

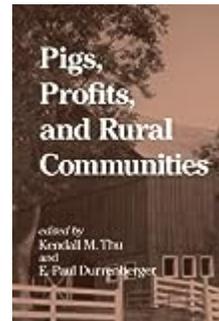
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Deborah Fink. *Cutting into the Meatpacking Line: Workers and Change in the Rural Midwest (Studies in Rural Culture)*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998. xv + 235 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2388-0; \$30.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-4695-7.



Kendall M. Thu, E. Paul Durrenberger. *Pigs, Profits, and Rural Communities (SUNY Series in Anthropological Studies of Contemporary Issues)*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998. vii + 208 pp. \$23.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7914-3887-9; \$22.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7914-3888-6.



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THE VIRTUES OF ANTI-AGRARIANISM, AND AGRARIANISM TOO

Unlike most academic treatises, these two books overpower the reader with a powerful sense of smell. We are treated to vivid descriptions of the aroma of dead swine flesh in Deborah Fink's powerful dissection of the contemporary Iowa meatpacking industry; in turn, we get many chances to catch a whiff of the pig manure that is one of the most common motifs of Kendall Thu and Paul Durrenberger's anthology on contemporary corporate hog factories. An older worker in Fink's book recounts swallowing his own vomit while working in the midst of the grotesque stench of the hide room; country

folk are no longer able to put out their laundry due to the odors told of in Thu and Durrenberger's essays.

That pungent sense of smell is just one sign of the genuine force of these books. Both combine hard-hitting analysis with impressive attention to ethnographic detail. Both are outspoken in their concern for contemporary rural life, especially in Iowa. Both include fearless voicing of calls for social justice. Both are important, even crucial, accounts of the transformation of the modern countryside.

That said, it is important to understand that each book is considerably different in its intellectual orientation. Above all, Deborah Fink writes as an impassioned critic of the agrarian tradition, while the contributors to Thu and Durrenberger's volume come proudly out of the Jeffersonian mindset. That both books together are so significant is a sign not of intellectual confusion, I think, but of the vigorous contest of ideas animating our attempts to understand modern rural life today. As we on H-Rural have found over the last year, a passionate debate between agrarians and anti-agrarians remains one of the best ways for us to insure the continued relevance of rural issues in modern intellectual life.

Deborah Fink is quite familiar to the H-Rural virtual community. She is the author of a profound meditation on class and gender, *Open Country Iowa, as well as the most significant scholarly feminist criticism of American rural patriarchy*, *Agrarian Women*. She also serves as book review editor for this list. With *Cutting into the Meatpacking Line*, Fink has scored another major triumph. All scholars concerned about contemporary country life must read this book, and in an ideal world all rural citizens and policy makers would confront her challenging ideas.

Fink provides us with her usual creative blend of anthropology and history in *Cutting into the Meatpacking Line*. The book is primarily an ethnographic study of Fink's four-month experience as a worker in an Iowa Beef Producers plant in Perry, Iowa (until the end, unbeknownst to the IPB authorities). Yet it is much more than this: Fink also provides us with our first genuinely integrated history of class, gender, and race in the agrarian heartland.

Kendall Thu and E. Paul Durrenberger are also anthropologists, although *Pigs, Profits, and Rural Communities* makes no pretense to historical analysis. Instead, Thu and Durrenberger have brought together a diverse set of social scientists, scientists, farmers, and political activists (including former U.S. senator Robert Morgan from North Carolina) to survey the consequences of the recent rise of corporate hog farming—with a primary focus on Iowa and North Carolina.

To put it mildly, Deborah Fink is not happy with current affairs in rural America. The same is very much true of the contributors to Thu and Durrenberger's anthology. Beyond that, however, their critical eye, and their political concerns, are in very different places.

Deborah Fink's bete noire has long been Thomas Jef-

erson, and even though Jefferson's shadow is not nearly as long here as in *Agrarian Women*, our third president continues to take a beating in *Cutting into the Meatpacking Line*. Of course, it is really Jefferson's heirs that matter to Fink, and they have a lot of reckoning to do after her effective demonstration of the strength of the industrial tradition in the rural Midwest. Twentieth-century rural Iowa has never lacked its wageworkers, its factories, and its strikes. Farmers had their farmhands, farm wives their domestic help, and their son his job in town. In fact, during this century the working class has generally constituted the majority of the rural midwestern population, but the agrarian tradition has tended to render proletarians invisible.

Indeed, Fink compellingly argues that industrial meatpacking and commercial farming have grown up in a symbiotic relationship, with farmers growing docile hogs for slaughter and rural residents providing docile labor to perform the slaughtering. Neither hogs nor labor were necessarily quiescent all the time, but by and large the system worked well for both workers and management—above all in the post-World War II golden age when unions and company jointly prospered.

