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Review of *Meatpackers and Beef Barons: Company Town in a Global Economy* by Carol Andreas

Laura Lacasa

University of Nebraska-Lincoln

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Meatpackers and Beef Barons: Company Town in a Global Economy.
Carol Andreas. Niwot, CO: University Press of Colorado, 1994. xii+225 pp.
Index, notes, and appendices. \$17.50 paper (ISBN 0-87081-321-8).

Lamenting the exploitation of meatpackers at the hands of America's multi-billion dollar beef industry, sociologist Carol Andreas presents a case study of ConAgra, Inc.'s operations in Greeley, Colorado. Andreas asserts

that large companies purposely exploit labor to survive in a highly competitive global market. Accordingly, she argues that the U.S. meatpacking industry, epitomized by ConAgra's operations, represents a flawed economic system that fails to offer advantages either to blue-collar workers or their communities.

The dominating theme of this work is exploitation. In its constant pursuit of increased profits, minority (mostly Hispanic) and female workers, pro-union employees, and the town of Greeley itself become ConAgra's pawns. The promotion of racism and sexism, long hours in unhealthy and unsafe conditions, low pay and limited benefits, union busting, environmental destruction, and financial coercion are means by which the company achieves its goals.

Andreas attributes the continuation of such abuses to the numerous crises presently confronting the beef industry. Lower overall red meat consumption, the struggle to expand into foreign markets, and the competition of cheaper meat products from South America all simultaneously strain industrial management. ConAgra's preoccupation with solving these problems prevents it from using less forceful and destructive means to achieve higher rates of production.

Drawing her themes together, the author makes a sweeping condemnation of the capitalist system, arguing that capitalism offers financial rewards for the unethical treatment of the working class. Additionally, its laissez-faire ideology inhibits governmental intervention and thus allows abuses to occur. Increased labor union activity along with stricter federal regulations are Andreas's solutions to the difficulties experienced by labor.

The primary weakness of this work is its failure to integrate ConAgra's operations into the global economy. The author blames the heightened competitiveness of international beef transactions for the limited corporate vision of profit-making and the corresponding cheapening of labor. The work's discussions of the international context are too general, however, and insufficiently portray ConAgra's local abuses as direct outcomes of international operations. Moreover, although the author implies that ConAgra's strategies are representative of the meat industry as a whole, her comparative analyses, focusing primarily on ConAgra's key competitor Iowa Beef Processors (IBP), mainly concern union activity and the corporate response to it. Consequently, her supporting evidence fails to convince the reader that ConAgra's abuses are of epidemic proportions throughout the American beef industry.

Despite these criticisms, *Meatpackers* is valuable scholarship, its social history supplementing the traditional coverage of American food

industries as represented in *Economics of Food Processing in the United States*, edited by Chester O. McCorkle. Such textbook overviews of modern food processing enterprises frequently fail to depict the often hidden and seedy nature of daily operations.

Andreas's work portrays a working class struggle against an abusive corporation and the system that fosters it. Her well-written narrative makes compelling reading. Its broad condemnations of capitalism and the American beef industry, however, lack supportive material. **Laura Lacasa**, *Department of History, University of Nebraska-Lincoln*.