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Book Review of *Improved Earth: Prairie Space as Modern Artefact, 1869-1944* by Rod Bantjes

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**Improved Earth: Prairie Space as Modern Artefact, 1869-1944.** By Rod Bantjes. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005. 204 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. $45.00 cloth.

In this short but suggestive study, sociologist Rod Bantjes examines how contending visions of modernity shaped the social and physical landscapes of the Canadian prairies. “[B]oth statesmen and prairie farmers were infused with the modernist spirit of innovation, the will creatively (and destructively) to transform their worlds,” Bantjes argues. His provocative view of farmers as agents of modernity reflects recent scholarship that seeks to explore “multiple modernities,” or the notion that ideas and practices of modernism must be regarded not as monolithic but rather as contested and multivocal, and must be examined in their historical and geographical contexts.

Drawing on theoretical armature from Foucault, Giddens, Marx, and others, Bantjes seeks to move beyond static conceptions of space and nature on the prairies by emphasizing the dynamism of prairie modernity. Thus, although he explores physical artefacts such as the “grid” of the Dominion Land Survey, the endless fields of monocrop wheat agriculture, or the Corbusian architecture of grain elevators, his analysis of landscape focuses more on the aesthetic and ideal rather than the artefactual. Ever alive to the social and economic geographies of modernity on the prairies, the work nevertheless emphasizes processes of “spatialization” rather than “space” itself. Prairie landscapes and society are regarded as the (contested) outcome of social projects; thus Bantjes wishes to explore not only the prevailing visions but also “failed” utopian alternatives.

These themes are probed through chapters on the Dominion Survey and the abstract spaces of prairie colonization; rural settlement and land disposition; institutions of local governance; and the role of farmer cooperatives in “agrarian class formation.” In each, Bantjes counterpoises the efforts of the Dominion or provincial governments to exercise Foucaultian “governmental” control over the dispersed yet homogeneous social and physical spaces of the wheat belt with the countervailing efforts by farmers to articulate and defend their interests through a kind of “socialist modernism.” Farmer institutions such as the Saskatchewan Association of Rural Municipalities and the Wheat Pool defended farmers’ interests not through resistance to global commodity markets but rather through an ever-deepening engagement with them, witnessed by their embrace of increasing scales of monocultural wheat production and the evolution of farm mechanization. By
developing effective, decentralized organizations, Banjes contends, Canadian prairie farmers adopted “a modernism that embraced machine organization, but explicitly rejected its centralist, fascist forms.”

This work challenges traditional notions of farmers as reflexively parochial or anti-modern and places the development of agrarian radicalism in an interesting new context of “socialist modernism.” The provocative analysis is at times disrupted with excessive theoretical interjections, and the absence of farmers’ voices through much of the narrative is noticeable. Nevertheless, Bantjes provides important insights into the struggle to define the social and physical landscape of the Canadian prairies that also illuminate hitherto neglected aspects of Canadian modernity. Arn Keeling, Department of History and Philosophy, Montana State University.