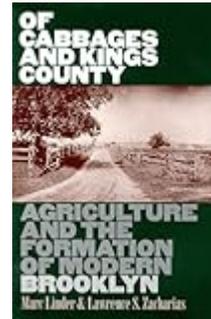


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Marc Linder, Lawrence S. Zacharias. *Of Cabbages and Kings County: Agriculture and the Formation of Modern Brooklyn.* Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1999. x + 478 pp. \$21.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-87745-670-4.



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I need to begin with a disclaimer. This year I was chair of the Agricultural History Society committee that chose *Of Cabbages and Kings County* for the Saloutos Prize, given annually to the best new book on agricultural and/or rural history. Be advised that I am favorably disposed toward this book.

In *Of Cabbages and Kings County*, Marc Linder, a law professor at the University of Iowa, and Lawrence Zacharias, who teaches management at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, attempt to show how rural Kings County, New York villages such as Flatbush, New Utrecht, Bushwick, Flatlands, and Gravesend were transformed from agricultural places to suburban or urban components of Brooklyn and later New York City, why that transformation took place, and whether there was an alternative to the result. They are not satisfied with the simple answer that market forces determined Kings County's fate, noting that the market is a human creation vulnerable to the vagaries of human nature. Not all of their alternative answers are definitive or even necessarily satisfactory, but in the process of formulating them, Linder and Zacharias provide us with the fullest examination of the urbanization – or de-agriculturalization – process I have seen.

Linder and Zacharias devote the first section of their book to a discussion of Kings County agriculture, with

special reference to the nineteenth century. The dominant farmers in the county were the descendants of the original Dutch settlers, and in some ways their agriculture had not evolved very much since the seventeenth century. The authors do not romanticize these folks, whose narrow social conservatism was symbolized by the tenacity with which they clung to the institution of slavery. Linder and Zacharias tend to downplay the significance of the market in these farmers' decisions, but one could argue that the major change in farm operations during the 1860s and 1870s – the shift from small grain to vegetable production – was dictated by the expanding metropolitan market for potatoes, cabbages, and so forth. In any event, Kings County quickly became one of the leading truck farming counties in the nation, producing vegetables on fields fertilized with urban waste. The authors' discussion of Kings County farming is fascinating, but at times Linder's legal background is betrayed by a tendency to over-argue, in the style of a legal brief, and by instances of special pleading.

The heart of the book is devoted to a discussion of the process whereby this agricultural area became suburbanized and then urbanized. The authors' analysis is impressively subtle and thoroughgoing, and they succeed in exploding a number of simplistic popular myths. For example, they refute the notion that property taxes are a de-

vice for driving farmers out of urbanizing and suburbanizing areas by showing that agriculture enjoyed favorable tax rates. In addition, they cast doubt on the notion that farmers were either grasping land barons, or, alternatively, bucolic simpletons, by noting divisions among farmers themselves over such issues as annexation, land-use restrictions, and the extension of streets, streetcar lines, water systems, and other improvements.

As Linder and Zacharias elaborate it, the process of de-agriculturization is a complex and subtle one. On the one side, real estate developers offer increasingly attractive incentives for farmers to sell, and they are always able to find some who are willing. On the other side, the Dutch patriarchs die out or retire from farming, leaving the land in the hands of tenants or children less committed to an agricultural life. As urban development slowly unfolds, the agricultural infrastructure decays, labor become more expensive, and farmers find themselves encroached upon by people with little sympathy for farming, who steal or vandalize crops, and who complain of the noise of farm wagons or the pungent smell of agriculture. As this process advances, a sense of the inevitability of suburbanization takes hold, and farmers decide not to reinvest in agriculture, looking to sell out to developers instead. As individuals sell out, the implicit pressure on their neighbors to do the same increases. Linder and Zacharias detail the push-pull process in an admirable fashion, providing a sophisticated and convincing expla-

nation of a complex phenomenon.

Linder and Zacharias conclude with a rather unsatisfactory discussion of whether the de-agriculturization of Kings County was inevitable. They argue that it was not, citing farm-preservation programs in nineteenth-century European cities and in such selected areas of the modern United States as Oregon and Long Island. I find this conclusion unsatisfactory in part because it ignores the strong traditional American bias in favor of individual control of private property – a bias that has hardly disappeared – and because it seems to suggest, ahistorically, that nineteenth-century Americans could have behaved in a way in which they almost never behaved.

The conclusion to *Of Cabbages and Kings County* is one of the few unsatisfactory portions in what is overall an attractively produced, abundantly illustrated, and impressively argued book. Marc Linder and Lawrence Zacharias have made a major contribution to the subfields of urban, rural, and economic history, and the American history as a whole.

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