a limited number of products were desired (or supplied) has left only the strongest competitors standing to now compete with those from less developed regions. The fate of farming in the northern hemisphere may thus stand as a lesson to be learned as to the long-term effects of these policies by those only recently drawn into the international market system. Nevertheless, the effort to suggest that neoliberal policies did more than accelerate the process to a limited degree falls somewhat short of convincing. Buckland's solutions, however, draw on the work of many proponents of policy change. Indeed, the proposed solutions could prove effective in regions not already too far under market influences and provide some hope for those opposed to the extension of developed world policies to less developed regions. The book is a must read for anyone interested in the interaction of food policy, neoliberalism and globalization, or in issues of social justice.

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