IBP then entered the story, disrupting this harmony with an aggressive new cost-slashing set of strategies, and soon the golden age was over. In its place came a new system of meatpacking that took, and continues to take, a tremendous human toll. Fink does not shy away from speaking truth to power when describing this new regime. Indeed, the most powerful parts of her book are her stories of the "carnage" (xiv) and brutalities inflicted upon individual workers; these accounts are truly masterpieces of the anthropological art. They are also, at times, simply heart-breaking.

Fink pays particular attention to the shopfloor itself. We learn much here about the intricacies of whizzard knives and janitorial duties, carpal tunnel syndrome and painful back injuries, racist foremen and workers urinating into meat as a way of getting back at authoritarian supervisors. Indeed, Fink's voice as a self-conscious middle-class scholar coming into an alien working-class world is profound. As Fink writes, "Only forty miles from my home in Ames, this fieldwork took me as far from my own culture as I had ever been."(38)

The most important ethnographic contribution of *CUTTING INTO THE MEATPACKING LINE* is the description of women's work within meatpacking plants. In particular, the accounts—both historical and contemporary—of sexual harassment are truly horrifying.

With the active collusion of both union and management, women workers faced both constant sexual touching and joking as well as even more dangerous physical abuse.

Beyond ethnography, Fink shows how using gender as a central analytical tool nearly turns the traditional agrarian story of rural declension on its head. Without for one second absolving IBP of its ultimate responsibility for the way it treats workers, Fink compellingly shows how the trope of the evil corporate behemoth destroying the livelihoods of prosperous workers is very much a male narrative. The post-war golden age was for men; for women workers it was a nightmare.

Over and over, Fink shows how male workers in general, and the UFCW local in particular, consistently treated women as an enormous low-wage threat rather than as a potential source of solidarity at a time of major transformation within the industry. The vicious irony is that such sexism completely played into the hands of IBP, whose entire labor policy was based on deskilling workers. Since male workers almost never allowed women to gain valuable skills in the first place, they were helpless when IBP sunk wages, in part by hiring more women. In Fink's words, "the use of women workers was fundamental to deskilling jobs and thereby breaking the grip of the packing unions," (94) and "the union, in digging in its heels to preserve the old system, conceded gender to the manipulation of packing companies, thereby contributing to the deterioration of conditions for all workers." (112)

Fink follows the same general line of analysis when it comes to issues of race. She points to the long history of African Americans in Perry and then highlights the new Latino and Asian immigration that promises to change forever the face of the rural Midwest. Fink's analysis here is not as forceful, as she herself recognizes. While highlighting the exploitation of these workers in the meatpacking plants, she also understands that for many new immigrants to Iowa, Perry represents something of a haven in comparison to their previous lives. Still, the structural conditions for blacks, Latinos, and Asian Americans is basically the same as for women: the company exploits them, the majority of white workers harass them, and the union has no substantive interest in racial equality.

Indeed, IBP is not the only villain in *Cutting into the Meatpacking Line*. Fink is an all-out supporter of *unionization*, and she has great scorn for the "primal distaste for labor organization" (165) that she finds among rural Iowans. But this by no means makes her a romantic. Not

only is the Perry UFCW local a full and active partner in discrimination against women and peoples of color, it has consistently cut sweetheart deals with the company and purged dissidents. It is difficult not to conclude, as Fink does, that the current "union structure as a whole has constituted a barrier to [workers] rather than an avenue through which they have been able to effect positive changes." (196)

A similar lack of hope in the current political situation informs *Pigs, Profits, and Rural Communities*. Above all, the essayists insist on the tremendous price that farmers, the environment, the communities involved, and the supposedly democratic political process have paid with the coming of corporate hog farming.

Kendall Thu, E. Paul Durrenberger, and the contributors to the anthology provide excellent evidence of these costs. To begin with, the figures involved are stunning: "The number of swine producers has declined precipitously from 750,000 in 1974 to 157,000 by the end of 1996. Between 1994 and 1996 one out of every four hog producers left the business." (7)

We also learn that the coming of large-scale hog confinement facilities (the hallmark of the corporate approach) is not by any means merely the result of economic efficiency. This trend very much relies on political favoritism, discriminatory pricing structures at packing plants, and the misuse of anti-nuisance laws. Corporate hog farms have led to considerable environmental damage, and at times genuine ecological disasters, especially when underground sewage lagoons burst and flow into nearby rivers. Occupational injuries are prevalent among the farmers who contract, under a kind of "indentured relationship," (147) to tend the hogs between weaning and slaughter. The most scientific study in the collection even shows how seriously the odors associated with massive, concentrated hog manure affect the very moods of neighbors. And anthropologist Mark Grey, in a study of Storm Lake, Iowa, confirms Fink's findings of the exploitation of meatpacking workers and the attendant educational and health costs borne by local communities as the result of IBP's callous mistreatment of its workers.

