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Review of *Agrarian Women: Wives and Mothers in Rural Nebraska, 1880-1940* by Deborah Fink

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Agrarian Women: Wives and Mothers in Rural Nebraska, 1880-1940. Deborah Fink. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1992. xiii + 242 pp. Preface, photographs, tables, appendix, notes, bibliography, index. \$34.95 cloth, \$12.95 paper.

Agrarian Women begins with a paradox. "Agrarian ideology—the celebration of farming and farmers as the heart of American society"—pervaded the rural households where the author grew up. "Yet it meshed poorly with the lives of many rural women we knew" (p. xv). Using published and unpublished letters, diaries, fiction, public records, historical studies, and interviews, anthropologist Deborah Fink explores the ways in which the agrarian ideal failed the women of Boone County, Nebraska.

Agrarian ideology formed the core of American public policy and values from Jefferson through the New Deal. It "proclaimed that women were liberated rather than limited" by the farm experience (p. 2), but Fink found that agrarian idealism was male oriented and forced women into subordinate roles. It made promises which could not be fulfilled because of women's inequality and because of conditions on the farming frontier. Because agrarian idealism emphasized the family farm, women had to be wives and mothers, but they were not equals. Wives must "stay at home" and "devote their energies to meeting the needs of men" (p. 22); when their work crossed gender lines, it did not bring

power. Childless women were considered unfulfilled—even by themselves. Women who were deserted or divorced were scorned socially and discriminated against in state and federal depression relief programs; while widows often did not have full inheritance rights.

Farm wives in Boone County (no single women farmed in this county) were isolated and unable to bond with and support each other. Their lives were often brutally oppressed. Isolation contributed to stress, loneliness, male alcoholism, sexual abuse, and physical violence, all of which Fink sees as pervasive problems for agrarian women. Despite the agrarian ideology's promise of prosperity, poverty was a continual problem in transitional farm areas like Boone County. The problem became especially acute during the agricultural depression of the 1920's and the Great Depression, when wives had to do what their husbands could not: provide for the family. Greater economic responsibility increased women's burdens, but did not bring gender equality. Divorce was not a viable escape from these problems, Fink concludes. "A farm wife was more likely to put up with a bad situation than was a nonfarm wife, because she had invested herself in a joint economic operation that she could not hold on to if she dissolved the marriage" (p. 120).

Agrarian idealism also failed rural women in their roles as mothers. Farm wives were expected to contribute to race and society through child-bearing and child-rearing, and motherhood imposed enormous burdens of work, stress, and frustration. Agrarian ideology "promised health, wealth, and wisdom for children growing up on the farm" (p. 149), but it failed the children as well as their mothers. Rural life delivered hard work, sexual abuse, beatings, inferior education, poverty, and inadequate medical care. The children's best hope for the future seemed to be in breaking away from the agrarian tradition which trapped their mothers.

The difficulties in the agrarian lifestyle were increasingly obvious. A variety of individuals and government commissions and agencies all identified farm problems and called for reform. Yet few Americans, even the women who Fink interviewed, were willing to admit that the ideal itself was a failure. In fact, "one effect of the rural crisis that began in 1920 was to deepen the agrarian myth rather than to prompt a rethinking of it" (p. 190). Fink concludes with a call for "a new plains ideology, laying the groundwork for a more viable and democratic rural society" (p. 196).

Deborah Fink's *Agrarian Women* is a provocative, but problematic book, perhaps because it is partly a "reflexive study" (p. xxii). The structure is not always clear; there is unnecessary repetition due to the way the book is organized; and there are some writing problems as well. Fink needs to fully

describe the meaning of the agrarian ideal for women early in the book. Her reviews of family organization and the development of agrarian idealism could be shortened, although I would like to see her expand on Populist ideology and women. Her treatment of the period from the early 1900's to the 1920's is erratic. Although Fink intends to focus on Boone County, she draws heavily on sources and accounts outside the county; she needs to clarify their connection with Boone County. She might have made fuller and more consistent use of Boone County records, her own interviews and other studies to support her generalizations. Finally, *Agrarian Women* gives the impression that not only did the problems of farm life outweigh its blessings, but that there were no blessings at all. Not all farm wives were oppressed, not all farm families were dysfunctional. Even though her focus is on the problems of farm women, Fink needs to acknowledge the variety of agrarian experience.

Despite these problems, *Agrarian Women* is important. Deborah Fink's use of agrarian idealism in analyzing the roles of western women works well, allowing her to explore the interaction of gender attitudes, other social values, and specific conditions in shaping rural women's experiences. While Fink argues that the farm liberated men more than women, her work suggests that agrarian ideology often failed to fulfill its promises to men and offers an approach for a more inclusive interpretation of agrarian life. Fink's work is also valuable in emphasizing the extent of physical and sexual abuse in rural homes and the serious problems faced by farm children. Finally by juxtaposing ideal and reality, Fink reminds us of the emotional consequences of marginal farm life. For many rural women the objective problems of daily life were compounded by despair at their own inadequacies and by fear that the failure of agrarian idealism was their own fault. In fact, Fink argues that the ideal itself was flawed, and its standards were destructive. For rural women, agrarian idealism was, therefore, useless "except as a sentimental sop" (p. 156). **Betsy Downey**, *Department of History, Gonzaga University*.