RESEÑAS DE LIBROS / BOOK REVIEWS

ARTURO WARMAN: ***Corn and Capitalism: How a Botanical Bastard Grew to Global Dominance.*** Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2003.

First, ask yourself, how much do I want to know about corn? If the answer is less than a lot, *Corn and Capitalism* perhaps should not top your reading list. On the other hand, if you are willing to keep an open mind, the book will reward your attention. In it the Mexican anthropologist Arturo Warman examines the history and development of corn, a "bastard" of human creation, including the biology and economy of the plant, its dissemination over space and time, and the human and ecological effects of corn's widespread adoption, from population growth to deficiency diseases. Reviewed here is a translation of the 1988 Spanish-language original, from which, the reader may be relieved to learn, the "outmoded" and "ambiguous" Marxist jargon has been removed.

Among corn's many recommendations are its "high photosynthetic efficiency," [16], an ability to thrive in a wide variety of climatic conditions, and the many useful products to which it contributes. Having established corn's likely origins in the central valley of Mexico, Prof. Warman details the spread of the American grain to China, where it became the food of the poor, to Africa, where it sustained the slave trade, and across Europe; he does not address the North American frontier's well-known dependence on "pork and [corn]pone," only reaching that region in the early 20th century. Along the way the text repeatedly wanders off to follow tangential topics, for example, Chinese land holding patterns, slavery, the "second serfdom," and the sad fates of the African and European peasantry. Generally these digressions are well done and interesting but not immediately relevant to the topic, or at least could have been handled more briefly. As the author points out, though, he researched this topic for years and evidently means the reader to have the benefit of as much of this work as possible. Too, the asides add to the "world history" feel of the book. Chronologically, *Corn and Capitalism* tends to move backward and forward, carrying the story of corn in Africa up to the present, and then doubling back to Europe in the 17th century and the southern United States after World War I.

Together with its many positive attributes, corn carries a "curse" [132]. This is the disease of pellagra, the causes of which were not fully understood until the 20th century. Corn's climactic adaptability, summer growing season, and high output – potatoes have similar effects – raised the carrying capacity of the European countryside and with this the rural population. Corn became the last resort of that continent's poor and, in the early 20th century, of sharecroppers in the southern US, and often all they ate, with a resulting niacin deficiency, the immediate cause of pellagra. But pellagra, the author argues, was more than simply a disease "of poverty and deficiencies, but one of the many diseases of modernization, of development, of pro-capitalist development, to be more precise." [150].

The last four chapters of *Corn and Capitalism* focus on changes in world corn production and markets since the mid-20th century. The dominant trend in the industrial world has been a shift from the simple intake of corn to its indirect consumption as meat, fed on corn. Parallel to this has been an enormous growth in world markets for the grain, stimulated by food-aid programs such as PL 480 and massive sales and fed by subsidized North American production. With no need to make the average rate of profit, peasants in Third World countries can often survive this competition. However, capitalized local production cannot, with the result that the urban areas become dependent on imported food; they forfeit "dietary sovereignty"[215] even as they export specialized agricultural products to North Atlantic markets.

Particularly interesting is the opportunity *Corn and Capitalism* affords to read "world history" written from a perspective apart from the usual US-European one. Warman laments that Mexicans often feel that researching or writing about anything apart from the strictly local is a "luxury we cannot afford" [xi]. As a result they depend on others for information about the rest of the world, information that commonly arrives framed in a perspective quite foreign to their own. If *Corn and Capitalism* was relieved of some of its digressions, it would make a tighter 200 rather than 250 page book about corn, but perhaps not as interesting regarding world history. And the readability of the later chapters would benefit from transferring some of the multitude of statistics to tables or even to appendices. Nevertheless, *Corn and Capitalism* is highly recommended to the general reader, for use in world and/or ecological-environmental history courses, or simply to anyone who wishes a "de-centered" view of global historical processes.

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