Although Thu and Durrenberger unfortunately make the pseudo-scientific mistake of claiming that their book has no "political agenda" (4), they and their essayists consistently make both social scientific observations and political declarations. They are particularly interested in the alternatives to corporate hog farming, whether through the use of sustainable agriculture or via democratic producers' networks. And, without exception, the authors'

political viewpoints flow proudly out of the agrarian tradition. Walter Goldschmidt, author of the classic *AS YOU SOW*, is the patron saint of the book and provides the concluding essay on “The Urbanization of Rural America.” Family farmers, struggling against tremendous economic and political odds, are the heroes of *Pigs, Profits, and Rural Communities*. And, I think, rightly so.

How can one read *Cutting into the Meatpacking Line*, and agree with so much of it—and then turn around and still uphold the (at least relative) virtues of family farmers? Precisely because we may find it the appropriate time to move beyond simple agrarianism and anti-agrarianism in our scholarly and political analyses.

Indeed, Deborah Fink herself has asked us to do precisely this in an eloquent posting to H-Rural on May 6th. Yet her own arguments in *Cutting* come off, in the end, as far too binary. Although valuable in terms of provoking us to think hard, her idea that “working class” and “middle class” people have “distinct systems of knowledge” (158) and “distinct systems of logic” (188) simply does not have sufficient supporting evidence. As different as petit bourgeois and working folks can be, and as antagonistic as their cultures and politics have at times been, I think we make a mistake in taking too far Fink’s contention that “the middle class and working class have different histories in rural Iowa.”(189)

Yes—and no. Of course packinghouse proletarians have had lives considerably different from those of comfortable professionals. Yet for all her grit Fink—ironically—bypasses some of the genuine messiness of rural life, the places where, for example, families enable one child to achieve a white-collar career while the others remain enmeshed in the blue-collar world. When I was teaching my course on “The Family Farm in American History and Society” at Buena Vista College in Iowa, one student—herself now a teacher—proudly told the class both of her parents’ efforts to keep their farm AND of her brothers’ recent participation in a strike against an Iowa meatpacker.

As scholarship by sociologists David Halle, Robert Zussman, and Alan Wolfe helps us understand, many, if not most, “middling” people consider themselves as part of a vast “working middle class.” Tensions and divisions are likely to remain between people whom we categorize as “the working class” and “the middle class,” and especially between farmers and industrial workers, but these conflicts are historically contingent and by no means inevitable. Although valuable at times to write blue-collar and white-collar histories separately, our ultimate goal

should be to recognize their interconnections as well as the opposition between them.

Indeed, radical agrarianism has historically been quite pro-proletarian. Go back a century to the Populists, or a decade to the farm activists of the 1980s, and a farmer-labor alliance has been a crucial part of the progressive political agenda.

Yes, agrarianism has often helped restrict our vision, rendering far too many unpropertied people invisible—or worse. Unfortunately, the essayists in *Pigs, Profits, and Rural Communities* rarely confront this problem. Still, they do make a compelling argument that the preservation of the family farm is necessary if we seek to undercut corporate economic power in the rural Midwest. (Thu and Durrenberger’s book also provides substantial evidence for the *ecological* benefits of family farming—a topic that Fink does not address.)

So Deborah Fink is completely right in arguing that we must fully confront gender, racial, and class inequalities if progressive rural politics is to get very far. Yet I depart from her vision in casting forth the unfashionable thought that a popular agrarian front between family farmers and workers is not only desirable but possible. Current economic development panaceas—involving massive tax giveaways and massive political favoritism—are very likely untenable in the long run. If—rather, when—they fail, formulating a democratic political response to the current crisis in the countryside should mean neither abandoning the agrarian tradition nor accepting its historical blindnesses, but rather embracing (and then reworking) one of our most powerful dissenting traditions.

Let’s allow Deborah Fink the last word, however. As she has so well shown in *Cutting into the Meatpacking Line*, when coming to grips with the crisis in rural life *today* we must above all ground our analyses fully *in the past*. As Fink correctly concludes, “Although conditions in the Perry IBP plant [are] far from bucolic, they rose logically out of the economic and social history of rural Iowa.” (192) Beyond that, she also wisely notes, “although IBP projects an image of triumph and inevitability, its power is not monolithic.” (196) As we move to understanding—and, let us hope, dismantling—corporate power in rural America, we can have few guides better than Deborah Fink.

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