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Book Review: *Pigs, Profits, and Rural Communities* by Thu, Kendall M., & Durrenberger, E. Paul (Eds.)

E. Wesley F. Peterson

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, epeterson1@unl.edu

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BOOK REVIEW

Thu, Kendall M., & Durrenberger, E. Paul (Eds.). (1998). *Pigs, Profits, and Rural Communities*, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, vii . 208 pp., \$17.95 paperback, \$54.50 hardcover.

Early in their introductory comments, the editors of this book claim that they “are not political activists and that [they] neither promote nor defend industrial agriculture based on any political agenda” (p. 4). Industrial agriculture, as understood in this book, includes large corporations, vertically integrated firms, multinationals, and anything else that seems to differ from what might be thought of as a traditional family farm. The editors suggest that their goal is to provide objective assessments of one example of industrial agriculture, large-scale hog confinement operations. However, as the introduction progresses, strange things seem to happen to this perfectly sensible goal. On page 13, several studies highlighting the potential benefits of large-scale swine production enterprises are dismissed because they are “based on a set of assumptions, not empirical data.” But on the next page, a study by one of the contributors to the volume (an agricultural economist) is cited approvingly with no critical discussion of the fact that the chapter in question is also based on assumptions and, what is worse, includes straw-man argumentation and conclusions that are not supported by the data reported.

Contrary to the claims of objectivity in the introduction, this book clearly supports a political agenda, and it does so in a way that is far from being a neutral account of empirical reality. In fact, by about the second page of their introductory comments, the editors, two anthropologists at the University of Iowa (Durrenberger has since moved to Pennsylvania State), have abandoned all pretense at objectivity and begun touting the vision of conspiracy and victimization that animates the rest of the book. Of the 14 contributors to this volume, six are anthropologists, one is an extension agricultural economist, three hold academic appointments in biology, health, and psychiatry, one is a politician, and the remaining three are farmers. They share an understanding of rural America that sees traditional family farms as bastions of virtue under assault by industrial capitalism, technology, and the agricultural science departments of the land-grant universities. The Center for Rural Affairs in Walt Hill, Nebraska, and its former director Marty Strange are mentioned frequently with approval.

The book is divided into four parts, each of which includes three chapters. The first part focuses on descriptions of the negative effects of large-scale swine operations on rural communities, the second on the environmental impact of such enterprises, the third on the politics and alleged injustices in the establishment and regulation of these operations, and the fourth on possible alternatives to the structural changes currently under way. None of the chapters in the book stands out in the sense of being different from the others or having unusual insights that would be of general interest. There

is no need, therefore, to single out any particular chapter for further discussion in this review. In the following, I will simply highlight some of the general themes and approaches found in the book.

One of the main themes addressed in the book is the inevitability of ever larger agricultural enterprises. All of these contributors see the evolution toward larger production units that are more tightly integrated into the wider national and global economy as problematic because it moves agriculture away from its tradition of independent, self-sufficient, yeoman farmers. They wish to argue that this evolution is not inevitable, that, in fact, smaller, more traditional family farms are just as viable as larger, more industrialized units and that we would be better off with an agriculture based on the small rather than the large. The problem, of course, is that the number of large-scale enterprises is increasing rapidly while the kinds of farms these authors prefer are gradually disappearing. The most common way to account for these changes is to point to efficiencies that allow the large-scale farms to produce and market agricultural commodities at lower cost than the traditional farms. This explanation is bolstered by the empirical observation that as agriculture has industrialized, real food prices have declined despite the fact that demand, driven by growing US and world populations and income, has increased. But, of course, such an explanation suggests that structural changes in agriculture are the result of ordinary market forces, and this is precisely what the contributors to this volume wish to deny.

So they need an alternative account to explain agricultural industrialization. Their unoriginal solution to this problem is to argue that there is a conspiracy aimed at promoting the interests of large-scale producers at the expense of traditional family farms. The reason industrial agriculture fares so well is that the system has been stacked in its favor by politicians, commodity groups, industrialists, and university researchers. If these unfair biases could be eliminated, structural changes of the sort being observed in the swine industry would not occur and the kind of agriculture favored by the authors of this book would prosper. To support these ideas, the authors rely on anecdote, personal stories, and bad scientific analysis. An example of the latter is found in a chapter on the effects of odor in the vicinity of large confinement operations on psychological mood. The authors of this study do a survey in which participants living near hog confinement operations were asked to fill out a questionnaire "on each of four consecutive days when hog odors could be smelled" (p. 86). Those not living near such facilities were asked to fill out the same questionnaire "on each of two days" (p. 86). Such a procedure obviously biases the results, which, not surprisingly, show that people are less happy when their worlds smell bad than when they do not. Other examples of fallacious argumentation, unfounded assertions, and sweeping generalizations based on single cases, anecdotes, or impressions abound.

The approach taken to the discussion of large-scale swine operations is so one-sided that it would be easy for everyone but those who already share the prejudices of these authors to dismiss the book out of hand. And that is unfortunate because there are real problems associated with the changing structure of swine production that merit serious discussion. I have no doubt that nauseating odors from large-scale facilities that are built near the homes of people who have lived in a particular community for many years constitute the kind of external effect that cries out for regulation. An even-handed analysis of the institutional setting in which structural changes are occurring would represent an important contribution to the policy debate about land-use regulations and other legal elements having a bearing on the structure of agriculture. There are certainly other issues where sound analysis would be of great benefit. This book, however, does not provide such analytical assessments. Rather, it is an example of a group of like-minded true be-

lievers preaching to the choir. Those of us who do not wish to sing in that choir will find little of interest here even though the book deals with important questions.

Still, there may be some things that can be learned from reading through these diatribes. If nothing else, it is always useful to know what people who defend unpalatable positions are saying. Beyond this, there may be an important lesson for those of us involved in public agricultural research. Many of these writers expressed an enmity toward professors from the university that was surprising. They see academic research as biased because it is produced by professors who are so closely allied to commodity groups and agribusiness interests that their objectivity can be called into question. While these authors have serious biases of their own, I suspect that there is a widespread perception in rural America that university researchers do not produce objective research results because they have been "bought" by wealthy groups seeking to advance their economic and political interests. This may be more than simple paranoia. Many university researchers do appear to have compromised their objectivity in the search for grants, patentable innovations, and other financial rewards. If we become too closely allied to special interests, we will lose our credibility with the public and simply be seen, along with the authors of this book, as one more raucous voice in the increasingly rancorous din that passes for public debate in the United States. It seems to me that the primary merit of this book is to draw attention to this question.

E. Wesley F. Peterson
University of Nebraska-Lincoln